

## **'Imposter syndrome is dissipating slightly (could be a trick, will be on guard!): chronicling the lives of racially minoritised PGRs**

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### **Research Domains**

Postgraduate scholarship and practice (PGSP)

### **Abstract**

While doctoral education in the UK has grown, particularly at modern universities (Smith McGloin, 2021), often white, middle-class candidates continue to dominate doctoral spaces (Mateos-González & Wakeling, 2022). The EDEPI program aims to remove barriers to doctoral education for racially minoritised groups with one project tracking the PGR experience of individuals admitted through the program's interventions. This paper examines the importance of ethnographic diaries as a methodological approach as diaries are not just data, but dialogic and reflective texts shaped by the participant-researcher relationship. The approach incorporates creative analytical practice (Richardson, 2000), allowing layered and non-linear ways of reading the diaries and recognises participants' subjectivities. Short vignettes presented represent participants' experience, drawing from both textual and visual material and shed light on how this methodological approach can be essential in not only building our understanding of the racially minoritised PGR experience, but humanising the PGR journey often hidden from HE discourses.

### **Full paper**

Despite increasing attention to diversity and inclusion within UK higher education, the lived experiences of racially minoritised postgraduate researchers (PGRs) remain under-explored and insufficiently addressed in institutional policies and practices. While representation at the undergraduate level has improved, significant disparities persist in PGR participation and progression (Badrie et al., 2023; Arday, 2021). The Doctoral Education through Partnership and Innovation (EDEPI) programme recognises the importance of minoritised representation currently missing in doctoral education (EDEPI, 2023). In partnership with Nottingham Trent University (NTU), Sheffield Hallam University (SHU) and Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU) EDEPI is divided into three distinct work packages (WP) targeting:

recruitment, admissions, and transition as critical points of systemic inequality. EDEPI implements these changes by rethinking outreach to potential PGRs (WP1), reforming admissions frameworks (WP2), and creating a more inclusive culture (WP3). This paper discusses an ongoing ethnographic diary study and how these diaries are being used as a meaningful tool to understand 'a year in the life of a PGR candidate', generating helpful insight into the resilience of racially minoritized PGRs, and can capture voices often excluded in doctoral discussions.

Smith McGloin surveyed how, 'the doctorate is variously conceptualised in higher education sector press, self-help blogs and university guidance as a journey, *route*, pathway, *rollercoaster* and (not an easy) ride' (2021, p. 372). Regardless of how it is conceptualised, the importance of capturing this journey to better understand the PGR experience is paramount. To ensure the racially minoritised PGR voice was at the forefront of the research, ethnographic diaries were chosen as a methodological tool. Ethnographic diaries are framed not just as data, but as dialogic and reflective texts shaped by the participant-researcher relationship. The approach incorporates creative analytical practice (Richardson, 2000), allowing layered and non-linear ways of reading the diaries that recognise participants' subjectivities. Diary methods are also a way of accessing intimate, emergent, and affective dimensions of PGR life. Journaling can 'provide students with powerful opportunities to recognize and value their individual and collective perspectives as both observes and analysis of the world around them', especially during high stress times' (such as PhD completion) (Willen et al., 2024, 45). Journaling, thus, can offer a valuable space for connection (both connection with the self and the PGR community), social support, and community creation.

Participants were selected from PGRs who attended an EDEPI-led workshop in 2023. The exercise sought to capture all aspects of the PGR journey: admissions, PGR research, PGR candidate experience, and completion of studies, and requested eight submissions across the 2024-2025 academic year. Participant guidance was provided at the start of the project and suggested the various mediums of expression (or one that suited them best). Ideas included: handwritten and/or typed traditional diary entries, photographs, mementos, screenshots, video blogs, and/or drawing, poetry, and/or music. The only firm guidance was that each participant was asked to create an initial 'self-portrait' for their first submission.

While diary entries are still in the process of being submitted, two initial project-based findings have been identified. First, participants overwhelmingly selected more creative methods to express their journey—so freedom of creative expression was key. As a result, the participant data will be presented in short vignettes extracted from diary entries,

each capturing a theme such as 'writing as fracture', 'supervision as loss and labour', and 'collective resistance'. Vignettes are a helpful tool by allowing for in-depth analysis and for studying complex issues raised by participants (Finch, 1987). Vignettes also allow participants' voices to remain central when drawing analytical attention to patterns across experiences. The vignettes will be composed of text, visual elements, and reflective commentary which demonstrate the variety of submissions received and the importance of allowing participants creative licence over their submissions. Second, ongoing reflection regarding the use of ethnographic diaries as a means to explore the lived experiences of racially minorized PGRs is essential in the co-creation of stories. Diaries offers a reflexive account of co-creating the diary project (between EDEPI member/students), including ethical tensions, emotional labour, and researcher-participant dynamics (Baker, 2025). Creative, participatory methods can reshape how institutions understand "progress" and "support" in doctoral education. Thus, diary-based methods are crucial in not only informing ongoing work on inclusive and decolonial postgraduate research environments, but also in humanising the PGR journey often hidden from doctoral discourse.