

Ethnicity and the Postgraduate Experience

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Executive Summary

Advance HE's Postgraduate Research and Postgraduate Taught Experience surveys provide some of the largest survey-based datasets in the sector, which have enabled detailed assessment, in this report, of how the Postgraduate Research (PGR) and Postgraduate Taught (PGT) experiences may differ among students of different ethnicities. Crucially, the datasets enabled deeper analysis beyond the often-used White / BAME comparisons, to instead analyse a range of more specific ethnic groups, combining ethnicity with other characteristics to pinpoint cohorts and areas of the student experience where specific focus may be required.

Age and Ethnicity

When considered together, PGR students from Black backgrounds reported relatively high levels of overall satisfaction – as do most PGR students overall. However, our analysis has highlighted that there was a major difference by age. The majority of Black PGT students were aged 31 and above and were relatively satisfied. Yet, younger Black students were in fact among the least satisfied PGR students, and by focusing on this specific group the report has highlighted issues such as supervision, isolation and skills and confidence which are of particular concern to this cohort.

In terms of PGT students, combining age with ethnicity has shed the spotlight on two particular cohorts with very low satisfaction. Again, these represent younger students (aged 30 and under), specifically younger Black students, and younger students of Other ethnicity. An area of lower than average satisfaction for both of these groups of students was assessment and feedback, with these students being relatively less likely to agree that assessment-marking is sufficiently prompt, detailed or fair.

Mode of learning and Ethnicity

With the exception of Chinese PGT students, distance learners of all ethnicities reported higher overall satisfaction than face-to-face learners. The largest, statistically significant, difference in satisfaction between distance and face-to-face learners is in the Other ethnicity group. Areas in which Other ethnicity face-to-face learners reported particularly low levels of satisfaction include assessment and feedback, and support for career planning.

Learner type and Ethnicity

At PGR level, there are only small differences (1–4%) in overall satisfaction between full- and part-time learners in each of the ethnicity groups. Across all ethnic backgrounds, full-time learners tended to report a slightly higher level of satisfaction than part-time learners.

In contrast, at PGT level, there were a range of differences between full and part-time students, with part-time PGT students of all ethnicities reporting significantly higher overall satisfaction than full-time students. This was particularly striking among full-time students of

Other ethnicity, who reported the lowest overall satisfaction (75%). Areas in which this cohort reported particularly low levels of agreement include guidance and support, and in particular these students would benefit from additional support to help with their feeling of preparedness for their future careers.

This report highlights several examples where PGR and PGT students of Black, and Other ethnicity (those who are younger, who study part-time, as well as those who are face-to-face learners) may require particular support – aspects that may have previously been hidden when assessing satisfaction among BAME students overall or even among Black and Other ethnicity students overall, without combining with other characteristics.

1. Introduction

A wide body of evidence demonstrates how the undergraduate experience and outcomes are significantly less positive for students from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnicity (BAME) backgrounds compared with White students.¹ For example, the Advance HE-HEPI 2019 Student Academic Experience Survey (SAES),² conducted among UK undergraduates, has highlighted how the experience of BAME students on key issues such as value for money and learning gain consistently lags behind that of White students. On a similar theme, the Office for Students' analysis of National Student Survey (NSS) data shows that, compared with White undergraduate students, BAME students report lower levels of agreement that marking and assessment has been fair.³

By comparison, there is considerably less public evidence at postgraduate level to demonstrate whether and how experiences of postgraduate taught (PGT) and postgraduate research (PGR) degrees differ among students of different ethnic backgrounds. The Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES) and the Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES) present the opportunity to develop this somewhat scarce body of evidence.

The objective of this report is to investigate the data gathered by PRES and PTES in 2019 in order to understand how the postgraduate experience differs for students of different ethnic backgrounds. The report will also investigate how experiences vary among students of different ethnicities while considering other demographic characteristics, including age group and learner type (full- or part-time learners and face-to-face and distance learners). While this report does not consider ethnicity alongside other personal characteristics, notably gender and disability, it is felt that these areas and their nuances warrant further investigation in a later report.

¹ www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/reports/Documents/2019/bame-student-attainment-uk-universities-case-studies.pdf [Accessed 15 October 2019]

² Neves, J and Hillman, N (2019), Student Academic Experience Survey. Advance HE and HEPI. p. 29.

³ www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/the-national-student-survey-consistency-controversy-and-change/ [Accessed 10 March 2020]

2. Methodology

This report will draw upon data from the 2019 Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES) and the 2019 Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES). The 2019 PRES dataset represents the views of over 50,000 postgraduate research (PGR) students across 107 higher education institutions (HEIs) – the largest survey of its kind in the UK. The 2019 PTES dataset represents the views of over 70,000 postgraduate taught (PGT) students across 85 institutions.

Data is collected via an online survey using Jisc Online Surveys⁴ software. Surveys are distributed by individual HEIs directly to their postgraduate student population.

The analysis discussed in this report has been carried out among UK-domiciled students only, in order to remove any impact of overseas students on this ethnicity analysis, and in line with SAES data on undergraduate students, which will be referenced in this report. It also includes only those from whom ethnicity data has been collected.

In the analysis below, significance testing has been used when comparing the difference between two cohorts, for example, younger and older students of the same ethnicity group. Significant differences are highlighted in bold and are calculated at the 95% confidence level. This means that over and above any margin of error, this is likely to represent a real difference in 95 out of 100 cases. In some cases, the small base sizes of some ethnicity groups mean that large absolute differences are not significant, but the report still covers some of these in depth to be as thorough as possible in the analysis of the subject.

2.1 Challenges

A particular challenge for investigating the experiences and concerns of students of different ethnicities lies in the fact that each of the groups (White, Black, Asian, Chinese, Mixed and Other) considered in this report are comprised of a range of different sub-groups, each of which may face particular issues. In particular, the Mixed and Other ethnicity groups are quite challenging to analyse as they are defined by diversity. While the categories forming these ethnic groups are illustrated in the below table, each will also contain a range of sub-categories, meaning that there can be as much diversity within ethnic groups as between ethnic groups.

⁴ Jisc Online Surveys (2019), *About online surveys*. Available online: www.onlinesurveys.ac.uk/about/

Table 1: Categories within ethnicity groups

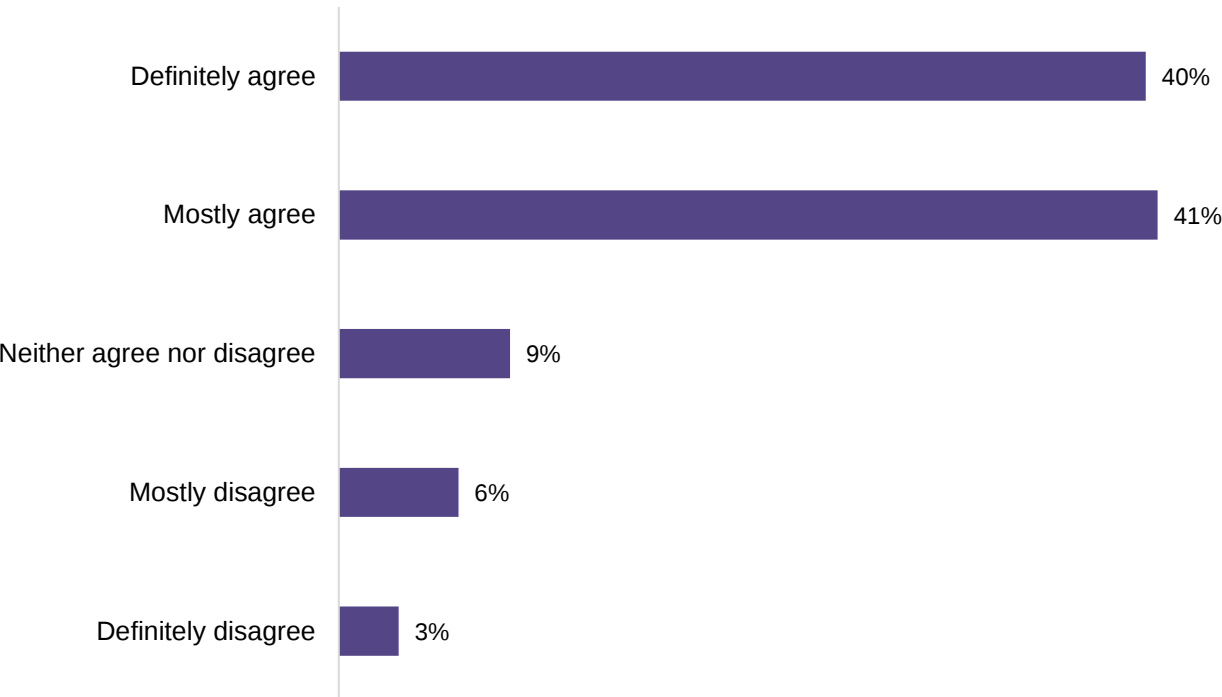
Ethnicity group	Category
White	White
	White: Gypsy or Traveller
Black	Black or Black British: Caribbean
	Black or Black British: African
	Any other Black background
Asian	Asian or Asian British: Indian
	Asian or Asian British: Pakistani
	Asian or Asian British: Bangladeshi
	Any other Asian background
Chinese	Chinese
Mixed	Mixed: White and Black Caribbean
	Mixed: White and Black African
	Mixed: White and Asian
	Mixed: Any other Mixed background
Other	Arab
	Any other ethnic background

3. The overall experience and ethnicity

3.1 Postgraduate research students

This report will begin by considering the overall satisfaction of PGR students, then that of PGT students. Encouragingly, in 2019 the vast majority (81%) of UK-domiciled PGR students were satisfied with their experience overall.

