FEEDING THE RESEARCH AND INNOVATION PIPELINE:

COVID-19 AND CLOSING THE AWARDING GAP

LEADING ROUTES

TABLE OF CONTENTS

3 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS
4 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
6 KEY TAKEAWAYS
7 KEY ACTIONS
8 ACRONYMS
9 INTRODUCTION TO THE RESEARCH
12 RESEARCH AIMS, OBJECTIVES & QUESTIONS
13 OVERVIEW OF LITERATURE
17 METHODOLOGY
19 KEY FINDINGS
21 **Research Question 1:** Where did racially minoritised graduates go after graduating in 2020 and 2021?
26 **Research Question 2:** What was the qualitative impact of a 'good' degree outcome on racially minoritised graduates?
32 **Research Question 3:** What role has/did COVID-19 played in graduates' abilities to pursue careers in research and innovation?
37 CONCLUSION
41 REFERENCES

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study investigates whether a 'good' degree outcome (First or Upper Second class) for racially minoritised graduates opens career pathways in research and innovation (R&I). The research is grounded in data from 2019/20 to 2020/21, a period when the undergraduate awarding gap between white and all other students significantly narrowed from 12.3% to 8.6%, the largest reduction in 16 years. However, this gap re-emerged in 2022/23 after COVID-19 mitigations introduced by universities during the height of the global pandemic were lifted, indicating that the changes were not embedded.

THE STUDY IDENTIFIES TWO CRITICAL ISSUES:

1. The dominant narrative that COVID-19 mitigations significantly narrowed the awarding gap risks obscuring other impacts of COVID-19 and new equality gaps for racially minoritised students.
2. The narrow focus on numerical awarding gaps risks overshadowing broader anti-racist interventions needed to dismantle systemic racism in higher education and to truly open career pathways for racially minoritised graduates.

Primarily, we ask did a 'good' degree outcome for racially minoritised graduates open careers in R&I, with sub-questions focusing on the destinations of graduates, the qualitative impact of a 'good' degree, and the role of COVID-19. We focus particularly on Black graduates, for whom the awarding gap is widest.

Our findings indicate that the narrowing of the awarding gap in 2020 and 2021 did not significantly open R&I careers for racial minorities. Black graduates, in particular, remained less likely to be in professional roles despite holding 'good' degrees; a situation pronounced in 2019/20, at the height of labour market uncertainty due to COVID-19.

The study also highlights that Black graduates from non-Russell Group institutions are more likely to be in non-professional roles, which tend not feed into R&I career pipelines. This is in a context where non-Russell Group institutions award the highest proportion of 'good' degrees, with racial

minorities more likely to obtain a 'good' degree at a non-Russell group institution than at a Russell Group institution by an average of between 2-4%.

Additionally, we find the COVID-19 pandemic had a significant negative impact on the mental health and wellbeing of racially minoritised graduates, exacerbating existing inequalities. For Black students, particularly at Russell Group institutions where their fewer numbers tend to make them hypervisible, the pandemic years coincided with public reckoning with anti-Black racism, demanding these students absorb additional roles in providing care and support to peers. Such a detailed and nuanced picture of life in 2020 and 2021 for racial minorities, identifies the profound level of effort required to stand still, to neutralise the impact of COVID-19, and stay on track for a 'good' degree outcome.

Our research illuminates an underacknowledged dilemma for Black students: to choose between a non-Russell Group institution, which improves one's chances of a 'good' degree but with less chance of a professional role. Or, to attend a Russell Group institution, with a slightly lower chance of a 'good' degree outcome, and the likelihood of having to navigate hypervisibility and additional care roles with peers, but – if one secures a 'good' degree - with seemingly more opportunities for scholarships and professional roles, than non-Russell Group Black graduates.

The study concludes that existing pipelines for R&I careers overly privilege Russell Group institutions and that a broader approach is needed to improve racial representation in R&I, one that specifically targets graduates of non-Russell Group institutions. It also emphasizes the need for institutional investment in mental health and wellbeing for racially minoritised students to address the compounded effects of COVID-19 and systemic racism, which precede the pandemic and was exacerbated by it.

Overall, to open pathways to careers in R&I for racial minorities, the study calls for policy makers and higher education institutions to tackle racial inequity in higher education by going beyond numerical awarding gaps, which risk an artificial separation of a 'good' degree from the racialising conditions of higher education. Instead, the study advocates for broader measures of success that extend institutional regulatory obligations. Centring student-informed notions of a 'good' degree and achievement in higher education, is more likely to surface racial inequity and shift institutional responses in ways that reflect the realities of racially minoritised students succeeding in overwhelmingly white institutions.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

1. Between 2019/20 and 2020/21 the undergraduate degree awarding gap between white and all other students significantly narrowed from 12.3% to 8.6%. This did not correspond to an opening up of careers in research and innovation for racial minorities.

2. Black graduates are less likely to be in professional roles than other racial groups despite holding 'good' degree results; a situation pronounced in 2019/20, at the height of labour market uncertainty due to COVID-19.

3. Non-Russell Group institutions award the highest proportion of 'good' degree results, with racial minorities more likely to obtain a 'good' degree at a non-Russell group institution than at a Russell Group institution by an average of between 2-4%.

4. Existing pipelines for careers in research and innovation – such as scholarship schemes - overly privilege graduates of Russell Group institutions.

5. University choice for Black students can be a trade-off between increased chance of a 'good' degree outcome at non-Russell Group institutions but with fewer chances to access research and innovation pipelines, or, the converse, with additional racialised pressures of hypervisibility, isolation and demands of peer support and care.

6. A detailed portrait of life for racially minoritised students during COVID-19 illuminates the immense effort required to stand still and stay on track for a 'good' degree result.

7. A policy and operational focus on numerical awarding gaps risks an artificial separation of a 'good' degree from the racialising conditions of higher education.

8. Centring student-informed ideas of a 'good' degree and achievement in higher education, is more likely to surface racial inequity and shift institutional responses to reflect the realities of racially minoritised students succeeding in overwhelmingly white institutions.

KEY ACTIONS

TO POLICYMAKERS & REGULATORS

- Commit to reading and understanding awarding gap data within a wider context of anti-racist interventions (or lack thereof) in higher education institutions.
- Encourage more collaboration between Russell Group and non-Russell Group institutions, disrupting the 'Russell Group pipeline' to provide more opportunities to students.
- In the interests of informed university choices, facilitate a sector-wide conversation on how Black students be advised on the apparent trade-off between the greater chances of a 'good' degree outcome though with fewer opportunities for careers in research and innovation, or the converse but with additional racialised burdens.

TO UNIVERSITY LEADERS

- Reform scholarships and postgraduate funding opportunities and criteria so they are truly inclusive and not reinforcing a 'Russell Group pipeline' from undergraduate to postgraduate study.
- Embed racial equity into your core strategies – including but not limited to teaching and learning strategies - ensuring that institutional policy responses are rooted in the realities of racially minoritised students and value their experiences and achievements.

TO STUDENT SUCCESS OPERATIONAL TEAMS

- Adopt a holistic definition of 'success', integrating student-informed measures of achievement that reflect lived experiences rather than solely degree classifications and national student survey frameworks.
- Work in genuine partnership with students to co-create interventions that reflect their lived experiences and needs. Focus on creating inclusive environments, through both student facing support and institutional change, where students can bring their authentic selves to university life rather than solely equipping them to navigate and succeed within a system shaped by racial inequities.

ACRONYMS

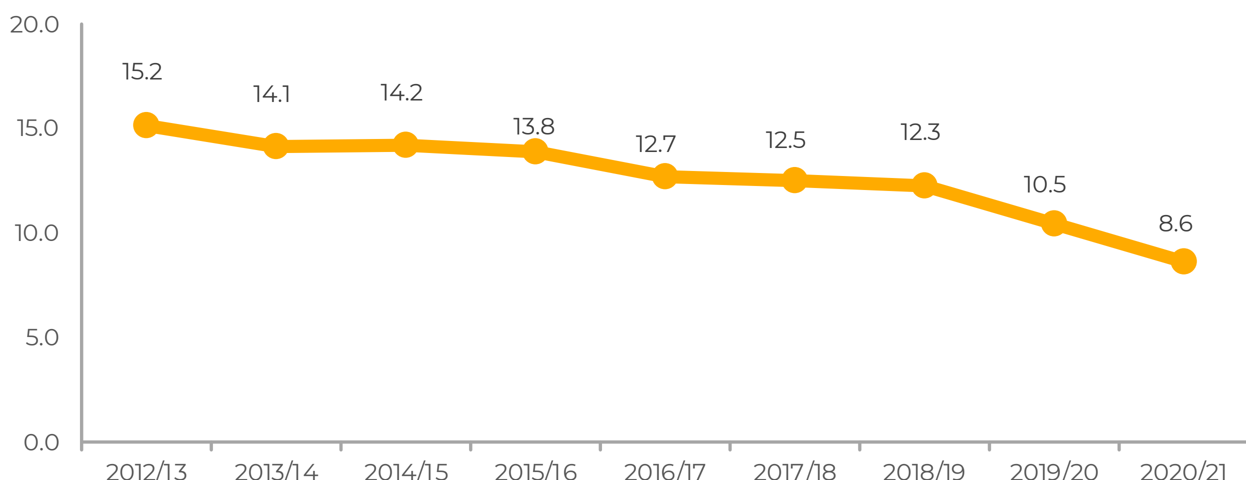
B(A)ME	Black (Asian) Minority Ethnic
COVID-19	Coronavirus disease 2019
DOL	Destination of Leavers
ECU	Equality Challenge Unit
GO	Graduate Outcomes
HESA	Higher Education Statistics Agency
OfS	Office for Students
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics
R&I	Research and Innovation
RQ	Research Question
UCL	University College London

INTRODUCTION TO THE RESEARCH

This study contributes to scholarship and practice on racial equity in higher education. It investigates the question: did a 'good' degree outcome for racially minoritised graduates open careers in research and innovation (R&I)?

