

PGR Student Partners – Empowering and encouraging doctoral students within institutional, EDI change projects

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Research Domains

Student Access and Experience (SAE)

Abstract

How do we utilise, empower, and encourage doctoral students (i.e., the next generation of academics) to support efforts to dismantle myriad issues that exist within postgraduate research (PGR) culture and the wider doctoral landscape? These include inequalities related to doctoral students' access into, experience of, and progression from PGR. In this paper, we describe our attempt to dismantle such inequities, whilst retaining social justice and liberatory values within an institutional setting, through our PGR Student Partners scheme. We report on our approach which centres values of partnership, co-creation and equity, highlighting how this ethos enabled empowerment and activism of our Student Partners. We also describe the tangible outputs, impact and experiences of our Student and Staff Partners involved in the scheme whilst recognising the challenges that arise in implementing EDI work within universities. Finally, we provide a model for colleagues tasked with enhancing PGR research culture.

Full paper

How do we utilise, empower, and encourage our doctoral students (i.e., the next generation of academics) to support our efforts to dismantle myriad issues that exist within PGR research culture and the wider doctoral landscape? This includes evidence suggesting serious inequalities related to doctoral students' access, success, and progression:

- Access into doctoral education remains for those with the cultural, social, and material capital to navigate this landscape as lacking information, advice and guidance inhibits under-represented students from pursuing PGR (Pásztor & Wakeling, 2018; Wakeling, 2009)
- Whilst over-represented at UG and PGT level, there is little qualitative explanation into the under-representation of racially minoritised students at PGR which has resulted in 'broken pipelines' (Williams et al., 2019)
- PhD journeys are often characterised by loneliness, isolation, and wellbeing concerns (assumed to be normal aspects of doctoral study) (Pitkin, 2020a), with such issues being more acutely felt by racially minoritised students (Institute for Community Studies, 2022; Mattocks & Briscoe-Palmer, 2016; Pitkin, 2020b).
- Doctoral students report lacking access to wider professional development opportunities (Neeves, 2022).

- Despite most PhD students wanting to stay within academia, ~70% leave within 3-4 years of their academic careers (Hancock, 2020).

One of the tools used to disrupt such inequality in higher education institutions has been the use of student-staff partnerships. Whilst the past decade has seen an explosion of literature which espouses and advocates values of student-staff partnership (Chatrakul Na Ayudhya et al., 2023; Healey & Healey, 2019; Smith et al., 2023), much of this work has been in the context of undergraduate students and their roles within pedagogy creation, specifically in learning and teaching (Matthews et al., 2018). Furthermore, many of these schemes do not often meaningfully consider diversity and inclusivity as core elements of practice (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2019; Mercer-Mapstone & Bovill, 2020). In taking the view that partnership can and should authentically hold values of social justice, and must directly centre under-represented and minoritised student groups (De Bie et al., 2021; Guitman et al., 2020), this paper describes our approach of embedding a PGR Student Partners scheme within the Doctoral College of a large Russell Group (i.e., research intensive) university to ensure our endeavours to promote a strong, inclusive, supportive and equitable research culture could be achieved in partnership with our PGR students themselves.

The PGR Student Partner programme

The PGR Student Partner programme was developed and operates along the following key characteristics:

- A team of postgraduate researchers are hired on a part-time basis to work alongside the university's Doctoral College, upholding values of partnership, co-creation, mutuality, equity and participatory methodologies aligned to liberatory theories e.g., Freirean principles and bell hooks' pedagogy (Islam, 2022).
- The scheme is advertised with a clear focus on EDI within the scope of the work to be undertaken and encourages representation of minoritised groups.
- PGR Student Partners work with and are fully embedded within the Doctoral College and the projects they contribute to, operating in genuine co-creation and equal footing with colleagues, rather than being considered assistants or support staff.
- PGR Student Partners' ownership and empowerment transpires in activities that they lead or co-create, where they have opportunities to convey their own perspectives as well as act as conduit for their peers'.

Programme output, impact and experiences

The PGR Student Partner programme has, to date, enabled the following:

- The production of a co-authored report on Black and Asian PGR experiences at the University of Southampton which has been disseminated both internally and externally.
- The direct contribution to the Doctoral College's Research Culture work and Action Plans.
- The personal growth and development, and ongoing partnerships, for PGR Student Partners.
- The catalysing effect for dialogue, sharing of experiences and challenges of engaging in partnership work, which retains social justice and liberatory values within an institutional setting.

Given the relative dearth of literature and practice which centres doctoral students in student-staff partnership endeavours, we believe reporting on our approach is significant in order to scale and enact institution-wide change with a social justice orientation. Our paper actively addresses the conference's theme which seeks to explore how staff and students engage in forms of activism and resistance, and how the mainstreaming of these efforts must still retain a political point i.e., a radical and collective endeavour to reach transformative potential for students and staff (Peters & Mathias, 2018). We thus advocate for the transferability/adaptability of this model by other higher education institutions seeking similar aims for the PGR students.

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