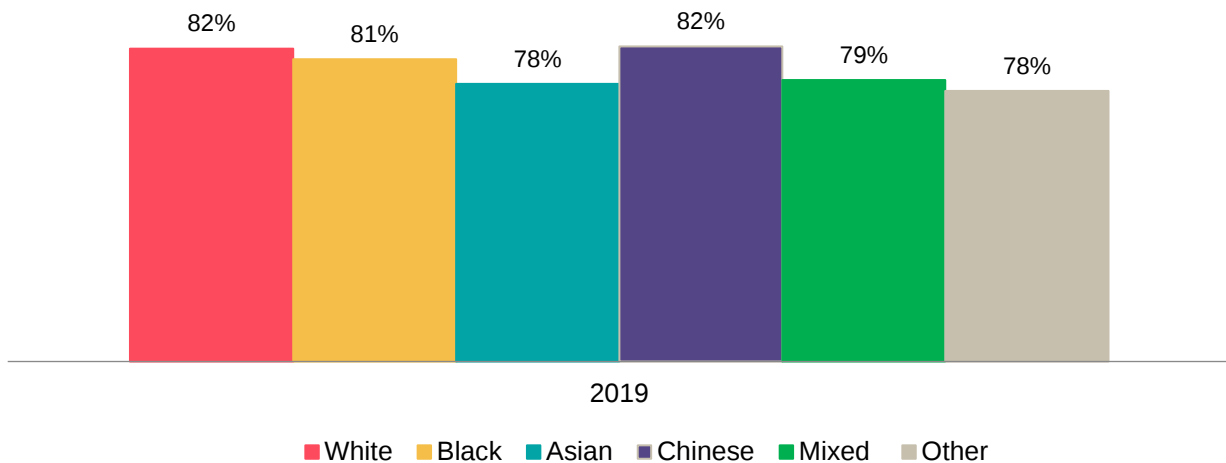
Figure 1: Overall, I am satisfied with the experience of my research degree programme (PGR students)



Asian PGR students, and PGR students of other backgrounds, appear to have been least satisfied with their experience. By contrast, PGR students from White, Chinese and Black backgrounds reported high satisfaction in relative terms, which broadly matches what we found at undergraduate level in the SAES.⁵

⁵ Neves, J and Hillman, N (2019). Student Academic Experience Survey. Advance HE and HEPI. p. 29.

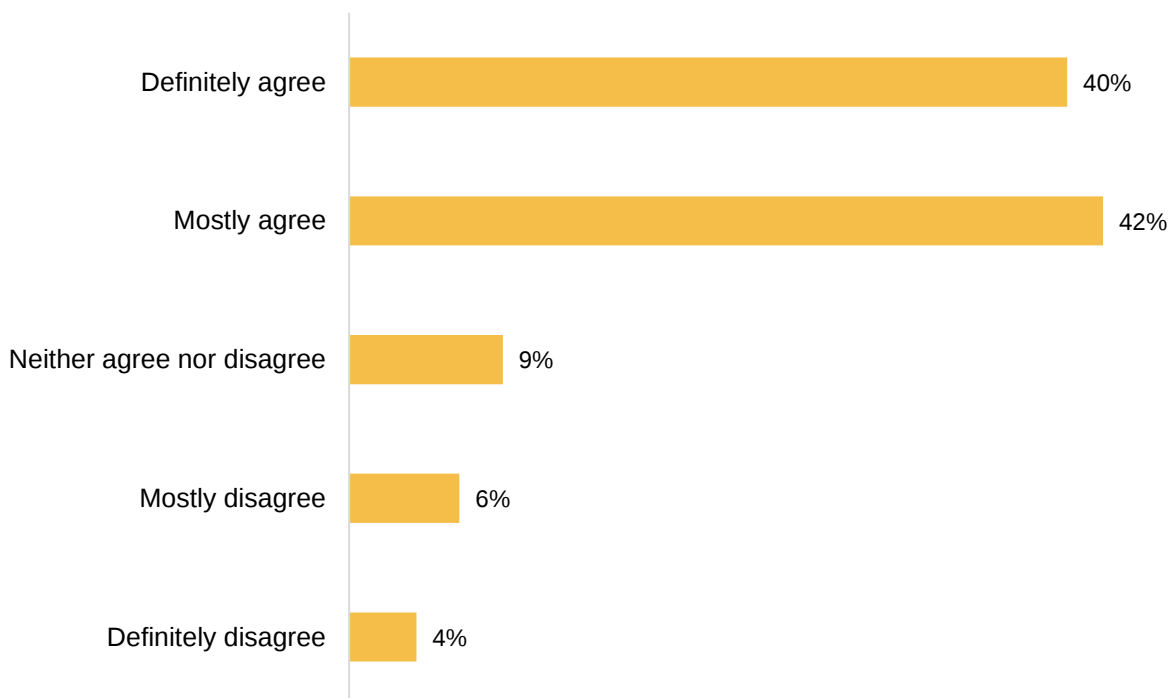
Figure 2: Overall satisfaction by ethnic background (PGR students)



3.2 Postgraduate taught students

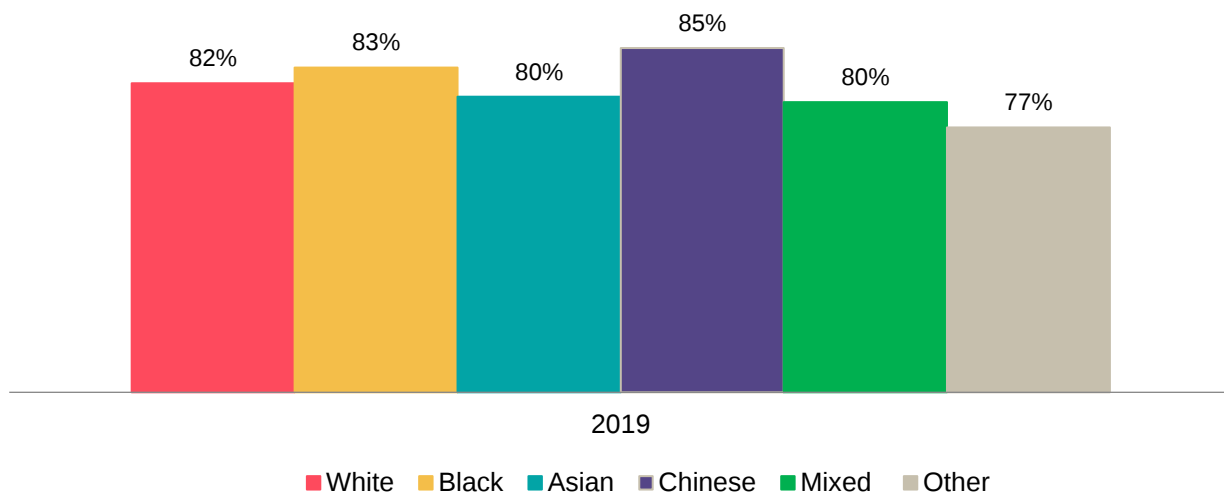
A similar picture is presented by PGT students, of whom 82% agreed that, overall, they were satisfied with the quality of their course.

Figure 3: Overall, I am satisfied with the quality of the course (PGT students)



Postgraduate taught Chinese students were most likely to agree they were satisfied, with Black students also rating their satisfaction higher than White students. Similar to the picture presented by PGR students, PGT students of Other ethnicity were the group least likely to agree. Asian and Mixed ethnicity students also reported lower than average levels of agreement. For these ethnicity groups, we have seen fluctuation over the past 3 years – but levels of satisfaction remain relatively low.

Figure 4: Overall satisfaction by ethnic background (PGT students)

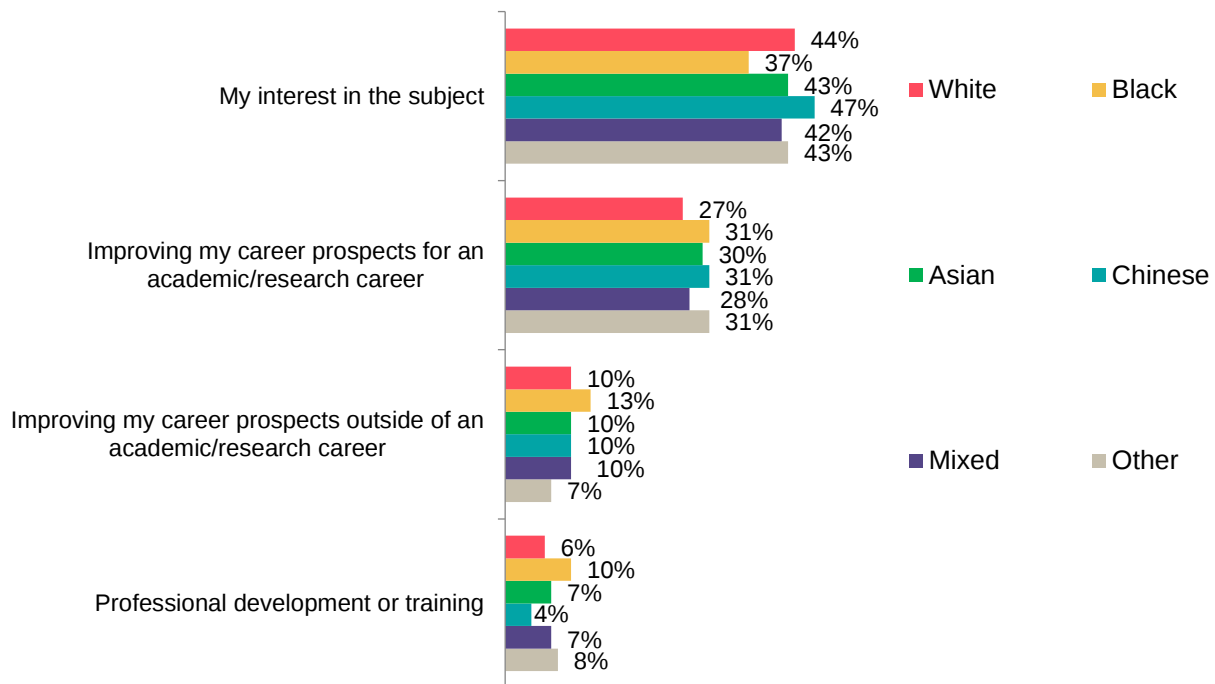


4. Motivations to study and ethnicity

4.1 Postgraduate research students

The top reason for choosing to study for a PGR course was interest in the subject (chosen by 44% of respondents). Interestingly, a much lower proportion of Black students chose to study for this reason, although it was still the top-selected motivation for studying for a postgraduate research degree. Lack students are, however, among the most likely to have been motivated by the other three most common motivations – to improve their career prospects both within and outside of academia or research and for professional development or training.