The study is empirically grounded between 2019/20 and 2020/21 when the undergraduate awarding gap (the difference in the proportion of white and non-white student degree awards with a First class or Upper Second classification) fell from 12.3% (pre-COVID) to 8.6%, the single largest reduction in 16 years (**Figure 1**). Between 2003/4 and 2018/19, the gap between white-Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) students and white-Black students had changed by an average of only 0.3% (McMaster, 2021). Were this trend to continue, the white-BAME gap would not be eliminated until 2070/71, and the white-Black gap until 2085/86 (Loke, 2020). But, between 2019-21 the gap narrowed dramatically, alongside COVID-19 mitigations brought in by universities leading to changed assessments and widespread use of no detriment policies. In 2022/23, with mitigations lifted, internal data showed the awarding gap had returned, showing the changes are not embedded.

FIGURE 1: DEGREE AWARDING GAP 2012-2021 (%)



Source: Graduate Outcomes (GO) survey data from 2017-2021 and Destination of Leavers (DOL) survey data from 2012/13 to 2016/17.[1]

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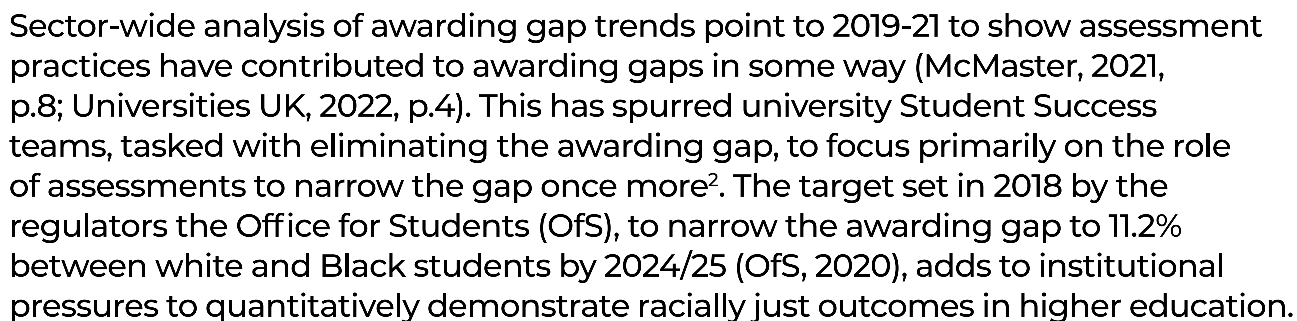
1 The figures in this report are the result of our own analysis of Graduate Outcomes (GO) survey data from 2017-2021 and Destination of Leavers (DOL) survey data from 2012/13 to 2016/17. Our treatment of specific variables (explained in the Methodology section) means our results may differ slightly from other awarding gap statistics.



Sector-wide analysis of awarding gap trends point to 2019-21 to show assessment practices have contributed to awarding gaps in some way (McMaster, 2021, p.8; Universities UK, 2022, p.4). This has spurred university Student Success teams, tasked with eliminating the awarding gap, to focus primarily on the role of assessments to narrow the gap once more[2]. The target set in 2018 by the regulators the Office for Students (OfS), to narrow the awarding gap to 11.2% between white and Black students by 2024/25 (OfS, 2020), adds to institutional pressures to quantitatively demonstrate racially just outcomes in higher education.

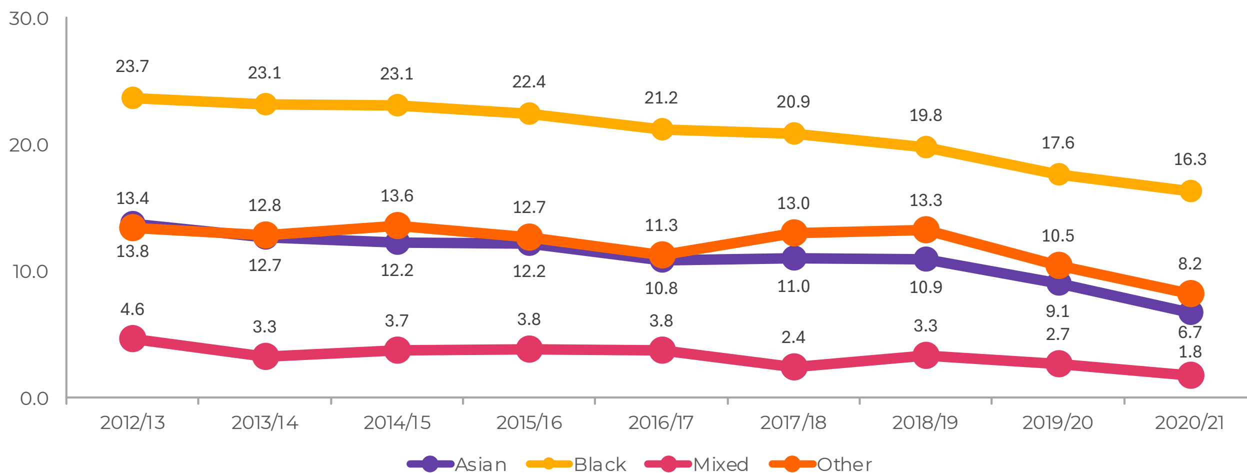
In this febrile policy environment, with practical implications on how limited resources dedicated to student success are invested, we identify two issues affecting entry to careers in R&I that need urgent interrogation and that we address in this study: (1) the dominant narrative of COVID-19 mitigations narrowing the awarding gap, risks obscuring other COVID impacts and any new equality gaps for racially minoritised[3] students and graduates from, for example, caring responsibilities, navigating heightened health risks from living in multi-generational households and post-lockdown poor mental health, which disproportionately affected young Black people (Dewa, et al., 2021). (2) The narrow focus on assessments as an immediate instrument for reducing a numerical awarding gap risks overshadowing multi-layered anti-racist interventions that aim to dismantle racist structures in higher education (Ugiagbe-Green & Ernsting, 2022; Arday & Mirza, 2018). Together, these two issues risk awarding gap initiatives being driven by narrow metrics and an incomplete capture of the impacts of COVID-19 on racially minoritised graduates at the beginning of their R&I careers.

Thus, we focus not on what are the causes or contributing factors of the awarding gap closing and then seemingly reopening, but on what difference it made to racially minoritised graduates when the gap closed. Empirically, we focus on Black graduates, for whom the awarding gap is persistently widest (**Figure 2**).

2 ‘BAME Awarding Gap Project: Report on the effects of the 2019/20 no detriment policy’ (Internal report, n.d.). Also, Paulette Williams, Head of Student Success at UCL and project Co-I reflects that awarding gap meetings (internal and inter-university) are now dominated by discussions of assessments and how to engender political will to change assessment practices.

3 In this report we use the term ‘racially minoritised’ graduates and students to reflect that racialisation and minoritisation are social processes that create groups of people that can serve to marginalise them; ‘race’ and minority status are therefore not innate.

FIGURE 2: DEGREE AWARDING GAP BY ETHNICITY 2012-2021 (%)



We look at the R&I career pipeline because imagining and forging a career in these fields is closely tied to student journeys and the ability of racially minoritised groups to access higher education and secure good degree outcomes. A 'good' degree is an entry requirement for postgraduate taught and research degrees in many high tariff and research-intensive institutions and an Upper Second or a 2.1 is often used as a minimum requirement in industry for graduate recruitment (Britton et al., 2022). Improving the rates of racialised minorities with good degrees and closing the awarding gap has been a central policy platform for the OfS since its founding in 2018, building on the first sector report into the 'BME attainment gap' (ECU/Advance HE, 2008). Eliminating this gap, the theory of change suggests, will impact industry representation and help address the 11.8% employment gap between white and racially minoritised groups that stymies inclusive innovation (Vorley et al., 2020:12); and will impact representation throughout the academic pipeline, promote epistemic plurality and potentially change what is researched and how (Williams et al., 2019; Patel & Shehabi, 2022).

RESEARCH AIMS, OBJECTIVES & QUESTIONS

Drawing on primary qualitative data and secondary analysis of existing quantitative data sets, this research aims to influence operational and policy agenda on awarding gaps and feed the pipeline for careers into R&I for racially minoritised graduates.

Our objectives are threefold: (1) to empirically examine the effects of ‘good’ degree outcomes on careers in R&I for racially minoritised graduates, offering a new evidence base to revisit the aims, objectives and theories of change that underpin awarding gap projects in universities. (2) To uncover the impacts of COVID-19 at the start of the R&I lifecycle and identify new equalities gaps, building an evidence base for future action. (3) To bring these objectives together, and critically assesses the OfS’ narrow focus on numerical awarding gaps and build a case for additional metrics or measures of racial equity grounded in the graduate student experience to build an inclusive R&I ecosystem.

Our primary research question (RQ) is: did a ‘good’ degree for racially minoritised graduates open careers in research and innovation?

TO ADDRESS THIS, WE ASK THREE SUB-QUESTIONS:

RQ1

Where did Black, Asian, and other racially minoritised graduates go after graduating in 2020 and 2021, and how does this compare to previous years? Does the picture differ for Black graduates, for whom the awarding gap is widest?

RQ2

What was the qualitative impact of a ‘good’ degree on racially minoritised graduates between 2020-2021, professionally or personally, and their wish to pursue careers in research and/or innovation? Specifically for Black graduates?

RQ3

What role has/did COVID-19 played in graduates’ abilities to pursue careers in research and/or innovation? Specifically for Black graduates?

OVERVIEW OF LITERATURE

This section gives a brief overview of scholarship on racial disparity in higher education, the influence of a 'good' degree on careers and personal development, the impact of COVID-19 on careers, and the presence of racism and structural inequality in the UK job market. These literature situate this study at the intersection of established scholarship on racism in higher education and employment, and more nascent work on the effects of COVID-19.

RACIAL DISPARITY IN UK HIGHER EDUCATION, THE JOB MARKET & AWARDING GAPS

There is a plethora of studies on racism in higher education in the UK that spans domestic and international student experience (Wong et al., 2020; Brown & Jones, 2011), academic life (Sian, 2019; Rollock, 2023), curricula (Jacobs, 2006), university policy (Bhopal & Piktin, 2020) and the institution itself (Arday & Mirza, 2018; Johnson, Joseph-Salisbury & Kamunge, 2018). Some of which helpfully places higher education policy and practices within the context of racist education policy more generally (Tomlinson, 2008; Gillborn, 2008); thus, contextualising universities within the political and social landscape of the UK and its racisms, from early learning through to careers and the job market.

