FEEDING THE RESEARCH AND INNOVATION PIPELINE:

COVID-19 AND CLOSING THE AWARDING GAP

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1. INTRODUCTION

The award of a 'good' degree (2.1 and above) matters in material ways (like securing a place on a postgraduate course or a job in a graduate scheme) and in social ways to do with self-esteem and validating one's knowledge.

The largest reduction in the Black-white awarding gap in 16 years in 2019/20 and 2020/21 coincided with COVID-19 mitigations, which when lifted, saw the gap widening.

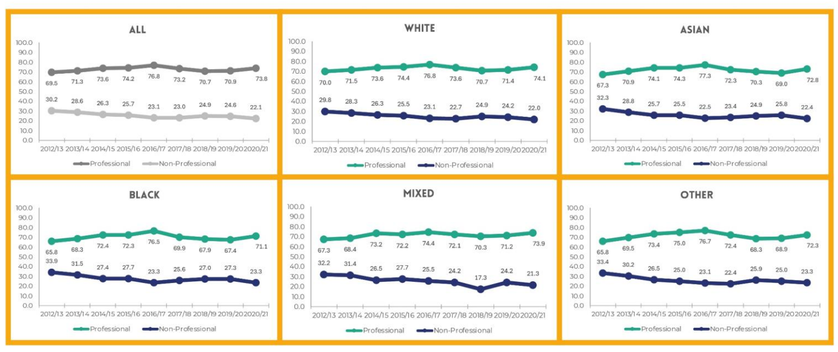
Universities are under pressure to reduce the gap and are held to account for their successes/failures.
In this environment, we risk obscuring other COVID-19 impacts on racially minoritised groups, and risk overshowing more complex anti-racist interventions.
So, we asked what difference a 'good' degree made to racially minoritised graduates in the UK - **did a 'good' degree for racially minoritised graduates open careers in research and innovation?**

2. METHODOLOGY

- 10 years of quantitative data held by HESA on Graduate Outcomes and Destination of Leavers surveys
- 11 focus group discussions with racially minoritised graduates from the UK – including international students
- 18 interviews with graduates from 2019/20 and 2020/21 with a 'good' degree, including two international students

3. FINDINGS

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



We found graduates with 'good' degrees are more likely to enter employment than further study after graduation and in 2020 and 2021, the results are broadly consistent with the pre-pandemic years. We also found (above) employed Black 'good' degree holders are the ethnic group least likely to report being in professional roles. 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.

Quantitatively, 2019-2021, did not reveal significant changes in the employment patterns of racially minoritised graduates with a 'good' degree.

THE QUALITATIVE IMPACT OF A 'GOOD' DEGREE FOR RACIALISED MINORITIES

> *"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."*

> *"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'."*

> *"[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."*

THE ROLE OF COVID-19 IN GRADUATE PATHWAYS

> *"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."*

> *"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."*

Alongside material impact, is self-esteem and social value. Buoyed by ringfenced scholarships and racially diverse academic staff, pathways to new knowledge creation are created.

For many Black students, the 'pandemic in the pandemic' created new anti-racism work.

The awarding gap reduction does not appear to have opened careers for racial minorities with a 'good' degree outcome, but a more nuanced picture of life in 2019-21 reveals the effort required to stand still, neutralise the impact of COVID-19, and stay on track for a 'good' degree outcome.

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.

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.