Figure 5: Ethnic background and motivations to study (top 4 reasons) (PGR students)



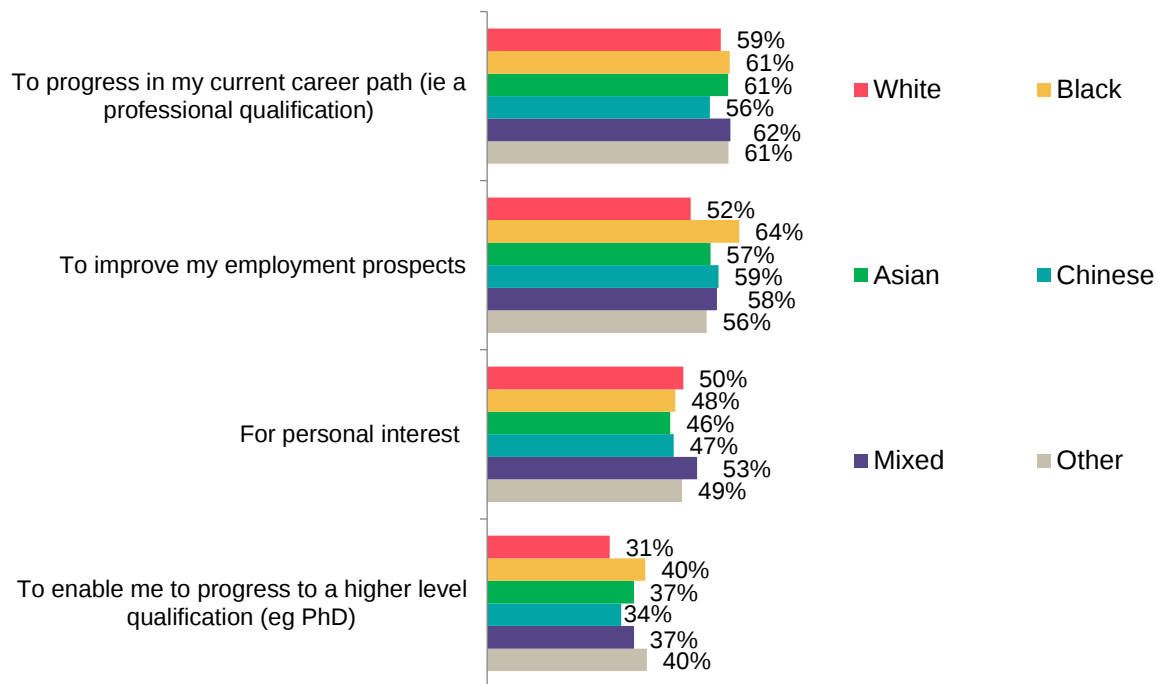
4.2 Postgraduate taught students

Among PGT students, few differences in motivations to study are observed across the different ethnic groups. The top motivation among all PGT students was to progress in their current career path (60% of all students said this was a motivation), however Chinese students were less likely than others to have reported this as a reason for choosing to study their PGT course (56%). White students were less likely than other students to have chosen to study as a route into a higher level qualification, and to improve their employment prospects, whereas Black PGT students were most likely to have been motivated by improved employment prospects.

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Figure 6: Ethnic background and motivations to study (top 4 reasons) (PGT students)



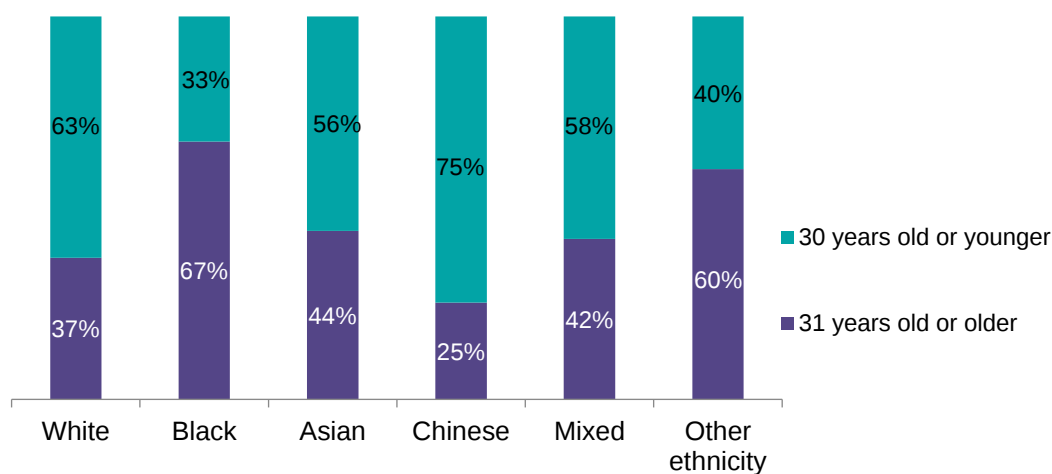
The following sections of this report will consider how students' overall experiences vary by certain demographic characteristics when combined with their ethnic background. This report will illustrate some of the areas of the student experience which may be driving large distinctions in overall satisfaction between students of particular ethnic backgrounds having one demographic characteristic (eg aged 30 and younger) and those having another demographic characteristic (eg aged 31 and above). It will also consider potential drivers of low satisfaction among groups which have particularly low levels of satisfaction overall.

5. Age and ethnicity

5.1 Postgraduate research students

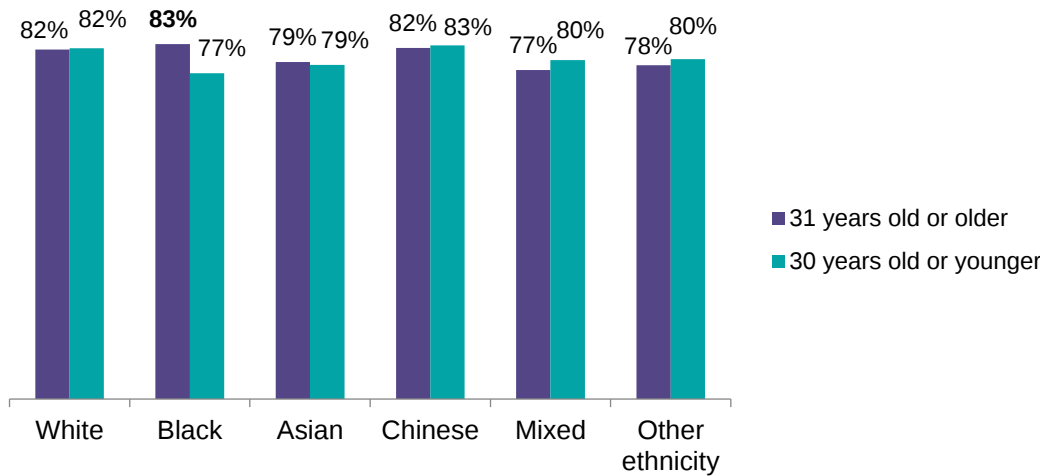
The majority (61%) of the PGR student population are aged 30 and under. However, this is not the case among all ethnic groups. When we consider the different ethnic backgrounds, we see large differences in the proportions of research students in each of the age groups, with the majority of Black and Other ethnicity students aged 31 or older.

Figure 7: Ethnic background and age (PGR students)



When we consider the data by ethnic background, we observe distinctions between older and younger researchers in some of the ethnicity groups. Younger PGR students of Mixed or Other ethnicity backgrounds reported slightly higher satisfaction with their overall experience than their older counterparts. By contrast, among students from Black backgrounds, PGR students aged 30 years or younger reported considerably lower (seven percentage points) levels of satisfaction than those aged 31 years or older. When considered together, students from Black backgrounds reported relatively high levels of overall satisfaction due to the majority of Black students being aged 31 and above; however, this overall consideration masks the observation that younger Black students were in fact among the least satisfied PGR students – something we now go on to analyse in more detail.

Figure 8: Overall satisfaction by ethnic background and age band (PGR students)



Bases:

White n=23,688 (31 or older: 8,832; 30 or younger: 14,856)

Black n=808 (31 or older: 543; 30 or younger: 265)

Asian n=1,666 (31 or older: 740; 30 or younger: 926)

Chinese n=738 (31 or older: 186; 30 or younger: 554)

Mixed n=1,065 (31 or older: 445; 30 or younger: 620)

Other n=839 (31 or older: 506; 30 or younger: 333)

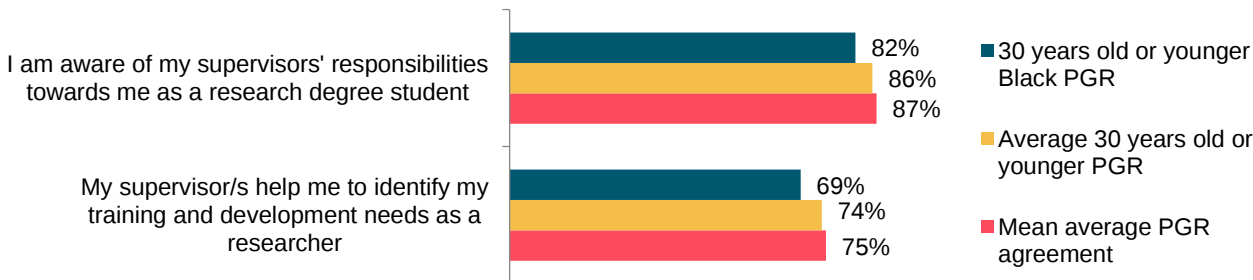
Bold font indicates a statistically significant difference between the younger and older cohorts within the same ethnicity group

5.2 Black postgraduate research students aged 30 years and younger

5.2.1 Supervision

Areas in which Black PGR students aged 30 years and younger displayed statistically significantly lower satisfaction relative to those aged 31 and above, as well as to younger students of different ethnic groups, include elements of supervision. Younger Black PGR students were less likely to be aware of their supervisors' responsibilities towards them as a research degree student or to agree that their supervisors helped them to identify their training and development needs.

Figure 9: Agreement with statement by ethnic background and age band (PGR students)



The majority of Black PGR students aged 30 or younger who chose to leave a comment about their supervisors left positive comments. However, of those who left a negative comment, themes included a lack of knowledge of, or interest in, the student's chosen research topic. PGR students also commented on a lack of help to identify their training and development needs.

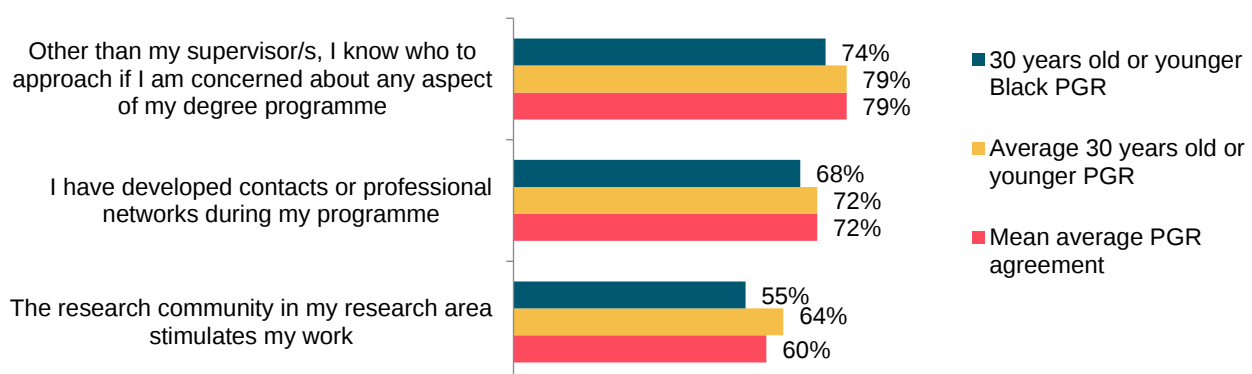
Institutions may wish to take steps to ensure that supervisors are able to identify students' development needs and advise as to how these can best be met to benefit the younger Black PGR student cohort, such as encouraging supervisors to connect students to their wider academic network of colleagues to broaden and deepen the advice and expertise available to the students.