UK HIGHER EDUCATION & THE AWARDING GAP

Studies on the undergraduate awarding gap in UK universities – its causes, consequences and means of address – have become a mainstay of research, policy and action for anti-racism, and totemic of targeted policies on racism and their misfire (misfire, given the stubbornness of the awarding gap). These studies have repeatedly found that the persistence of the awarding gap keenly affects Black students (Cramer, 2021; Kwok Alsop, 2021; Marandure, Hall & Noreen, 2024), nuancing the racism of higher education to the assiduousness of anti-Blackness. Factors contributing to the white-all racial minority gap include exam performance (Cramer, 2021), module-level differences (Kwok & Alsop, 2021), students' experiences of unbelonging and racial stereotypes (Marandure, Hall & Noreen, 2024), and the pervasiveness of "white-centric discourses" in curricula (Arday, Branchu & Boliver, 2022, p.1).

A strong factor that appears to narrow the gap, aside from the COVID-19 related changes in universities mentioned previously, is private schooling, with the awarding gap sitting at 7 percentage points for privately educated racially minoritised graduates versus 15 percentage points for state-school educated

ones (Boero et al., 2022, p.23). When further disaggregated by race, Boero et al. (2022, p.23) note privately educated Black students or those with mixed ethnicity were on average "6 percentage points more likely to be awarded a First than those from state schools". This finding both emphasises the importance of socio-economic status within racially minoritised groups, and that even relatively high socio-economic status is not a panacea for the awarding gap.

UK JOB MARKETS & THE AWARDING GAP

Trends in the awarding gap appear to readily translate into career pathways and outcomes, this is acute for Black graduates. With Black students less likely to achieve 'good' degrees overall (Underwood & Conrad, 2021), in the work place, Black employees then face a glass ceiling in terms of progression due in part to "closed and insular cultures" amongst senior management (Miller 2019, p.269). This feeds low representation in leadership and contributes to an ethnicity pay gap. While factors including parental background, local area, and university choice partially explain earnings differences amongst racially minoritised groups, overall, these have a limited impact on employment disparity by race (Zwysen & Longhi, 2016, p.30), with Black men graduates earning significantly less than white men graduates (24% less), even when accounting for job type (Machin et al., 2009, p.3).

Among all racially minoritised graduates, the impact of a 'good' degree appears to significantly improve labour market outcomes (McGuinness, 2003, p.1953), especially as the wage premium for a 'good' degree has increased over time (Naylor, Smith & Telhaj, 2015). Additionally, and across all racial groups, attaining a 'good' degree can positively impact self-esteem, confidence, and professional identity (Neary, 2014). In fields requiring high levels of education, such as R&I pathways, Lee (2021) highlights – with reference to international students – that institutional habitus significantly shapes students' post-study plans, suggesting that teaching, learning and research environments in universities can greatly influence the career paths that graduates choose to pursue. This is further supported by Labini and Zinovyeva (2011), who found that the quality of academic research at universities positively impacts graduates' likelihood of pursuing research-oriented careers, implying that a robust academic environment – in which a racial minority does well - not only nurtures but also directs career aspirations towards R&I.

COVID-19, CAREERS & STUDY

Immediate effects of COVID-19 on employment and the job market

The COVID-19 pandemic (2020-2021) significantly disrupted the UK job market, particularly affecting recent graduates. Studies show that the pandemic led to widespread concerns about job opportunities, reduced employment rates, and potential long-term scarring effects for graduates (Martin & Okolo, 2020). The impact was more severe for non-graduates, with up to 5 million jobs potentially lost without government intervention (Martin & Okolo, 2020). Graduates faced unique challenges from reduced economic activity and a frozen labour market (Rodríguez et al., 2020), such as cancelled contracts, reduced internships and thus opportunities for practical work experience and networking, and lower-paying jobs (Suleman, 2020; Arthur, 2021). However, some research indicates that employment rates for 2020 graduates recovered within 9-12 months, possibly due to rapid economic recovery and increased job vacancies (Ray-Chaudhuri & Xu, 2023).

Generally, in the UK, the pandemic exacerbated existing trends of over-qualified graduates in relation to graduate jobs available (Roberts, 2021). The percentage of students graduating with a First class degree rose from 28% to 35% between 2019 and 2020, with new job market entrants having to 'step down' into lower paid jobs to avoid unemployment (Roberts, 2021, p. 568, p.580). Globally, the pandemic introduced greater job precarity and exacerbated poor mental health issues, with a potential impact on long-term career prospects and earnings (Momen et al., 2022).

Pandemic-induced barriers to careers and opportunities in research and innovation

Given the importance an academic environment can play on nurturing student aspirations to careers in R&I (Labini & Zinovyeva, 2011), studies on COVID-19 and the university as a workplace show that barriers for early career researchers and otherwise marginalised academics were exacerbated at this time. Such barriers included disruptions to research continuity, delayed grant submissions, and challenges in establishing research independence (Soller et al., 2022; Báez et al., 2023). Women and caregivers faced disproportionate setbacks due to increased family responsibilities (Lafkas et al., 2023). Universities are still trying to discern the impact of the pandemic on their staff and develop appropriate responses, as evidenced by the funding call for this project.

"Pandemic within the pandemic" – Black students and COVID-19

The 'pandemic within the pandemic' refers to the dual damage to Black students and graduates of, firstly, the disproportionate COVID-related deaths amongst Black and brown people in the UK and the losses of life and jobs, financial hardships, fear and grief it instilled; and secondly, the Black Lives

Matter protests triggered by George Floyd's murder in 2020 that prompted public conversations and societal reckoning with anti-Black racism, and exposed a lack of trust in public institutions (Arday & Jones, 2022). These events had the effect of surfacing racial trauma and feelings of isolation, particularly amongst Black women and girls who faced an additional burden of care during the pandemic (Pennant, 2022). These two pandemics were coupled by the government at the time, which used Black Lives Matter protests to explain surges in COVID-19 cases, and thereby helped to engender racial vilification (Karlsen & Nelson, 2021, p.11).

While the confluence of COVID-19 and Black Lives Matter drew acute and widespread attention to racism in universities and the workplace, Black and racially minoritised students have long championed and mobilised for anti-racist universities and called for public conversations and societal reckoning with anti-Black racism. This is exemplified by the high profile 2014 panel at UCL titled 'Why isn't my professor black?', and the ensuing student-led campaigns for racial equity (Tate & Bagguley, 2016, p.291), and the 2019 occupation of Deptford Town Hall in south-east London by the Goldsmiths Anti-Racist Action group where, "occupiers pointed to an endemic culture of racism and anti-blackness in which students of colour were forced to navigate daily 'microaggressions, insensitive lecturers and seminar leaders, readings that exclude our experiences, and [a] lack of response from authorities concerned'." (Pimblott, 2020, p.210).

Student and graduate adaptations and resilience during COVID-19

In response to pandemic-related challenges to studying and careers, common coping mechanisms among all students included socialising virtually, engaging in exercise, focusing on studies or work, and practicing self-care (Timonen et al., 2021). The sudden shift to online learning presented its own difficulties in communication and motivation, but also opportunities for increased autonomy and self-regulation (Liu et al., 2021; Shoaib et al., 2023). Some universities had implemented student support interventions such as counselling, mindfulness programmes, and flexible study options (Donald & Jackson, 2022; Shoaib et al., 2023). It is possible that those students able to best adapt to the pandemic's impact on family and home life, wellbeing, isolation and mental health, were better able to engage effectively in career development and research opportunities post-graduation. Through the three research questions, this is an area we look to interrogate further and thereby bridge studies on racial disparity in universities and the workplace, with the particularities of COVID-19 and its impact on racially minoritised graduates.

METHODOLOGY

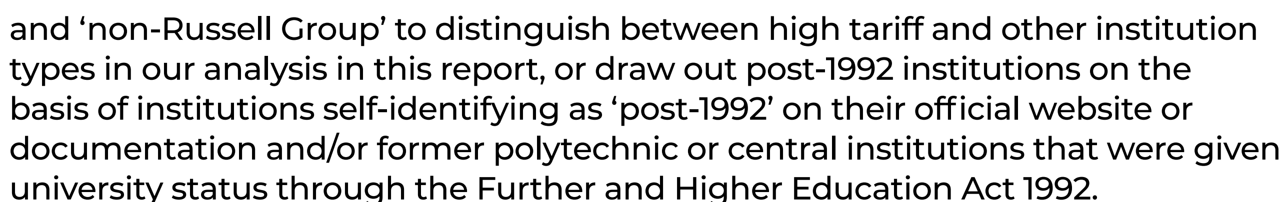
The team assembled to conduct the research are all racial minorities. The Accountability & Insights Group assembled to work with the research team and to sense-check its findings are all racial minorities. We have drawn upon the depth of our collective experiences to develop a methodology that creates space for new epistemic possibilities to know the impacts of COVID-19 and the awarding gap on a diverse range of racially minoritised graduates.

To answer our research questions we adopted a mixed methods approach. For RQ1 on the destination of racial minority graduates in 2020 and 2021, we analysed quantitative data on graduate destinations between 2012 and 2021 from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA). In May 2024 we purchased from JISC - the UK digital, data and technology agency - two data sets: these were Graduate Outcomes (GO) data from 2017-2021 and Destination of Leavers (DOL) survey data from 2012/13-2016/17 which survey UK domicile students only[4]. The data in this report refers only to those graduates of undergraduate programmes with 'good' degree outcomes (not postgraduate) who responded to these surveys and not all graduates in the UK. On average, 244,169 graduates are represented in each year between 2012 and 2021 in the data sets[5]. Across the UK, there are approximately 500,000 graduates of undergraduate programmes annually.

The following search fields were available for each survey respondent: 'Institution', 'Ethnicity', 'Disability', 'Sex', 'Parental Education', 'Degree Classification', 'Current Activity' and 'Employment Type' / 'Worker Skill Level'. When analysing the data for 'Sex' in this report, it is important to note that respondents had the options of 'Male', 'Female' and 'Other' in their survey however the number of respondents responding with 'Other' each academic year was extremely low (only 0.8% of respondents in 2012/13 up to 1.5% of respondents in 2020/21) and so these data were excluded from any gender analysis due to the small sample size. All graduates who selected 'Not Applicable', 'Unknown' or 'blank' for their ethnicity were excluded from data analysis due to this information being a necessity in this research. 'Institution type' was manually added as a search field by the quantitative research assistant. Due to multiple varying sources as to which institutions are officially classed as 'post-1992' and 'plate glass' for example, only institutions classed as Russell Group universities can be assured to be accurate. Therefore, we use the designation 'Russell Group'

4 2016/17 was the last year when the Destination of Leavers (DoL) survey was used, after which the Graduate Outcomes (GO) survey was introduced. DoL took place six months after graduation, while GO takes place 15 months after graduation. Some fields in the multiple choice survey around employment and study changed between the surveys which means the two data sets are not directly comparable. In the findings section of the report, we explain trends across the data surveys.

5 As a result of exclusions from the data – explained in the next paragraph - the number of graduates for each cohort is as follows: 2012/13 n=217838, 2013/14 n=235698, 2014/5 n=222000, 2015/16 n=230031, 2016/17 n=244018, 2017/18 n=249888, 2018/19 n=252938, 2019/20 n=263436 and 2020/21 n=281676.



and 'non-Russell Group' to distinguish between high tariff and other institution types in our analysis in this report, or draw out post-1992 institutions on the basis of institutions self-identifying as 'post-1992' on their official website or documentation and/or former polytechnic or central institutions that were given university status through the Further and Higher Education Act 1992.

To answer RQ2 and RQ3 on the impact of a 'good' degree and the impact of COVID-19 on career pathways, we drew on two qualitative methods: focus group discussions and 1:1 semi-structured interviews. From May to June 2024, we conducted 11 focus group discussions online with racially minoritised graduates of UK universities between 2019-2021 with any degree outcome. We had restricted eligibility to 'home fees' students only. Using purposive sampling and advertising through social media, we invited potential respondents to complete a screening survey and then invited 88 people to a focus group, securing 58 respondents. Focus groups were organised so that some were exclusively for women, men or mixed; graduates with a third or a 1st/2.1 degree; people who self-identified as disabled; and people who self-identified as Black Caribbean or Black African. Contrary to our eligibility criteria, we believe that a high proportion of respondents were racially minoritised international students. This means that focus group data do not easily correspond to the quantitative data on UK domicile graduates, though the data does uncover useful insights into the wide ranging experiences of racially minoritised students in UK universities – domestic and international students. It also draws attention to the incredibly precarious position of international students in UK universities, who reported heightened levels of isolation during the pandemic, and who remain under-researched in research and practices designed to address awarding gaps.

Applying a snowball sampling technique, between August and October 2024, we conducted 18 1:1 semi-structured interviews - 16 with graduates who had 'home fee' status and two with international student status. All respondents graduated with a 'good' degree from a UK university between 2020 and 2022. We deliberately aimed for a mix of Russell Group and non-Russell Group respondents, as the findings of our quantitative analysis suggested institution type mattered to graduate outcomes. All respondents were assured anonymity and are thus referred to in this report in the aggregate or by descriptors that are consistent with their gender and ethnic identity.

The survey instruments for the focus group and interviews were co-designed by the research team with peer refinement from the Accountability & Insights Group set up for this study. This group comprises a current undergraduate student and recent graduate, a Student Success practitioner outside of UCL, and the co-Chairs of UCL's Race Equality Steering Group, the highest forum on racial equality in the university.

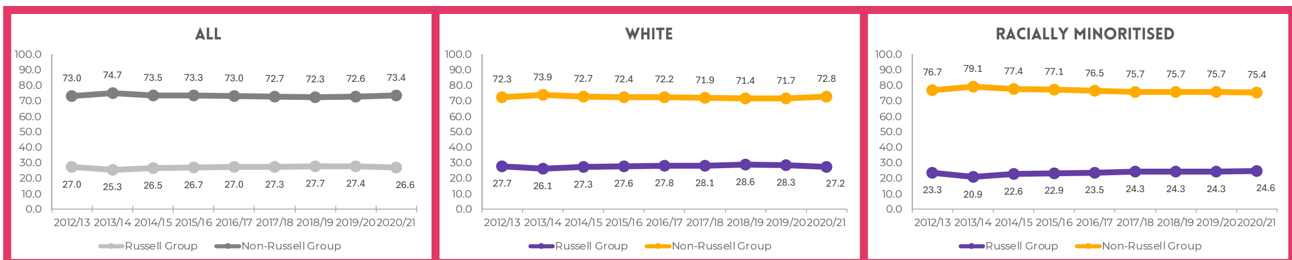
Ethical approval for the study was granted by UCL on 20th February 2024.

KEY FINDINGS

We asked, during 2019-21, when the white-racial minority awarding gap closed considerably, did a 'good' degree for racially minoritised graduates open careers in research and innovation?

To answer this overarching question and the three sub-questions to follow, it is important to disaggregate awarding gap data by ethnicity, sex and institution type especially. We found that non-Russell Group universities award the highest proportion of 'good' degrees, and that racial minorities are more likely to obtain a 'good' degree at a non-Russell group institution, by an average of between 2 - 4% (**Figure 3**).

FIGURE 3: 'GOOD' DEGREES FROM RUSSELL GROUP VS NON-RUSSELL GROUP UNIVERSITIES: WHITE & RACIALLY MINORITISED GRADUATES (%)



When we disaggregate all racially minoritised graduates into smaller ethnicity groups it becomes evident that 'good' degree outcomes from non-Russell Group institutions are not similarly secured by all racially minoritised groups.

The percentage of Black graduates who were awarded their 'good' degree from a post-1992 university greatly exceeded all white and other racially minoritised graduates. Over 60% of Black graduates with a 'good' degree achieved this from a post-1992 university in 2020/21 (61.9%). On average, every academic year between 48-57% of White, Asian, Mixed, and 'Other' ethnicity graduates with 'good' degrees obtain these from post-1992 universities, with this range being the smallest in 2020/21 (**Figure 4**). By contrast, for Russell Group institutions, Black graduates fair the worst in terms of a 'good' degree award, with fewer than 15%. This is despite the number of Black graduates being awarded 'good' degrees increasing by 3.3% since 2012/13 (**Figure 5**).

FIGURE 4: 'GOOD' DEGREES FROM POST-1992 UNIVERSITIES BY ETHNICITY (%)

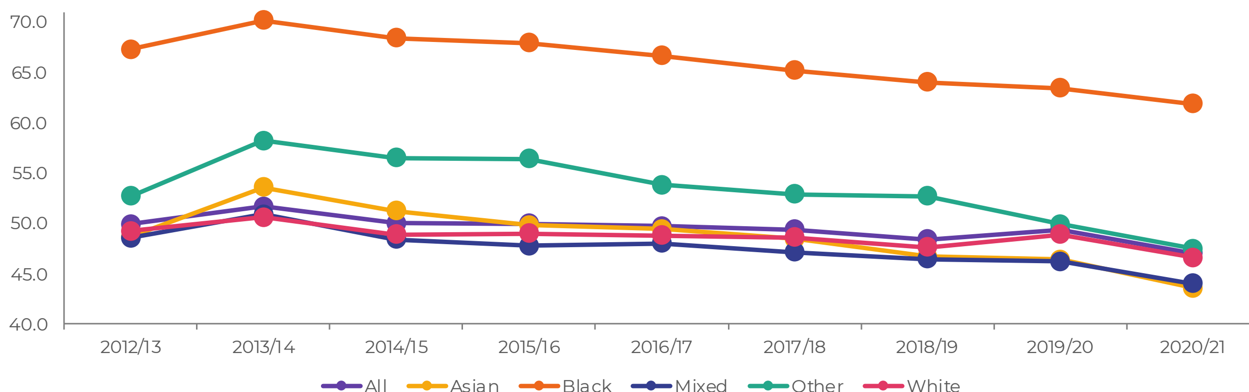
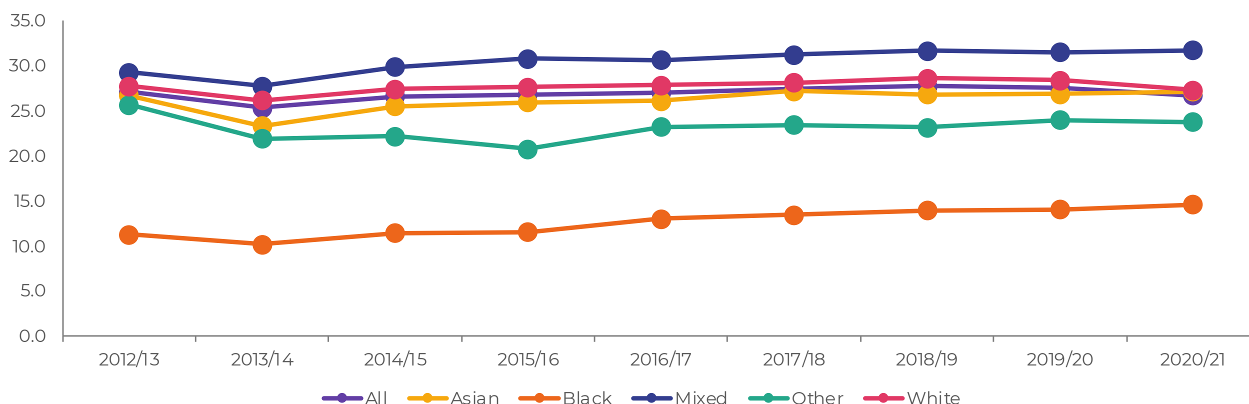


FIGURE 5: 'GOOD' DEGREES FROM RUSSELL GROUP UNIVERSITIES BY ETHNICITY (%)



Across all institution types, between 2012 and 2021, we found that regardless of ethnicity, most 'good' degrees are obtained by women. Men graduates make up between 40-42% of good degree recipients each academic year whereas women graduates make up almost 60%. When further disaggregated by ethnicity, we find Asian graduates persistently have the smallest difference in proportion between men and women graduates, whereas Black graduates persistently have the largest difference. Black men graduates are the only group of men graduates to have never reached making up 40% of 'good' degree holders within their ethnic group, that is, Black women consistently outperform Black men in degree outcomes. In 2020/21 the difference in the proportion of Black women graduates and Black men graduates with good degrees was 30.1%, whereas the difference between women and men graduates was 18.9%, 10.2%, 19.3% and 12.3% for White, Asian, Mixed and Other ethnic groups respectively in the same academic year (**Figure 6**).