5.2.2 Isolation

As well as having lower than average levels of agreement that, other than their supervisor, they knew who to contact about any concerns about their degree, Black PGR students aged 30 or under were less inclined than other PGR students aged 30 and under to agree that the research community in their area of research stimulated their work and that that they developed contacts or professional networks during the programme. This indicates that these researchers may have been feeling more isolated relative to the PGR student population as a whole and that this group, in particular, may benefit from additional signposting to support and networking services.

As well as encouraging supervisors to connect students to colleagues who may be able to offer their expertise and guidance, publicising a list of academic colleagues and their areas of expertise, as well as information about available training sessions, may help to resolve some of the issues experienced by younger Black PGR students.

Figure 10: Agreement with statement by ethnic background and age band (PGR students)

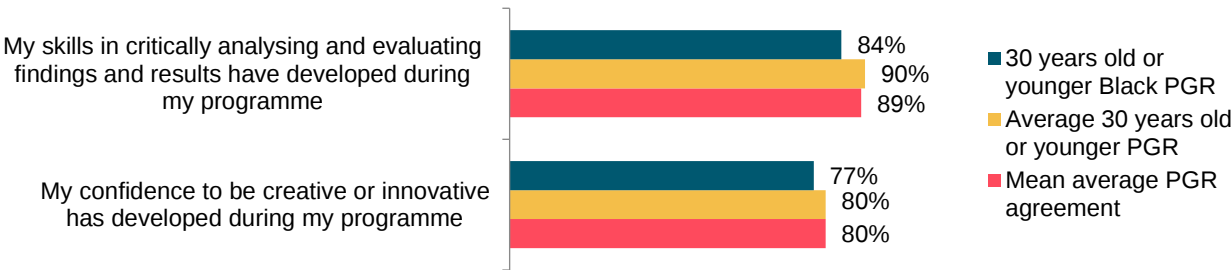


Comments from PGR students suggested they would have liked more opportunities to be organised to discuss their research, make connections and develop a sense of community. Younger Black researchers requested that institutions organise formal events for the research community, both to socialise and network, and to share research skills and knowledge.

5.2.3 Skills and confidence

Black PGR students aged 30 and younger reported a lack of improvement in critically analysing and evaluating results, and lower levels of improvement in their confidence to be creative or innovative, compared with other PGR students.

Figure 11: Agreement with statement by ethnic background and age band (PGR students)

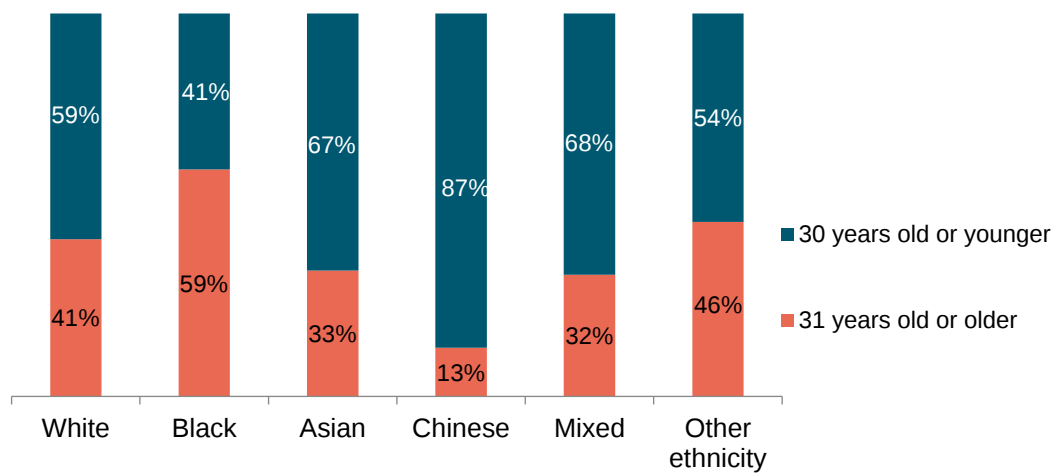


Comments revealed that young Black postgraduate researchers would have liked to have access to workshops covering the fundamentals of research, to refresh or enhance their knowledge. If institutions were to offer such sessions, it is likely they may see an improvement in agreement levels among other groups as these would likely be beneficial also to older students returning to research after a period away from it. Suggestions made in previous sections of this report, eg to publicise details of training sessions and academic staff members' areas of expertise as well as to host formal events for the research community to network, may also help to improve students' skills and confidence.

5.3 Postgraduate taught students

As we also observed among the PGR population, we see large differences in the proportions of PGT students of different ethnic backgrounds who fell into each of the age bands, with almost 6 in 10 Black students being in the older age category and the vast majority of Chinese students being younger than 30. However, just over half (54%) of PGT students of Other ethnicities were aged 30 or below, the opposite picture to that seen among Other ethnicity PGR students, of whom 60% were aged 31 and above.

Figure 12: Ethnic background and age (PGT students)

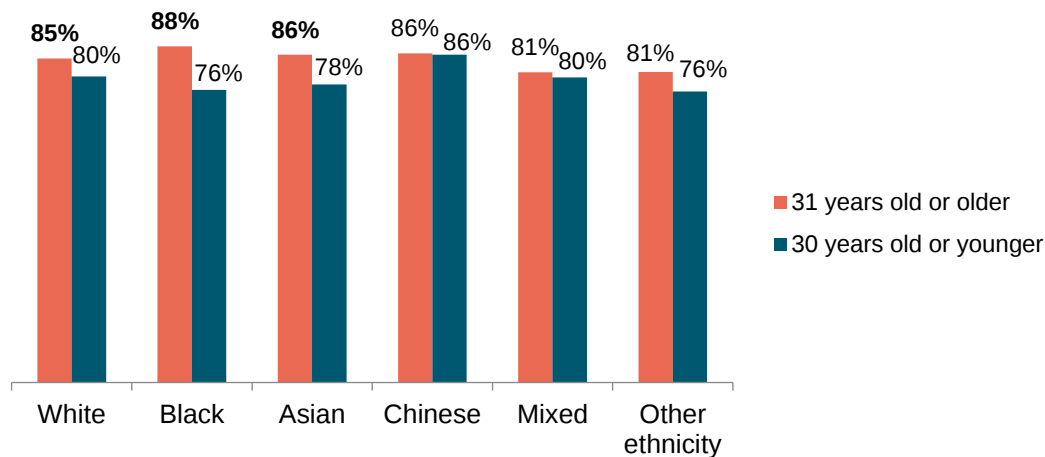


Among PGT students, older students (aged 31 or above) tended to be more likely to agree that they were satisfied with the quality of the course overall, regardless of their ethnic background. Whilst among PGR students we saw differences in satisfaction comparisons by age among different ethnicity groups (with younger students being more satisfied in some cases and less satisfied in others), for PGT students of all ethnicity groups analysed, older students were more satisfied than those aged 30 or younger.

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Figure 13: Overall satisfaction by ethnic background and age band (PGT students)



Bases:

White n=27,501 (31 or older: 11,305; 30 or younger: 16,223)

Black n=2,281 (31 or older: 1,352; 30 or younger: 929)

Asian n=2,690 (31 or older: 883; 30 or younger: 1,807)

Chinese n=1,004 (31 or older: 128; 30 or younger: 876)

Mixed n=1,312 (31 or older: 417; 30 or younger: 895)

Other n=697 (31 or older: 318; 30 or younger: 379)

Bold font indicates a statistically significant difference between the younger and older cohorts within the same ethnicity group

As with PGR students, the largest (statistically significant) difference between the age groups is observed among Black students. Among students from Black backgrounds, PGT students aged 30 years or younger reported considerably lower (11 percentage points) levels of satisfaction than those aged 31 years or older.

Unlike the trend observed among PGR students, we also observe a large, statistically significant, distinction in the levels of satisfaction of Asian PGT students aged 31 and older, and their younger counterparts. The older group was almost 8% percentage points more likely to be satisfied.

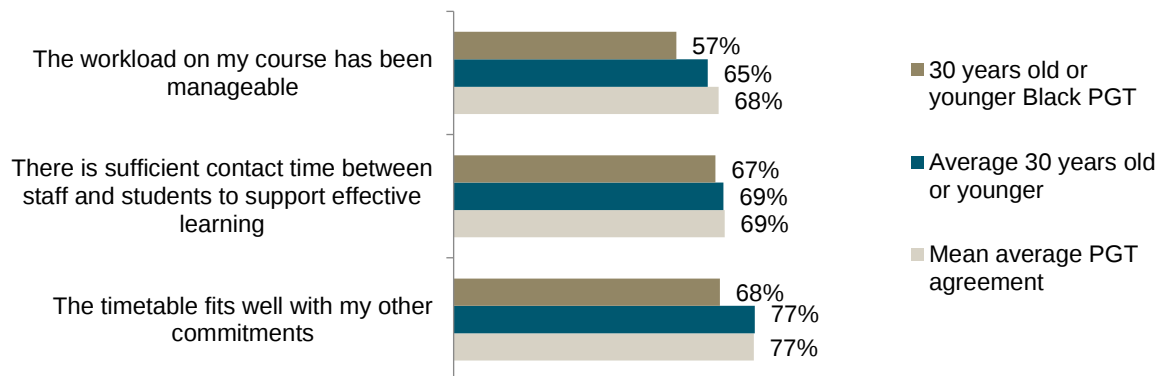
This report will now investigate areas of the student experience which may be driving the low satisfaction of Black and Other ethnicity PGT students aged 30 years and younger, as these are the groups which reported the lowest levels of overall satisfaction (both 76%).

5.4 Black postgraduate taught students aged 30 years and younger

5.4.1 Course organisation and workload

Younger Black PGT students had lower than average levels of agreement that the workload was manageable, or that the timetable fitted well with their other commitments.