FIGURE 6: PROPORTION OF 'GOOD' DEGREES BY SEX & ETHNICITY (%)

These data confirm that the awarding gap is acute for Black graduates, especially men, and that Black men and women generally secure better degree results at non-Russell Group institutions than at Russell Group institutions.

Building on this understanding, we turn to graduate outcomes.

RQ1 Where did Black, Asian, and other racially minoritised graduates go after graduating in 2020 and 2021, and how does this compare to previous years? Does the picture differ for Black graduates, for whom the awarding gap is widest?

Graduates with 'good' degrees are far more likely to enter employment than further study after graduation. In 2020 and 2021, the results are broadly consistent with the immediate years preceding the pandemic. When disaggregated by ethnicity, Asian, Mixed and Other ethnicity graduates have a higher-than-average proportion of graduates who pursue further study when compared to all graduates, and this is true for every cohort. For example, in 2016/17, 24% of all 'good' degree holding graduates pursued further study and this was 27.6%, 25.3% and 31.6% for Asian, Mixed and Other ethnicity 'good' degree holders respectively. This was also true for Black graduates in 2014/15, 2015/16 and 2016/7; there was a higher than average proportion of Black graduates who pursued further study when compared to all graduates, however prior to and since these dates the converse has been true – Black graduates have a slightly higher than average proportion of graduates who enter employment and are less likely to pursue further study when compared to all 'good' degree holders, similar to white graduates. In 2020/21, 11% of all 'good' degree holders pursued further study however this was only 8.9% and 10.9% of Black and white graduates respectively (**Figure 7**).

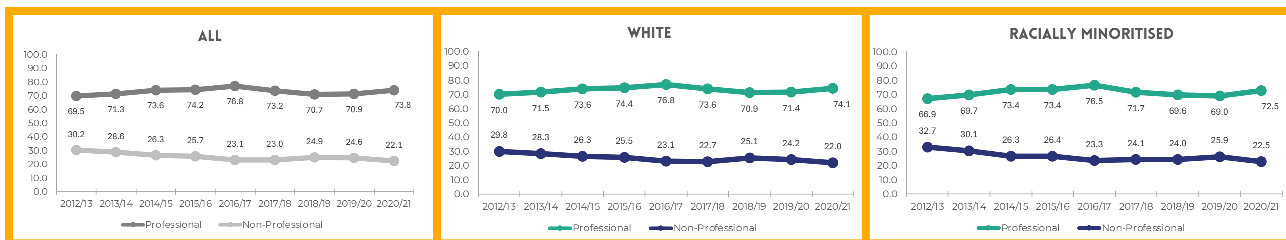
FIGURE 7: GRADUATES WITH 'GOOD' DEGREES IN EMPLOYMENT VS STUDY BY ETHNICITY (%)[6 7]

Examining further the types of employment graduates engaged in, we find that all employed 'good' degree holders are far more likely to report being in a professional role over a non-professional role. The difference is extremely small when comparing white and all racially minoritised graduates. In 2020/21, on average 73.8% of all employed 'good' degree holders reported being in professional roles, increasing very slightly to 74.1% for white graduates and decreasing slightly to 72.5% for racially minoritised graduates. At this level of analysis, the differences are extremely small (**Figure 8**).

6 The two survey sources for the analysis – Graduate Outcomes and Destination of Leavers – for the purposes of the study, had consistent variables except for options on classifying graduates in work or study. In the DoL, graduates had the options of 'full time work', 'part time work', 'primarily in work and also studying', 'full time study', 'part time study', 'primarily studying and also in work', 'unemployed', 'due to start work' and 'other'. These options changed to 'full time employment', 'part time employment', 'unknown pattern of employment', 'full time further study', 'part time further study', 'unknown pattern of further study', 'employment and further study', 'Other including travel, caring for someone or retired' and 'voluntary or unpaid work' in the newer GO survey. The removal of the 'unemployed' option, the lack of clarity of what is meant by 'other' in the DoL survey and whether this included the newly introduced 'voluntary or unpaid work' and the lack of clarity on whether the new category of 'employment and further study' is an amalgamation of the old categories 'primarily studying and also in work' and 'primarily in work and also studying', has led to some unavoidable inconsistencies in the data analysis in this area. Therefore, for clarity, the categories included in 'employment' and 'study' data from each survey are: for Employment: DoL Survey: 'full time work', 'part time work', 'primarily in work and also studying' and GO Survey: 'full time employment', 'part time employment', 'unknown pattern of employment'. For Study: DoL Survey: 'full time study', 'part time study', 'primarily studying and also in work' and GO Survey: 'full time further study', 'part time further study', 'unknown pattern of further study'.

7 The exclusion of the new 'employment and further study' category (so that these graduates are not counted twice in both employment and study) likely serves as an explanation for the percentage jump in 'employment' data and the drop in 'study' data seen in Figure 7.

FIGURE 8: EMPLOYED 'GOOD' DEGREE HOLDERS IN PROFESSIONAL VS NON-PROFESSIONAL ROLES: WHITE & RACIALLY MINORITISED GRADUATES (%)

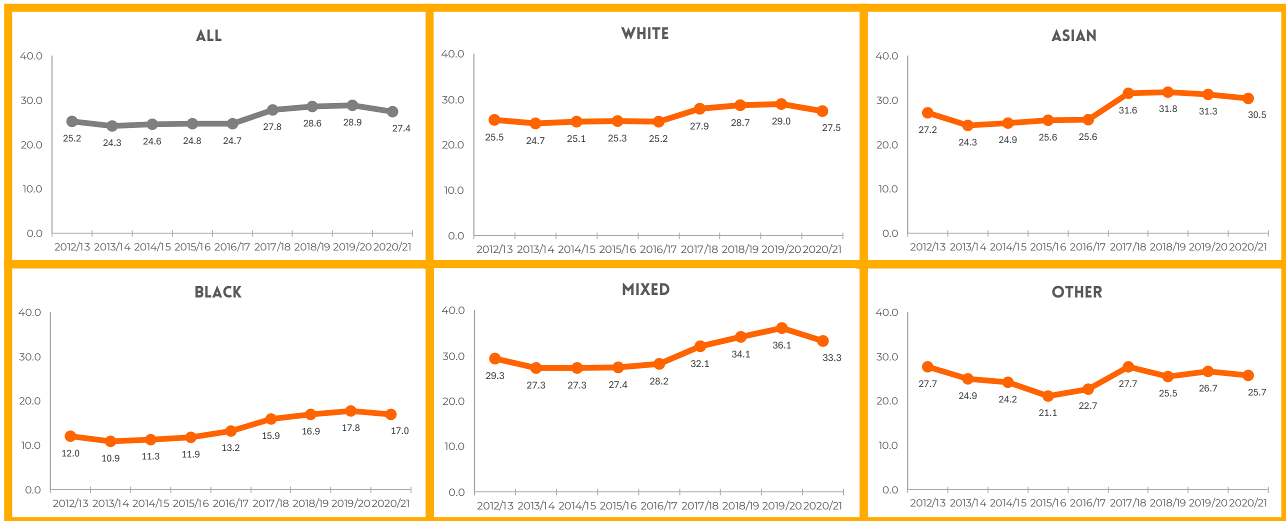


Disaggregating racially minoritised groups shows that, with the exception of 2015/16 and 2016/17, employed Black 'good' degree holders are the ethnic group that is least likely to report being in professional roles and most likely to report being in non-professional roles (**Figure 9**). In 2019/20, when the uncertainty of the pandemic was pronounced for 2020 graduates, 70.9% of all employed 'good' degree holders reported being in professional roles and this fell to 67.4% for Black employed 'good' degree holders.

FIGURE 9: EMPLOYED 'GOOD' DEGREE HOLDERS IN PROFESSIONAL VS NON-PROFESSIONAL ROLES BY ETHNICITY (%)

Examining 'good' degree holders in professional roles by institution type, we find that from 2016/17 onwards the percentage of employed Black 'good' degree holders in professional roles has exceeded the percentage of Black 'good' degree holders from Russell Group universities (**Figure 3**), meaning there is an overrepresentation of Russell Group Black graduates in the population of Black graduates in professional roles. This was particularly true in 2019/20, when only 14% of Black 'good' degree holders were from Russell Group universities yet 17.8% of employed Black 'good' degree holders in professional roles were from Russell Group universities (**Figure 10**). This is true for all racially minoritised ethnic groups – there is an overrepresentation of Russell Group graduates in professional roles when compared to 'good' degree holders each year (**Figure 5**), with the largest overrepresentations being Asian and Mixed Russell Group 'good' degree holders.

FIGURE 10: EMPLOYED GRADUATES IN PROFESSIONAL ROLES WITH 'GOOD' DEGREES FROM RUSSELL GROUP UNIVERSITIES BY ETHNICITY (%)



Disaggregated further by ethnicity and sex, we find that in every cohort of all employed graduates with 'good' degrees, Black 'good' degree holders who enter employment are disproportionally women (**Figure 11**). For example, in 2015/16, only 33.6% of Black 'good' degree holders who entered employment were men compared to Asian 'good' degree holders where 44.4% were men – the average for all this cohort was 40.2% men. Mixed ethnicity 'good' degree holders entering employment also tend to be disproportionately women but to lesser degree than Black graduates. Asian 'good' degree holders have the opposite trend, although - like every ethnicity - there are more women 'good' degree holders in general so there is a larger proportion entering employment. These findings are broadly consistent pre- and during the pandemic.

FIGURE 11: PROPORTION OF 'GOOD' DEGREE HOLDERS IN EMPLOYMENT BY SEX & ETHNICITY (%)

Turning to the proportion of ‘good’ degree holders in study (**Figure 12**), we find the proportion of men and women ‘good’ degree holders entering further study after graduation are similar and in proportion to all graduates (**Figure 6**). Disaggregated by sex and ethnicity, we find there is less variation than the employment data (**Figure 11**). In every cohort, Black ‘good’ degree holders that enter further study have a higher proportion of women graduates than all other ethnicities. For example, in 2013/14, only 36.7% of Black ‘good’ degree holders who entered employment were men compared to Mixed ‘good’ degree holders where 47.1% were men – the average for all this cohort was 42.4% men. All other ethnicities tend to be in line with the proportion of all ‘good’ degree holders with only minor fluctuations.

FIGURE 12: PROPORTION OF ‘GOOD’ DEGREE HOLDERS IN STUDY BY SEX & ETHNICITY (%)

The quantitative data establishes that while the awarding gap narrowed during 2019-2021 between white and all racial minority graduates, the gap remained widest for Black graduates and narrowest for those of mixed heritage, which is consistent with the pre-pandemic years. For Black graduates, women consistently performed better than men, and attending a non-Russell Group institution was more likely to result in a ‘good’ degree outcome than attending a Russell Group institution. This marks Black men with ‘good’ degrees at Russell Group institutions as a particularly minoritised group, albeit one that appears well represented in professional employment.

Turning to graduate destinations, 2019-2021 do not appear markedly different to previous years. For graduates with ‘good’ degrees, professional employment was a more likely destination than further study, irrespective of ethnicity. Though, Asian, Mixed and Other ethnicity graduates have a higher-than-average proportion of graduates who pursue further study. The noteworthy exception to continuing trends is in 2019/20, when 2020 graduates were entering a highly uncertain job market. At this time, Black graduates with a ‘good’ degree were least likely to report being in professional roles (67.4%) compared to all graduates (70.9%).

RQ2

What was the qualitative impact of a 'good' degree on racially minoritised graduates between 2020-2021, professionally or personally, and their wish to pursue careers in research and/or innovation? Specifically for Black graduates?

DEFINITIONS OF A 'GOOD' DEGREE & ITS EFFECT ON SELF-PERCEPTION

Across focus groups discussions and interviews, there were varied ideas on what constituted a 'good' degree. This included simply knowing more than before, having the ability to apply knowledge from one's degree (practical skills), being highly regarded by others especially family members as a university graduate, but also recognition of the material impact it makes to future prospects to have an upper second class (2.1) or first (1st) class degree, with one respondent sharing, a 'good' degree is one that "*propels you into the labour market*", and another adding,

> ***A good degree was able to get me a good job.***

Despite these varied definitions of a 'good' degree, there was some consensus in the focus groups on how a good degree affected self-perception. For example, one respondent explained, "*my degree made me an outstanding person among friends and peers.*" Similarly, another respondent stated, "*people are more likely to associate with you.*" In contrast, one respondent focused on the implications of lower qualifications, stating "*if you graduate with less than a 2:1, there's a sense of failure; people won't come to you for advice.*" Other respondents linked their understanding of a 'good' degree outcome more directly to the job market. For instance, one respondent felt that the value of a degree is closely tied to its relevance to their job. They stated, "*if you are working in the field you studied, your degree is a reflection of you and what you have achieved.*"

From interviews, a British Black woman graduate who was aware of the awarding gap and obtained a first class degree, reported feeling immense pride at *"beating the odds"*. Adding,

> ***I bring up my first all the time. ALL the time. Because I know that I'm a Black woman, and in my job they will take intelligence away from me. Every. Single. Time.***

A first class degree was therefore a source of affirmation and an instrumental means to assert knowledge in the workplace. Another Black woman respondent with a first class degree also reflected on its instrumental importance, reflecting,

"*it's just a qualification. It did help in some ways – like to get onto my masters programme – really, it helped my self-esteem*". Both respondents had attended state schools, with the latter respondent sharing that after disappointing A-Level results and securing a university place through clearing, *"I think a lot of teachers were disappointed in me... disappointed on my behalf"*. Her 'good' degree award was a source of validation and the delivery of her potential.

A 'GOOD' DEGREE & ITS EFFECT ON FAMILY & FRIENDS

The theme of family and friends emerged strongly throughout all focus groups, particularly when discussing motivations for attending university. It was evident that family played an influential role, though in varied ways. For instance, one respondent described how their family made their decision to attend university, "*it was never really my choice, but my family's decision*." Another respondent mentioned a softer influence, stating, "*my dad encouraged me to go*." Familial investment in the degree itself amplified pride in its outcome. One respondent who was awarded a 2:1 stated, "*this outcome helps to set a precedent; it gives my family a sense of confidence. I felt proud, I was able to graduate with the grade I wanted. My friends and family were very happy, as I was the first to attend university and came out with flying colours, it gave them joy*." In contrast, some respondents noted how their siblings, who attended university first, influenced their educational paths, "*I saw them go and thought it was a good thing*." Additionally, several respondents highlighted the importance of going to university as a means to support their families in the future. One respondent explained attending university as a way,

> ***"To fetch your money and pay your bills and take care of your family."***

Many focus group respondents emphasized the importance of a 'good' degree outcome as a means to financially support their families.

These themes were strongly echoed in interviews, especially with two Black African international graduates, both of whom were the first in their families to attend university and the first to travel internationally to do so. One remarked, *"it's important for younger ones [family members] to know the importance of education and that when they are in school, they should take everything seriously."* For UK Black African and Black Caribbean graduates, family and familial pride in a 2.1 or 1st class degree was as strong as it was for focus group respondents or international graduates. For these respondents, there was a shared sense that the decision to attend university, and the selection of the institution and course was shaped by peers, elder siblings and – diverging from the international graduates interviewed – their schools via subject teachers or careers advisors. One shared that at his state school, "*we had academic coaches who are always really supportive in terms of [...] reading over your personal*

statement and offering guidance". For the same respondent, his 'good' degree meant meeting the expectations of his parents, who, he explained with humour, "*are very much 'we expect you to get a 2.1, so if not, we might have a problem'!*"

There were some interesting findings concerning the ways in which some graduates spoke about the cultural expectations of their family in terms of education and degree outcomes. Several respondents drew on cultural stereotypes – some more benign than others - and many used humour to play on these, stemming from the rapport built with the research team and the sense that we too were in on the 'joke'. Some respondents of South Asian heritage spoke of meeting high parental expectations of educational success from their children. Some respondents seemed to differentiate between Africa and the Caribbean in a way that positioned the former as more hard working than the latter. A UK respondent of mixed African and Caribbean heritage with a 2.1 hinted at cultural differences within his family's response to his degree classification and ambitions to study. He explained, tongue-in-cheek, that, *"my family were very happy, especially the African side... the Caribbean side, I wouldn't want to use 'carefree', they were more... they emphasized more... having fun and enjoying school life while also not losing track of my studies. So, they were more on me to apply balance."* This group stereotype is deeply rooted in a combination of class antagonism and cultural politics that we see play out in Britain amongst Black diaspora. We flag this finding as demonstrative of the fluidity of race and the process of racialisation. In many ways, the interpersonal experiences of Black African and Caribbean graduates were very similar, yet, leaning on racialised tropes presented in a jovial manner, racial difference can be crafted and normalised. In this case, through racial stereotype, a group (African people) who invariably experience some of the sharper ends of racism's harms are crafted; simultaneously, racial stereotypes are used as a mechanism to position African people above another group (Caribbean people) to assert a more respectable position. We recognise that Black students engaging in the reproduction of Black diasporic tensions are unlikely to want to consciously perpetuate harm - but this is still how race operates and evolves. We see it as important to flag this finding as these stereotypes have had and continue to have both structural and interpersonal consequences for Caribbean people.

A 'GOOD' DEGREE & CAREERS IN RESEARCH & INNOVATION

In contrast to the quantitative data (**Figure 7**), most focus group respondents were inclined towards further study rather than pursuing employment. While a few are currently pursuing a masters degree, others expressed interest in doing so in the future. When asked about their motivations, some cited a desire for more knowledge, while others focused on improving job prospects. When

participants were asked about any potential barriers to further study finances emerged as the main concern. For example, one respondent noted,

> ***I'd consider doing [a masters], my finances are the restriction at the moment.***

Similarly, another respondent stated, "*I'm planning on starting my masters soon, but my finances are restrictive*" Most respondents only expressed plans for pursuing a master's degree presently, however, a couple expressed ambitions for academic positions. One respondent mentioned, "*I'm planning on studying for my masters soon, as I would like to become a lecturer in the future*," while another aspired to be a professor. Importantly, all respondents interested in further study confirmed their ambition predates the pandemic and was not influenced by it. In terms of career aspirations in the field of innovation, only one respondent expressed interest in starting a business, and another aimed for a career in the tech industry.

Our interview data draws out a clearer distinction in the connection between a 'good' degree, careers in research and innovation and the type of university attended, echoing quantitative data on the relevance of distinguishing between high tariff institutions represented by the Russell Group and lower tariff presented by non-Russell Group institutions, and literature on the research environment shaping student ambitions in this field (Labini and Zinovyeva, 2011). Across the 16 home fees graduates with 'good' degree outcomes we interviewed, nine had attended Russell Group institutions. Of these, seven had completed or were currently studying for a masters degree, and three were undertaking doctoral research. Of the two Russell Group graduates who had not engaged in further study, both expressed interest, but were hampered by personal finances. One explained, "*my family didn't have the funds to allow me to dive straight into a masters. So I had to look for work after my first degree, while I built-up the finances to go for my masters*".

One respondent studying for a masters degree had secured a full scholarship, with the prospect of a scholarship the only reason she applied: "*I applied because I was like, I would love to do this masters, and if I get a scholarship, then it's amazing. If I don't, then I won't be doing it.*" This was a scholarship ringfenced for Black students, it not only granted access to a masters programme for this respondent but shaped her degree choice in the humanities. She explained,

> ***I never thought about doing a masters, and I definitely hadn't thought about doing one purely out of enjoyment or passion for a subject. It was more like, 'this is my career plan. Therefore the steps to get there are ABC.' But I hadn't thought, 'Oh, I can just study something that I'm really interested in'.***

Access to this masters has now shaped her ambition to pursue a doctorate in her field of interest.