Figure 14: Agreement with statement by ethnic background and age band (PGT students)



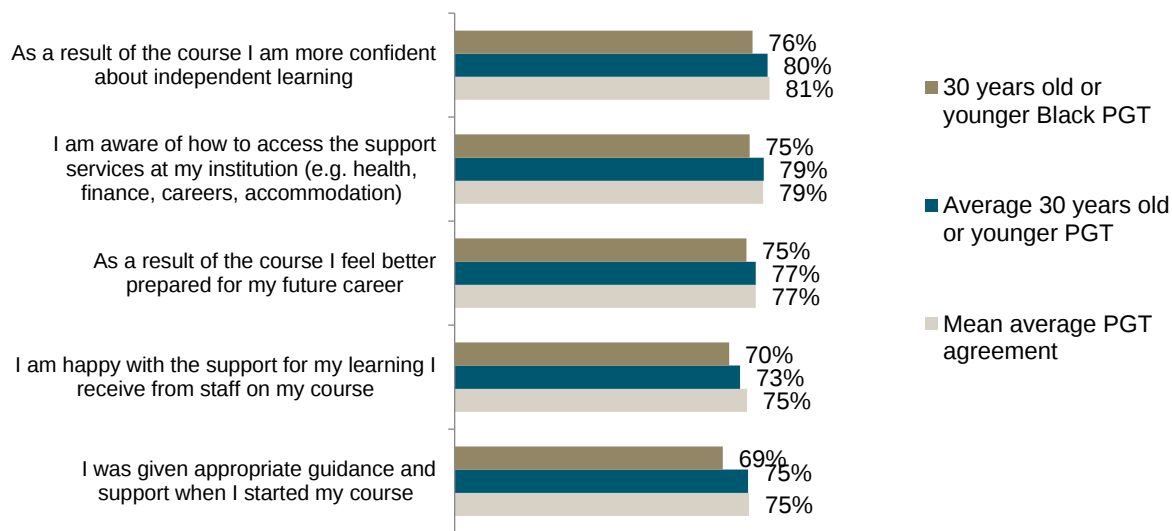
Despite this, these students would have appreciated more contact time with staff to support their learning. This is potentially linked to the younger cohort being less likely to have prior experience of self-managing and self-directing their own work.

Comments revealed several suggestions for institutions to consider in order to improve the experience of younger Black PGT students. Where possible, maintaining a similar pattern of contact hours throughout the course would make organisation easier for this cohort, as would releasing timetable information and course materials as soon as possible. Ensuring an appropriate split of individual and group projects may also help these students to manage their time, whilst also maintaining opportunities to share information and learn from other students.

5.4.2 Guidance and support

Younger PGT students from Black backgrounds reported relatively low levels of agreement with statements related to guidance and support, including receiving appropriate guidance and support when starting their course, as well as being aware of how to access the support services at their institution.

Figure 15: Agreement with statement by ethnic background and age band (PGT students)



Comments also highlighted a lack of BAME representation among staff and materials to support their learning. The lack of representation of BAME backgrounds among academic staff is a topic which has been well documented in the media⁶ and concerns about how and whether it is being addressed have also been raised in responses to PTES.

Improving diversity of teaching staff and course content, and making students aware of plans to improve diversity, will help to improve students' perceptions of their institution's representation of all ethnicities.

Comments, and answers to the statements, revealed that younger Black PGTs were less satisfied with the support for the learning they received from staff.

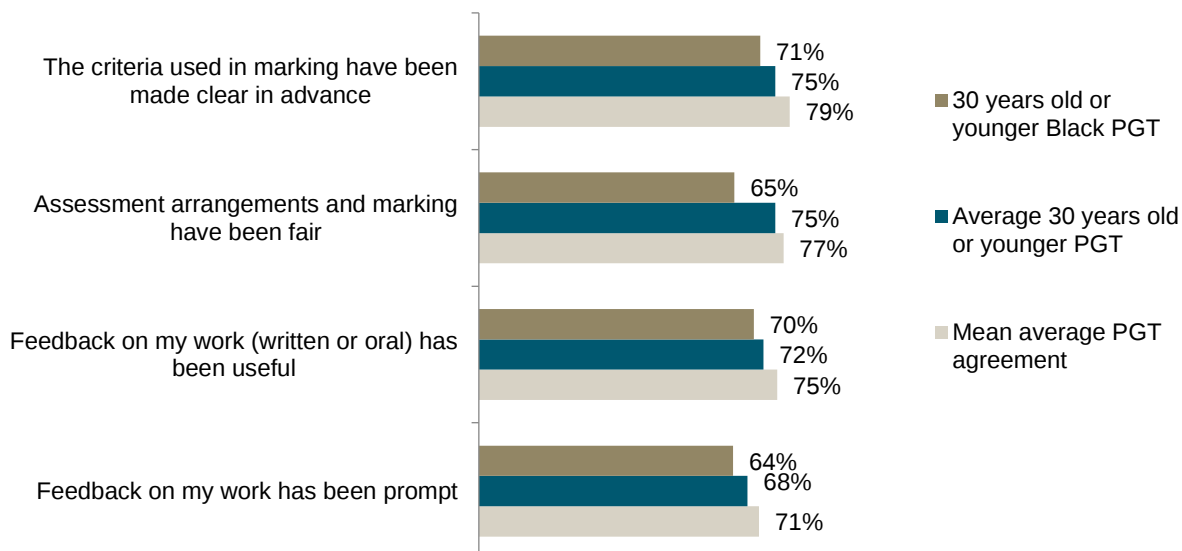
⁶ www.theguardian.com/education/2019/oct/15/uk-universities-bme-staff-less-likely-to-hold-top-jobs. [Accessed 7 May 2020]

Making students aware of how to contact staff at the end of taught sessions may help this cohort to feel better supported, as may contacting students at the beginning and throughout the course with tips relevant to the course stage. Highlighting, in taught sessions and assessment criteria, how the skills learned are transferable to the workplace will help students to feel better prepared for their careers. Furthermore, early signposting as to how students can access the support services at their institution may also boost these students' relatively low confidence about independent learning and their feelings of preparedness for their future careers.

5.4.3 Assessment and feedback

Younger Black PGT students had lower levels of agreement with statements related to assessment and feedback. On average, younger students of all ethnicities reported lower levels of satisfaction with this area than PGTs aged 31 and above, which may in part be attributed to younger students being the group more likely to have just finished a course of undergraduate study and being used to directed study, and therefore having different expectations around the amount of guidance they should receive in relation to feedback and assessment. That being said, younger Black students reported particularly low levels of satisfaction here.

Figure 16: Agreement with statement by ethnic background and age band (PGT students)



Comments from younger Black PGT students revealed they would have liked staff to have made more checks that students had understood the material prior to assessment, for example by conducting formative assessments. They would also have appreciated more prompt and thorough responses to student queries about assessment and more guidance and clarity around the requirements.

In terms of feedback, younger Black students in particular would have appreciated more constructive feedback at earlier stages of their courses. Comments also highlight frustrations around delays to feedback and communication of such delays.

Although students in paid employment were no less satisfied at an overall level, that Black students were among the most likely to participate in paid work alongside their course (see section 8.2) could be connected to their dissatisfaction with delays to feedback. This is because the demands of having a paid job make it particularly important for this cohort of students to be able to organise and balance their time effectively.

5.5 Other ethnicity postgraduate taught students aged 30 years and younger

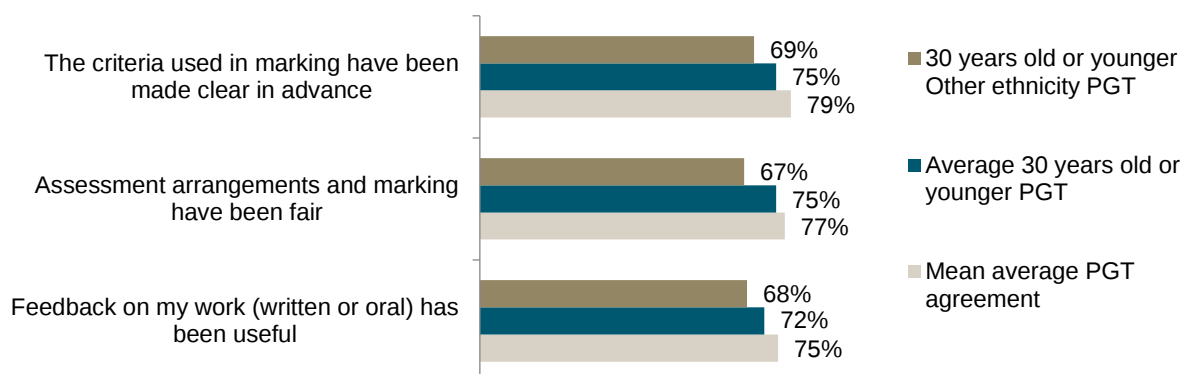
Equally unsatisfied with their experience overall as younger Black students were younger Other ethnicity PGT students. These younger students were a lot less satisfied (5% difference) than older students in the same ethnicity group, although this was not statistically significant due to the smaller base sizes.

5.5.1 Assessment and feedback

Like younger Black PGT students, students of Other ethnicities aged 30 and younger also had relatively low levels of agreement with statements related to assessment and feedback. As discussed previously this may, in part, be linked to the expectation that younger students are likely to have recently completed an undergraduate programme and were therefore used to a larger amount of direction in relation to feedback and assessment.

Of note is that older students of Other ethnicity also reported lower than average levels of agreement across the statements. This indicates that, whilst feedback and assessment was a particular issue for the younger group of Other ethnicity students and this section will continue to focus on this cohort, it was also an issue among their older counterparts.

Figure 17: Agreement with statement by ethnic background and age band (PGT students)



Younger students of Other ethnicity groups mentioned a lack of clarity provided in advance around assessments and marking criteria. They also highlighted a lack of detailed feedback.

Receiving information about the assessment(s) and marking criteria at the beginning of the course may help to improve perceptions of fairness among the younger Other ethnicity cohort, and all students. While it would be more time consuming for staff to provide, some students would appreciate more detailed feedback on coursework. Alternatively, running a drop-in session for students to ask for additional feedback on their work may be a more time-effective way of providing more feedback for those students who would like it.

5.6 Summary of the links between age, ethnicity and postgraduate satisfaction

5.6.1 Postgraduate research students

Among PGR students, the largest difference in overall satisfaction among those aged above and below 30 years old was among Black students, with Black students in the younger age group reporting an overall satisfaction level 7 percentage points lower than their older peers. The overall picture of Black students being among the most satisfied groups masks the relatively low satisfaction of those Black students who were aged 30 and below.

Areas in which younger Black PGR students reported relatively low levels of agreement include satisfaction with supervision and knowing whom to contact beyond their supervisor. This, along with students being less likely to have developed contacts and to feel the research community stimulated their work, makes it likely that younger Black students are a particularly isolated group. Organising formal networking events for the research community, as well as publicising information about staff members' expertise and training sessions, may help to reduce their isolation.

5.6.2 Postgraduate taught students

At PGT level, Black and Other ethnicity PGT students aged 30 years old or younger were the (ethnicity and age) cohorts least satisfied with the overall quality of their course.

Common areas of lower than average satisfaction among younger Black and Other ethnicity students include assessment and feedback. In particular, these students were relatively less likely to agree that assessment-marking is sufficiently prompt, detailed or fair. Providing detailed assessment criteria at the start of the course, conducting formative assessments, and providing detailed and prompt feedback should help to alleviate many of the students' issues and concerns. Younger Black students were also less likely to be satisfied with the organisation of the course and to find their workload manageable, potentially linked to Black students being among the most likely to take part in paid work alongside their PGT studies.