Of the three respondents currently pursuing a doctorate, all were financially supported with a full scholarship on the basis of research excellence. A Black woman respondent in a science, technology, engineering, mathematics (STEM) field explained that while her institution had a careers service and a professional skills module "*I don't actually think we got told what PhD was. At least I didn't know until I basically applied. And there was stuff I didn't find out about doing a PhD until I literally was doing it. Conferences. What do they involve? How does it actually work? Where does the funding comes from? What you do after? I didn't even know what the academic pathway was like. What is a postdoc? I literally had never heard of that before... I didn't know it [the PhD] was paid. I thought it was like a master's project. Which is why I didn't consider it*". What made this respondent consider a doctorate was an academic at her institution. She explains, this academic offered her a summer research project, and that they "*happened to be Black*". She clarifies later in the interview the encounter was intentional,

> ***They approached me because they specifically look out for Black students because we're so few and far between. And that changed the trajectory of my experience at Uni, because whenever I felt overwhelmed, I'd go into his office. I'd have my lunch there occasionally. He introduced me to other PhDs or ex-students, and we would then meet up outside of Uni. So then I ended up kind of growing my university network [after having felt isolated for so long]. I also felt more confident in speaking openly about my identity with other people at Uni... At the beginning, I felt quite conscious of being some people's first experience with somebody who's Black. I just got quite tired. It was just a feeling of tiredness having to explain certain things about myself that I hadn't had to explain before. It's small stuff: how often I wash my hair, what food that I would eat, music I would listen to... Then, because I met him and also seen other people who'd gone through the same thing, and were confident, and didn't shy away from it, then I became quite vocal.***

This respondent subsequently formed a network for Black scholars in STEM, and now "*I'm talking to everybody at Uni about the fact that I'm Black. It is really weird. I definitely had moments where I felt a bit uncomfortable. Like everybody thinks all I'm going on about is just being Black all the time. It's this hypervisibility thing. It is a bit weird... and, I've had to deal different types of comments from people who don't agree with me running programmes just for Black students. I've had people - non-Black students - question me on that.*" All graduates receiving a scholarship, had previously attended a Russell Group institution for their undergraduate degree.

Individual experiences add nuance to the particular challenges of pursuing postgraduate education and careers in research at high tariff institutions, especially for Black graduates. While financial support is a pivotal factor that makes disciplines in the humanities (in our example) accessible, the care and attention of Black academic staff – who are likely combating their own challenges in these institutions – is instrumental to help navigate academia.

The role of Black academic staff was also significant for respondents currently pursuing a doctorate at non-Russell Group institutions. Of the seven non-Russell Group graduates, three had completed or were currently studying for a masters degree, and one was about to commence doctoral research, none had scholarships. For the doctoral candidate, a Black woman, Black academic staff were pivotal to her decision to pursue a doctorate, as with the Russell Group graduate. She explained that after four years of undergraduate study she had had enough of university life. But,

> ***[a Black academic] said 'you just need to get a good grade. And you could just go straight and do your PhD [without a masters]. In fact, I'm going to start calling you Dr. X from now.' ... and it worked! ... My friends started calling me Dr X and then [a Black woman professor] called me Dr. X. And I'm just like, 'How can I not?!' I've been inspired.***

For graduates pursuing a masters degree at non-Russell Group institutions, there was a greater sense that any masters programme pursued was because it was instrumental for jobs and career prospects. This may be a reflection of the wider environment in which they study, where some institutions refer to their educational offer in terms of being "employment focused", in contrast to "research-based teaching focused". For example the University of East London (where some of our respondents had studied), regularly describes itself as a 'careers-led' or 'careers-first' institution, writing on its webpage, "Work-based learning at the University of East London involves students engaging in learning activities that occur within a professional work environment. It is an educational approach that integrates academic study with practical experience in the workplace." (University of East London, 2024).

One respondent at a non-Russell Group institution explained, "*The masters I did was just to become a professional*" and was akin to a technical qualification; a sentiment echoed by one other. Another respondent shared, "*I knew I wanted to do a masters degree but I was still figuring out what job I wanted to do, which is probably not the best reason to do a master's degree... so I studied corporate finance [related to her undergraduate degree] to help me figure this out*". This respondent applied for a masters during the second national COVID-19 lockdown, and chose to pursue further study close to home (as she did with her undergraduate degree). She explained, "*I felt comfortable there... I felt like I had stability there, especially with COVID. If I'd have gone to a new place it would have just been the same situation really, spending all day in a room.*" She also added that her undergraduate institution offered a financial discount on all programmes for their graduates, which cemented her decision.

While overall a 'good' degree outcome made postgraduate study an option, and thereafter careers in research and innovation, the experiences of Black graduates especially were shaped by an academic environment where being understood and seen mattered, symbolised by Black academics validating their knowledge-making abilities and encouraging them. Among Russell Group graduates, the pursuit of postgraduate study was shaped by access to scholarships and finance, which can enable graduates to pursue areas of scholarly interest, over more instrumental concerns for employment. Where for non-Russell Group graduates, the pursuit of postgraduate study was rarely for – primarily – interest and enjoyment, but for building a career path. The idea of postgraduate study purely for personal interest was highly unusual.

RQ3 What role has/did COVID-19 played in graduates' abilities to pursue careers in research and/or innovation? Specifically for Black graduates?

HYPERVISIBILITY & THE 'PANDEMIC WITHIN THE PANDEMIC'

The hypervisibility of Black graduates at Russell Group institutions was a common theme. Several respondents raised the effects of hypervisibility on them. One recalled,

> ***I think I was my own worst enemy at Uni a little bit, because I kind of went into it already looking for differences with everybody else rather than trying to find common ground with people. I think I was just so overwhelmed by feeling so hypervisible.***

Another respondent who attended a predominately white institution in a predominantly white town explained how he used his hypervisibility to: "*shout at the university... [about] the dual pandemic effects of COVID and racism on students of colour*". He added,

> ***It shouldn't be the job of students to do anything other than be students... but when you come into university as a student of colour, you don't necessarily choose to be an activist. Some people just want to be students, and almost unilaterally, every student of colour is forced to be a spokesperson.***

In this, the students are continuing a longer tradition of necessary anti-racist activism in their universities (Tate and Bagguley, 2016; Pimblott, 2020).

In all cases, hypervisibility came with an additional workload of outreach, support and care responsibilities for other Black students and other racially minoritised students, particularly in the absence of university action. This workload was acute during the global Black Lives Matter movement that

coincided with the first national COVID-19 lockdown in the UK in the spring of 2020, when students moved to online studying for the first time, and for final year undergraduates, faced a high degree of uncertainty over their immediate futures. One respondent shared, "*during the COVID lockdown, [my friends] were breaking the rules and going to parties and stuff. I was just stuck in my three person household, where I didn't socialise, I was also dealing with the Black Lives Matter stuff that was happening at the same time. [That's when I met X, another Black student] and I joined an association for students of colour - looking for a community – I found it.*"

Not all racially minoritised students felt the need to be an activist at university, which may be related to whether they were seen as a 'racial representative' in their context. For example, on Black Lives Matter, one respondent at an institution with a large proportion of racial minority students shared, "*I did see a lot of hashtags on social media [...] and a lot of people were protesting against police brutality and injustice... I saw a few students participate. But [I was not moved to]. I would have liked to. But you know, I was dealing with a lots of things at the time and just couldn't...*" and, crucially, did not feel he had to.

CONDITIONS FOR STUDYING DUE TO COVID-19 & DEGREE OUTCOMES

All respondents in focus groups and interviews were affected by the pandemic and the transition to online study. For some, the transition was particularly challenging. One respondent stated, "*I found it really hard to take classes alone, to do research alone, I'm the kind of person who likes to get ideas from others.*" Another respondent shared how this affected their concentration,

> ***It was hard getting used to the new normal, my concentration reduced a lot.***

In contrast, other respondents appeared to prefer the new learning conditions. One reported, "*I'm an introvert; I enjoyed being at home and studying online.*" All respondents noted that the transition to online learning and changes to assessment in their institutions had either a positive or a neutral effect on their grade average, partly because a large portion of the degree result was already confirmed for 2020 graduates in programmes of modular assessment.

For 2021 graduates, there was greater room for improvement to their average. For example, one respondent who was averaging a 2.1 in her first and second year and obtained a first overall shared, "*before COVID, I was like, 'there's no way I'm going to get First'. I don't like going into Uni. I don't have any proper friends. ... There's no way this is going to happen. And then once COVID happened I actually started doing my readings, I actually found that I really*

enjoyed it… I wanted to engage with this content." This respondent had felt out of place at her university driven by, what she felt, was an "*elitist sort of background [amongst classmates] and socially conservative*". Working online and from her home, the respondent shared,

> ***Not being around other students that I'm nervous about expressing my views with, I felt like more comfortable to engage with the content [politics] without them instantly challenging me.***

In addition to the social context of her engagement with peers, this respondent also had a diagnosis of anxiety and depression late in her undergraduate studies. With a diagnosis, she was able to identify appropriate coping mechanisms, which included virtual and limited social engagement.

The sentiment of a neutral or positive impact of COVID-19 on degree outcomes, however, masks the disparate experiences of learning during COVID-19 and different enabling environments that in some cases meant a neutral impact was the outcome of major adjustments and overcoming significant challenges. One interview respondent explained that during the lockdowns she moved into her family home, but "*I didn't have like a desk set up, or anything like this. I made one in my room with my bed and stuff, but obviously there's two other kids in the house (my little sister and little brother), mum and dad all walking around and stuff. So it was never silent.*" Another added that during the national lockdowns,

> ***I did think of coming home, but at that point I couldn't go home… because at that time the economy was very slow, and I felt adding myself to the family is just going to increase their expenses. So I just decided to stay here.***

Almost all respondents reported an impact on their mental health and wellbeing, either at the time, or on reflection. As one respondent explained,

> ***I don't think anyone's fully been able to internalize, explore, or unpack the impact of COVID [and the] shared trauma we all had.***

For graduates whose family support network was outside of the UK, the impact of COVID-19 was especially isolating and amplified concerns for family who were living in places with low or poor levels of access to a vaccine. For UK graduates - attentive to news reports and analysis during the pandemic that identified a disproportionate impact on racial minorities - family members who were classified as key workers during the pandemic meant an additional layer of concern and anxiety, especially for precariously employed workers such as supermarket workers and people in the food service industry. One respondent explained her parent who owned a small restaurant, had most likely

contracted COVID-19 in the workplace. They were hospitalised and placed in a coma suffering severe impact to their quality of life and requiring permanent medical interventions. She explained, "*the whole family dynamic changed*", a contributing factor that she attributes to her own severe and ongoing mental health issues.

For several respondents who had family members who worked in hospitals as doctors and pharmacists there was a similar sense of anxiety and fear for them, but coupled with a pragmatism echoed by the person in the medical setting. For example, one respondent explained, "*I was just really anxious all of the time. I'd always check in with my mum [who worked as a doctor in a hospital] to see if she's okay. Like to the point where I might have got a bit annoying for her. But I would call her at work… but part of my parents personality [and training] is that they can be more detached with things like this.*" Where racially minoritised key workers ran across socio-economic groups and professions, their children at university were differently impacted with their parents own circumstances either providing or not providing a means to help manage or exacerbate their child's anxiety.

Materially, some respondents described how the pandemic impacted them financially, with job loss a common theme. For example, one respondent described the knock-on effect of losing their job and the resulting feelings of isolation,

> ***It affected my personal wellbeing, in losing my job, not being able to meet people, I had a lot of anxiety thinking about what was happening.***

Similarly, another respondent stated, "*I had no support, I lost my job, it was very difficult to navigate through this period.*"

While many respondents could recall several of the supportive measures their universities took at this time, such as extending deadlines and changing the mode of assessment, there was a mixed picture on the adequacy of additional support measures in terms of respondents' particular circumstances. One respondent recalled his university provided, "*online mental health support, for people going through mental distress as a result of the lockdown, and which I myself made use of.*" Another respondent shared, "*I remember being like bombarded with a load of emails from college with updates: 'Oh, these are the new rules, these are the new guidelines'. And then there'd be like a little line at the bottom to reach out to college welfare if you need it, or something.*"

IMPLICATIONS OF COVID-19 ON CAREER PLANS & ASPIRATIONS

While respondents shared how the pandemic impacted them and their studies at the time, there was a consensus that the present-day implications are limited. When asked if COVID-19 influenced their decision-making on their next steps after graduation, only one respondent across all focus groups reported an impact. They stated, "*during the pandemic, recovering from my job loss was very difficult. It influenced my decision to look for a hybrid job... it has had a big impact on my views regarding hybrid working.*"

In interviews, similarly, respondents assessed only limited implications resulting from the pandemic on their career plans. Most felt fortunate to have secured employment or places for further study in a generally difficult economic environment for graduates. One respondent on a graduate employment scheme explained,

> ***I was incredibly fortunate to have a job lined up for me, even if it's not my ideal job... The job market was especially useless at the time, so having any job was better than no job. But I don't know. Maybe without COVID, and I might have tried to be a bit more risky.***

The exception to this sentiment across all interviews, as with the focus group data, was one respondent who explained, "*I started my job virtually and so never really experienced meeting people straight away in the office. COVID sort of prepared me for that... so [when we moved back to in-person at work] it felt a lot more daunting. I almost lost these social skills on how to interact and how to look people in the eye. And physically, I have to look presentable now. So, confidence wise, it was challenging and tiring as well. In terms of my career, it's still – to this day - challenging for me when I do go into the office.*" This respondent – who works for a corporate firm on their graduate track – further shared that in light of the growing workplace trend for employees to spend more time in an office,

> ***It would be so daunting, so tiring... This is something I would not look for unless it was absolutely necessary, financially. Even if this limits my career choices. But it's also something that I know if I had to come into the office, it would negatively impact my mental health.***

While the pandemic did not directly affect career plans and aspirations, indirectly it appears to have had a lingering effect on the terms and conditions graduates are prepared and able to work in, and the types of employment they subsequently pursue.

CONCLUSION

DID A 'GOOD' DEGREE FOR RACIALLY MINORITISED GRADUATES OPEN CAREERS IN RESEARCH & INNOVATION?

The narrowing of the white-racial minority awarding gap in 2020 and 2021 does *not* appear to have opened careers in research and innovation for racial minorities with a 'good' degree outcome. Over a ten year horizon, we consistently see similar percentages of racially minoritised graduates entering further study or employment, and within employment holding professional or non-professional roles. When disaggregated by ethnicity and sex, awards made in 2020 and 2021 follow established trends: across ethnic groups, graduates with 'good' degree outcomes are more likely to enter employment than further study, they are more likely to be in professional roles than non-professional, and women are better represented than men in obtaining 'good' degree outcomes, especially Black women compared to Black men.

There are two notable exceptions that exacerbate established trends: the first, across all ethnic groups, employed Black graduates with 'good' degrees are the ethnic group that is least likely to report being in professional roles and the most likely to report being in non-professional roles, a situation that was pronounced in 2019/20, when the immediate effects of the pandemic were hitting the labour market and economy. At this time, where 70.9% of all employed 'good' degree holders reported being in professional roles, this fell to 67.4% for Black employed 'good' degree holders. The second, when examining 'good' degree holders by institution type, we find that the proportion of Black graduates employed in professional roles with 'good' degrees from Russell Group institutions exceeded the percentage of Black 'good' degree holders from the Russell Group, meaning that Russell Group Black graduates fair well in the population of Black graduates in professional roles. This was particularly true in 2019/20, when only 14% of Black 'good' degree holders were from Russell Group institutions yet 17.8% of employed Black 'good' degree holders in professional roles were from the Russell Group.

These exacerbations of longstanding trends suggests that Black graduates with 'good' degrees at non-Russell Group institutions are the most likely group to report employment in non-professional roles; such roles are unlikely to be well set up to feed into a pipeline for careers in research and innovation. Importantly, this is within a wider landscape where Black men and women secure better degree outcomes at non-Russell Group institutions than at Russell Group institutions. Given that our data confirm

that the awarding gap is acute for Black graduates, especially men, our findings raise a point of concern and caution that existing pipelines for careers in research and innovation that seek to improve access and retention for racial minorities – especially Black graduates - are overly privileging Russell Group institutions.

From the perspective of future Black graduates, our findings illuminate an underacknowledged dilemma for Black university applicants and a potential trade-off they need to make between choosing a non-Russell Group or Russell Group institution. The former may increase their chances of a 'good' degree outcome, but with less chance of a professional role in employment or access to scholarship opportunities than Black peers at the Russell Group. While the latter seemingly offers greater professional and scholarly opportunities for Black 'good' degree holders, this is alongside largely unseen and unrewarded work navigating hypervisibility and additional care roles with peers.

Our qualitative findings also strike a note of caution in reading quantitative data that suggests COVID-19 did not overly impact degree outcomes, and therefore graduate pathways in employment or study. The experiences of racially minoritised graduates during the COVID-19 pandemic were varied and complex. Alongside adjustments to online learning, restrictions to movement and concern for the wellbeing of family and loved ones, our respondents – (particularly at non-Russell Group institutions) highlighted financial difficulties at home; heightened concern for family outside of the UK and in countries where vaccine roll out was uneven. Additionally, the dual effects of COVID-19 and racism on racially minoritised students both increased their visibility and calls for their labour during Black Lives Matter activism – especially if Black and attending Russell Group institutions – and simultaneously, their invisibility, in terms of poorly tailored institutional support that recognised the impacts of COVID-19 on racial minorities, especially those from lower socio-economic groups where it was hard to absorb the blows of family job losses and illness. A more detailed and nuanced picture of life in 2020 and 2021 for racial minorities, identifies the profound level of effort required to stand still, to neutralise the impact of COVID-19, that is, to stay on track for a 'good' degree outcome.

Our qualitative data tells us that a crucial factor to opening careers in research and innovation for racial minorities, especially Black graduates, is the availability of funding, specifically scholarships. Time and again our respondents raised financial barriers as a key obstacle for those wishing to pursue further study. For Black graduates, ringfenced scholarships meant having the intellectual freedom to choose their field of study and potentially take a risk that it may not materialise in a clearly recognisable well-establish profession. For all of our respondents who had secured a scholarship for postgraduate studies, all had attended Russell Group institutions for both their undergraduate degree and postgraduate degree. We therefore conclude that

the pipeline for careers in research and innovation risks feeding from Russell Group institutions to Russell Group institutions, whereas to accelerate matters of racial representation in a full range of research and innovation careers, the pipeline must be expanded to target non-Russell Group institutions and broaden the reach of scholarships.

DID COVID-19 OPEN NEW EQUALITIES GAPS AT THE START OF CAREERS IN RESEARCH & INNOVATION?

Almost all respondents reported a negative and at times severe impact on their mental health and wellbeing, either during their studies at the time of the pandemic, or on reflection. These are ongoing issues that our respondents take with them into the workplace and further study. We note this as a new equality gap because of its compounding effect with existing conditions of hypervisibility and the labour required of Black students especially to build communities of support in the absence of sufficient institutional endeavours, and ongoing COVID-related management of or recovery from financial difficulties. These create the conditions for current and further study. At a time of growing awareness and commitment to mental health and wellbeing provision for students e.g. *The University Mental Health Charter* (Hughes and Spanner, 2024), this finding adds impetus for institutional investment in this area and the necessity for it to take into account the particular compounding effects for racially minoritised students that affect their abilities to thrive, that is, for them to achieve more than standing still.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR POLICY & OPERATIONAL AGENDA FOCUSED ON AWARDING GAPS AS A PROXY FOR ADDRESSING RACIAL INEQUITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION?

'Student success' as a policy agenda is heavily focused on final degree outcomes and measurable metrics from national surveys, shaping an operational agenda in universities also focused on final degree outcomes as the ultimate and most meaningful measure of success. These measures of success leave little room to accommodate the aspirations of students. Our respondents, when given the space, defined success in a variety of ways that included yet went further than their final degree classification. For us, this raises a significant question: how much are quantitative measures of success at university pushed onto students and shaping their experiences – through, for example, remedial measures that aim to coach students into particular forms of writing or acceptable behaviours in the university - and how much space is there for self-defined ways of imaging and achieving success?

What our question really exposes is the risk of an artificial separation of a 'good' degree from the racialising conditions of higher education that our respondents brought into the research through their comments on the care and attention they received from Black academic staff especially that was so instrumental to them in navigating academia. It is these conditions that are invisibilised by decontextualised narrow metrics on awarding gaps, that - perhaps counter-intuitively - mask rather than surface racial inequity in higher education.

To address these concerns, there must be a policy push for institutions to confront structural racism through a deeper and more nuanced understanding of how it manifests in the experiences of students. The current policy and operational goals of closing awarding gaps, while important, fall short of capturing the full scope of what it means for many racially minoritised students to successfully complete a degree. Current goals do not account for the resilience or resourcefulness students demonstrate in navigating the structural barriers they face, and risk overlooking the broader definitions of success that extend institutional regulatory obligations. This is not about lowering aspirations for students; on the contrary, this research underscores the long-term impact of securing a 'good' degree. Rather, it challenges institutions and policy makers to expand their definitions of success, moving beyond narrow metrics to include student-informed notions of achievement, which reflect the complexity of their experiences and indicate the measures required for genuine equity in higher education.

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