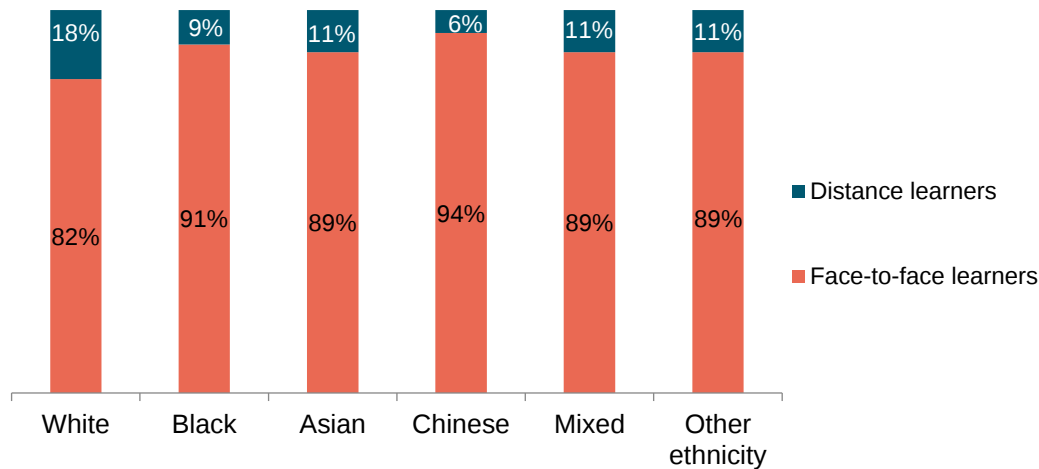
6. Face-to-face and distance learners and ethnicity

Due to the nature of a PGR programme comprising self-directed distance research and learning, only PGT students will be considered in this section.

6.1 Postgraduate taught students

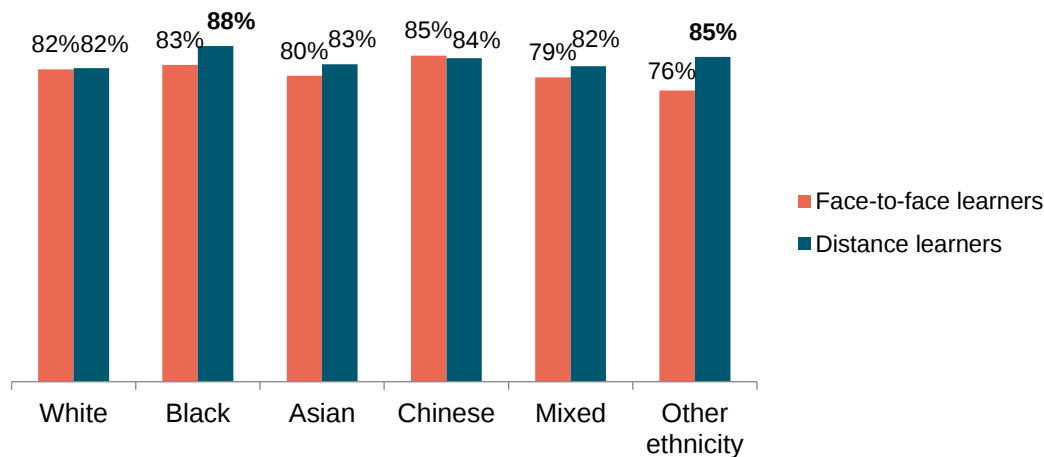
Among PGT students, there were differences in the proportions of distance and face-to-face learners in the different ethnicity groups. The largest proportion of distance learners is found among White students, of which almost a fifth of students were distance learners (18%). Conversely, only 6% of Chinese ethnicity PGT students were distance learners.

Figure 18: Ethnic background and learner type (face-to-face or distance) (PGT students)



We observe differences in overall satisfaction among the postgraduate taught population when type of learner (face-to-face or distance) is considered in conjunction with ethnicity.

Figure 19: Overall satisfaction by ethnic background and learner type (face-to-face or distance) (PGT students)



Bases:

White n=27,991 (Face-to-face: 22,976; Distance: 5,015)

Black n=2,344 (Face-to-face: 2,125; Distance: 219)

Asian n=2,745 (Face-to-face: 2,441; Distance: 304)

Chinese n=1,037 (Face-to-face: 979; Distance: 58)

Mixed n=1,325 (Face-to-face: 1,177; Distance: 148)

Other n=722 (Face-to-face: 643; Distance: 79)

Bold font indicates a statistically significant difference between the face-to-face and distance learner cohorts within the same ethnicity group

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With the exception of Chinese students, distance learners tended to be more satisfied than face-to-face learners overall, suggesting that provision for distance learners is meeting their needs. However, face-to-face Chinese PGT students reported slightly higher (1% higher) levels of satisfaction than Chinese distance learners.

The largest, statistically significant, difference is observed among the Other ethnicity group, with levels of agreement 9% lower among face-to-face students of Other ethnicity compared with those who were distance learners. As we know that the Other ethnicity group was the least satisfied with the PGT course quality overall, we should consider understanding the satisfaction of Other ethnicity face-to-face students a priority.

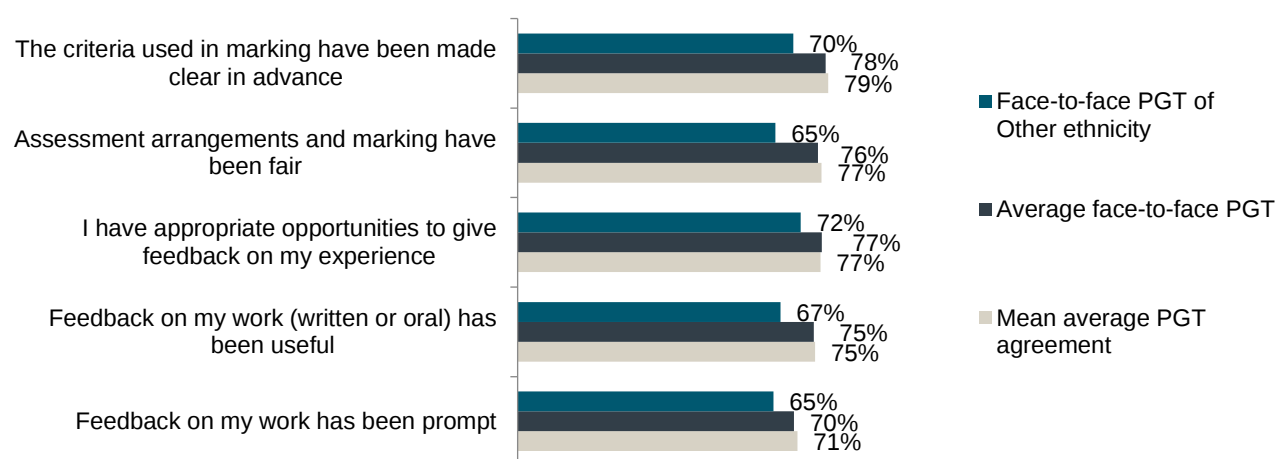
Face-to-face learners of Other ethnicity tended to report lower than average levels of satisfaction across the majority of statements. The following paragraphs focus on the areas in which these students' levels of agreement were particularly low.

6.2 Face-to-face postgraduate taught students of Other ethnicity

6.2.1 Assessment and feedback

Other ethnicity students learning face-to-face had low levels of agreement with statements related to feedback and assessment. This group of students had particular concerns about the fairness of assessment arrangements and marking, with just 65% agreeing with this statement compared with an average of 77%. As well as the feedback they received, opportunities to give feedback on their experience was also a concern.

Figure 20: Agreement with statement by ethnic background and learner type (face-to-face or distance) (PGT students)



Comments from face-to-face learners from Other ethnic backgrounds revealed multiple issues regarding feedback and assessment processes. These include a lack of clarity around marking criteria, delays to receiving feedback and a sense of assessments not being related to the content of the course taught in contact hours. A student also highlighted that feedback given to staff was not well received.

Ensuring that detailed criteria used in marking are made clear in advance, and setting expectations about what sort of feedback will be provided and when, may help to ease these students' concerns. Providing information early on in a module about how much-assessed material will be taught and how much should be learned independently will also help to manage students' expectations. To help alleviate concerns about the opportunities students have around giving feedback and how it is received, institutions may wish to provide specific support to staff on how to request and receive feedback, as well as advertising actions taken as a result of student feedback.

6.2.2 Career planning

Another area in which PGT face-to-face learners of Other ethnicity reported particularly low scores is career planning. Although awareness of how to access support services (including careers) was actually slightly higher than average among this group (76% versus the average of 75%), just 73% of students belonging to this group felt better prepared for their future career, compared with the average of 77%, and a similar proportion agreed that they have been encouraged to think about what skills they need to develop for their career.

Figure 21: Agreement with statement by ethnic background and learner type (face-to-face or distance) (PGT students)



It is interesting that, among students from Other ethnic backgrounds, the face-to-face learners had lower levels of agreement with statements related to career planning than distance learners. Perhaps the nature of the distance-learning course means that students learning in this way have different expectations about how much advice and guidance they can expect to receive about career planning from their institution versus how much independent research they should do in this area. For example, a distance learner might not expect to attend careers fairs or to speak to a staff member in the careers service face-to-face, whereas the comments below demonstrate that this was an expectation held by a face-to-face learner of Other ethnicity.

Students may benefit from additional signposting to careers support services, including online and self-access materials. A focus on highlighting career-related elements of the course, both in module information materials used by students to choose their module and during the modules themselves, may also lead students to feel better supported with regard to employability.

6.3 Summary of the links between mode of learning, ethnicity and satisfaction

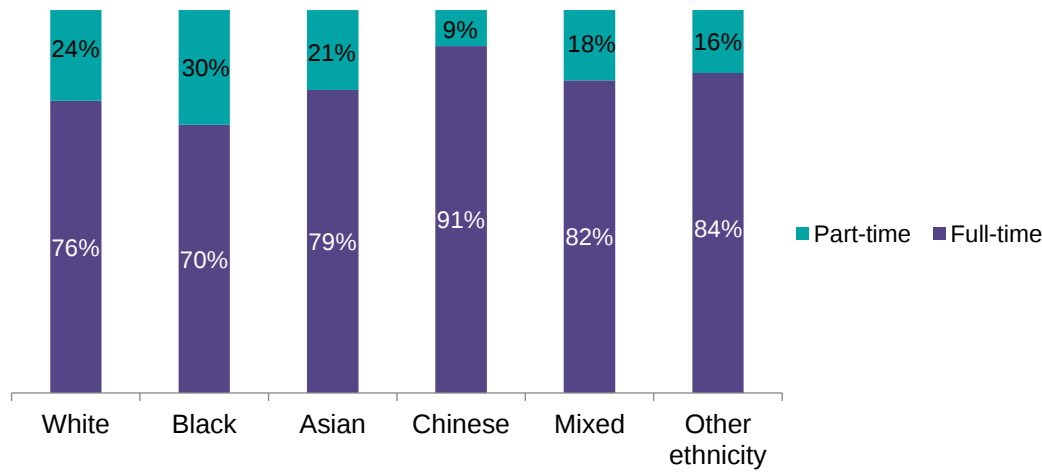
With the exception of Chinese PGT students, distance learners of all ethnicities reported higher overall satisfaction than face-to-face learners. The largest, statistically significant, difference in satisfaction among distance and face-to-face learners is in the Other ethnicity group. Areas in which Other ethnicity face-to-face learners reported particularly low levels of satisfaction include assessment and feedback, and support for career planning. Providing detailed marking criteria at the start of a module could help to alleviate concerns about the fairness of assessments, and setting expectations about the level of detail of feedback to be provided (and when) may also raise students' satisfaction in the area of assessment. To improve satisfaction with support for career planning, students may benefit from a focus on relating skills and knowledge gained in modules to employability, both prior to and during the course of the modules.

7. Full- and part-time learners and ethnicity

7.1 Postgraduate research students

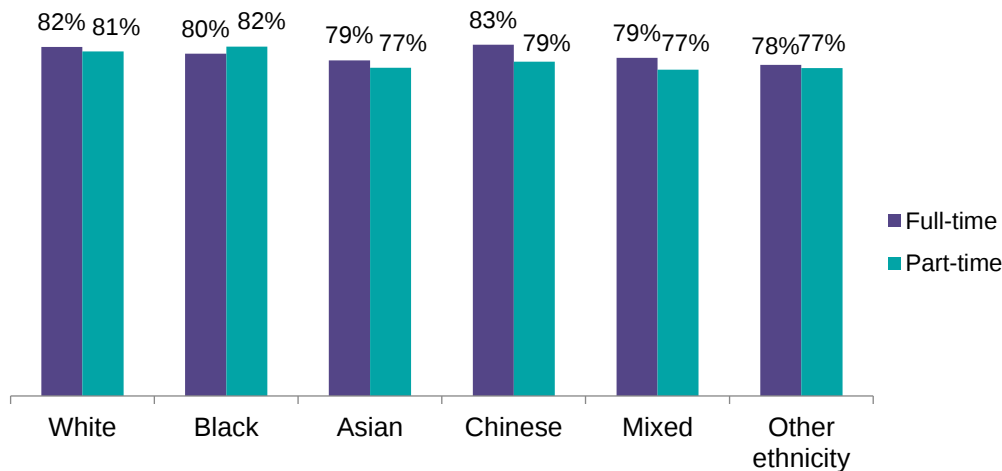
The proportions of PGR students studying full time and part time differed across the ethnicity groups examined. The highest proportion (30%) of students studying their postgraduate research course on a part-time basis was in the Black student group, whereas less than 1 in 10 PGR students of Chinese ethnicity were studying part time.

Figure 22: Ethnic background and learner type (full- or part-time) (PGR students)



Despite the large differences in proportions of students studying on a full- or part-time basis across the ethnicity groups, we observe only slight differences in overall satisfaction (of 1% or 2%) between full- and part-time PGR students in the majority of ethnicity groups. The largest difference in overall satisfaction with the research degree programme for full-time and part-time learners is also to be observed among PGR students of Chinese ethnicity. 83% of Chinese PGR students studying full time were satisfied with their overall experience in comparison with 79% of distance learners, a difference of 4%. Part-time students from Chinese backgrounds were still a relatively satisfied group.

Figure 23: Overall satisfaction by ethnic background and learner type (full- or part-time) (PGR students)



Bases:

White n=24,309 (Full-time: 18,575; Part-time: 5,734)

Black n=844 (Full-time: 586; Part-time: 258)

Asian n=1,711 (Full-time: 1,356; Part-time: 355)

Chinese n=752 (Full-time: 681; Part-time: 71)

Mixed n=1,079 (Full-time: 882; Part-time: 197)

Other n=879 (Full-time: 734; Part-time: 145)

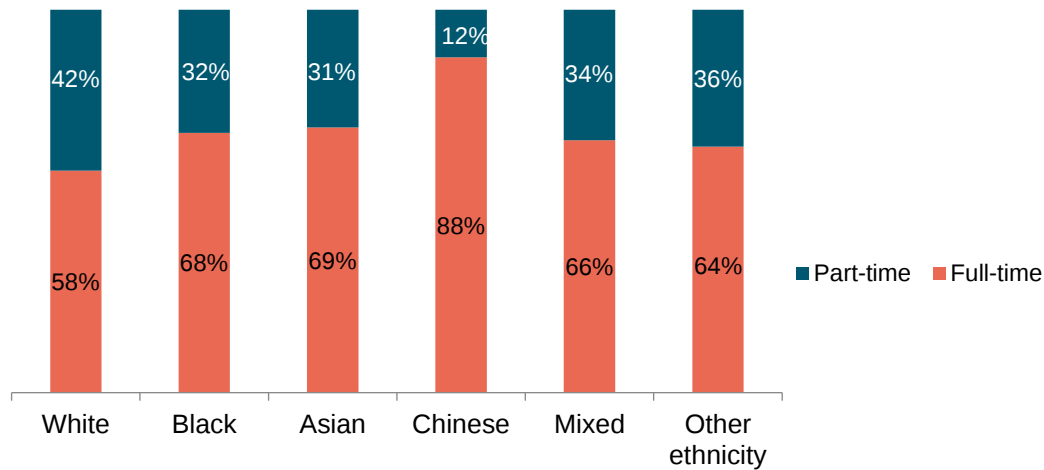
Bold font indicates a statistically significant difference between the full- and part-time cohorts within the same ethnicity group

Interestingly, full-time learners report slightly higher levels of satisfaction with the overall programme than part-time learners for all ethnicity groups with the exception of Black PGR students, for whom part-time students report 2% higher satisfaction levels. None of these differences are statistically significant.

7.2 Postgraduate taught students

As we also observed among the PGR population, we see large differences in the proportions of PGT students of different ethnic backgrounds who were studying on full- and part-time bases. The vast majority of Chinese ethnicity PGT students (almost 9 in 10) were studying full time. However, among PGT students, it was White students who were most likely to be studying on a part-time basis (42%).

Figure 24: Ethnic background and learner type (full- or part-time) (PGT students)



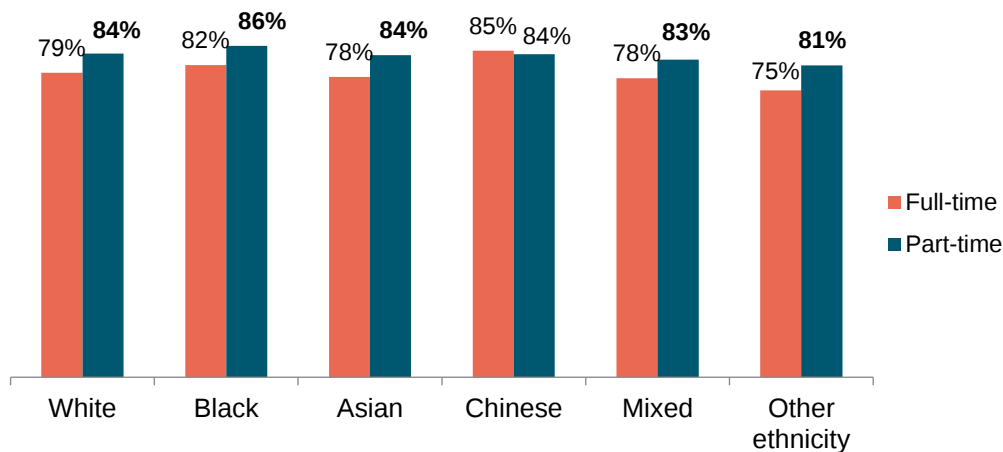
When we consider PGT students' satisfaction in conjunction with their ethnicity and whether they were a full- or part-time learner, we find that (with the exception of PGTs from a Chinese background), part-time students of all ethnicities were more satisfied, with some large, statistically significant differences observed. As shown in figure 23, in figure 25 we also see that PGT students of Chinese ethnicity are an exception to the pattern, as they had a much smaller gap in satisfaction, with full-time students slightly more likely to have been satisfied than their part-time counterparts.

Among the other ethnic groups, differences range between 5% and 6%, with the largest distinction among students of Other ethnicity, highlighting another area for institutions to focus on to improve satisfaction among this group.

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Figure 25: Overall satisfaction by ethnic background and learner type (full- or part-time) (PGT students)



Bases:

White n=27,851 (Full-time: 16,155; Part-time: 11,696)

Black n=2,335 (Full-time: 1,587; Part-time: 748)

Asian n=2,738 (Full-time: 1,895; Part-time: 843)

Chinese n=1,029 (Full-time: 901; Part-time: 128)

Mixed n=1,323 (Full-time: 871; Part-time: 452)

Other n=721 (Full-time: 463; Part-time: 258)

Bold font indicates a statistically significant difference between the full- and part-time cohorts within the same ethnicity group

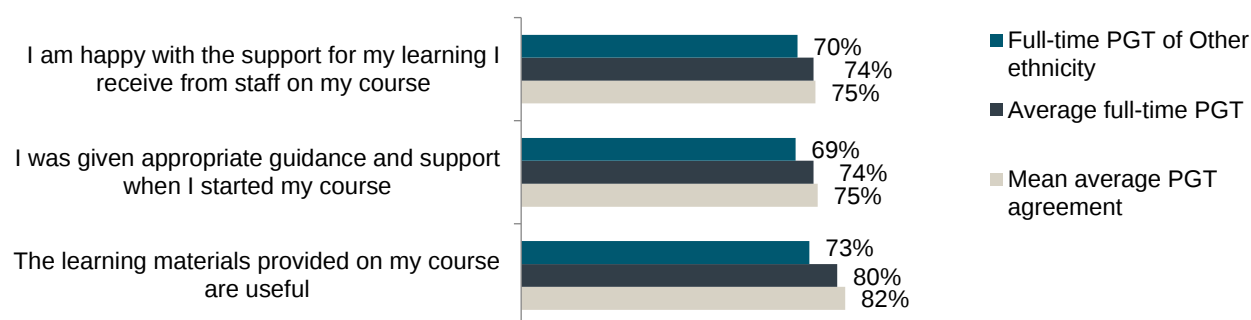
There are areas in which full-time postgraduate students of all ethnicities (with the exception of Chinese-ethnicity students) reported lower satisfaction than part-time students. These include support for learning from staff, course challenge, workload, course organisation and statements related to feedback and assessment. However, there are some areas, to be discussed in the following paragraphs, in which Other ethnicity full-time students reported particularly low levels of agreement compared with other students.

7.3 Full-time postgraduate taught students of Other ethnicity

7.3.1 Guidance and support

This cohort of students reported relatively low levels of agreement with feeling supported when they started their courses, and that they were happy with the support they had received from staff throughout their course. They were also less likely to feel supported by the learning materials provided on their courses.

Figure 26: Overall satisfaction by ethnic background and learner type (full- or part-time) (PGT students)



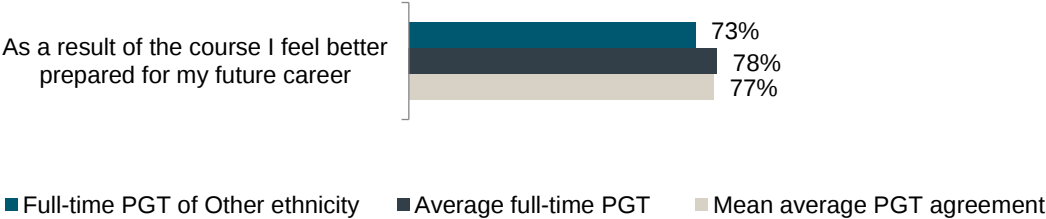
It is possible that Other ethnicity PGT students studying on a full-time basis had higher expectations of the level of support they would receive at the beginning of and during their course, thanks to the greater proportion of their time which is dedicated to it. Students mentioned that they were unclear of the expected academic standards at the beginning of the course and that they did not know whom to ask for help to resolve academic issues during the course. Furthermore, some students mentioned issues with the learning materials not being relevant to the taught sessions and being out of date and not diverse.

Institutions should consider ways to ensure that students of Other ethnicities, particularly those studying full time, feel supported by staff and that they are supported and represented by the learning materials provided. One such way is to update course content and materials regularly to ensure that they complement each other, are representative of developments within society and that they are diverse. Providing the details of assessments and marking criteria at the start of each module may help to clarify academic expectations and additional signposting to support services might be particularly welcome among members of this cohort.

7.3.2 Preparedness for future career

Full-time PGT students of Other ethnicity reported lower levels of agreement (73%) that they felt better prepared for their future career than part-time Other ethnicity students and the average agreement among all PGT students (77%). Of note is that among all Other ethnicity groups, full-time PGTs were more likely than part-time PGTs to agree with this statement, which highlights that this is a particular issue among this ethnicity group.

Figure 27: Agreement with statement by ethnic background and learner type (full- or part-time) (PGT students)



While no part-time PGTs of Other ethnicity chose to comment further about how they might be helped to feel better prepared for their careers, this cohort is likely to benefit from suggestions around careers guidance made in other sections of this report, including additional signposting to in-person and self-access careers services, and demonstrating how skills gained in academic modules are transferable to the world of work in taught sessions.

7.4 Summary of links between learner type, ethnicity and satisfaction

7.4.1 Postgraduate research students

Only small differences in overall satisfaction are observed between full- and part-time learners in each of the ethnicity groups. Across all ethnic backgrounds, full-time learners tended to report a slightly higher level of satisfaction than part-time learners. The only exception is among Black students, among whom part-time learners were slightly more satisfied than full-time learners.

7.4.2 Postgraduate taught students

Different to the pattern found at PGR level, part-time PGT students of all ethnicities reported significantly higher overall satisfaction than full-time students. The only exception is Chinese students, of whom those studying on a full-time basis reported slightly higher (1%) satisfaction.

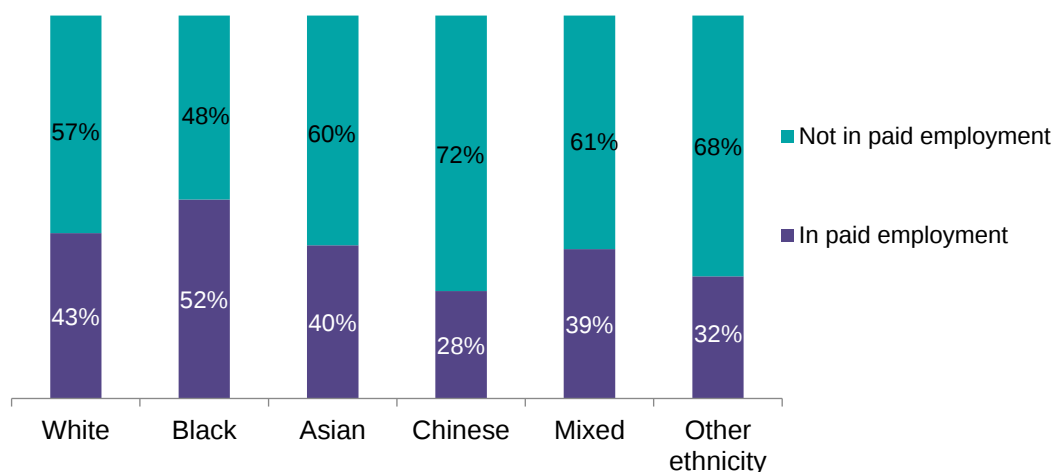
Part-time students of Other ethnicity reported the lowest overall satisfaction (75%). Areas in which this cohort reported particularly low levels of agreement include guidance and support, and in particular these students would benefit from additional support to help with their feeling of preparedness for their future careers.

8. Participation in paid employment and ethnicity

8.1 Postgraduate research students

Overall, just over 4 in 10 (42%) of PGR students were in paid employment. Black students were the only group in which over half of students were in paid employment (52%). On the other hand, PGR students of Chinese ethnicity were the least likely to be in paid employment (28%).

Figure 28: Ethnic background and employment status (PGR students)

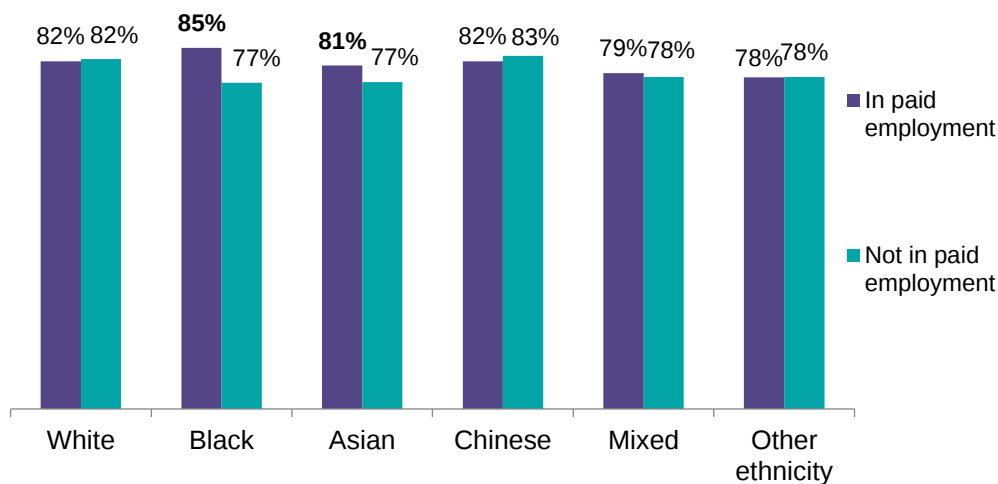


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Overall satisfaction tends to vary very little among those who were in paid in employment and those who were not, when employment is considered together with ethnicity. The two exceptions to this observation are the Black and Asian ethnicity groups, in which PGR students who were in paid employment in fact reported higher overall satisfaction with their experience than those who were not in paid employment. This finding is in contrast to the findings of analysis of data collected from undergraduate students via the Student Academic Experience Survey (SAES), which found that students who spent time working for pay reported lower satisfaction with the value for money they received and were less likely to feel that they had learned a lot than those who did not participate in paid work.⁷

Figure 29: Overall satisfaction by ethnic background and employment status (PGR students)



Bases:

White n=24,459 (In paid employment: 10,511; Not in paid employment: 13,948)

Black n=844 (In paid employment: 439; Not in paid employment: 405)

Asian n=1,714 (In paid employment: 683; Not in paid employment: 1,031)

Chinese n=755 (In paid employment: 210; Not in paid employment: 545)

Mixed n=1,087 (In paid employment: 429; Not in paid employment: 658)

Other n=888 (In paid employment: 282; Not in paid employment: 606)

Bold font indicates a statistically significant difference between those in paid employment and those not in paid employment within the same ethnicity group

The largest (statistically significant) difference in satisfaction among those who were employed and those who were not is observed among Black students, with 77% of those

⁷ Neves, J. and Hillman, N. (2018). Student Academic Experience Survey. Advance HE and HEPI. p. 27.

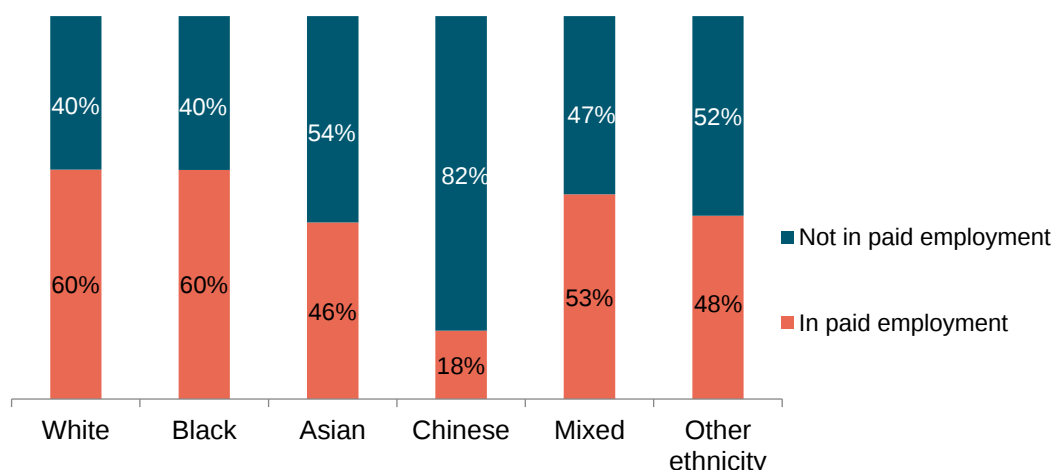
who were not in paid employment reporting satisfaction with their overall experience compared with 85% of those who were in paid employment, a difference of 8%. This makes Black PGR students who participated in paid employment the most satisfied group and Black PGR students who did not participate in paid employment among the least satisfied, alongside PGR students of Asian and Other ethnicities who were not in paid positions.

Among undergraduate students who took part in the SAES, it was students who worked for 10 or more hours per week who reported considerably lower satisfaction with the value for money they received and the amount they learned. However, Black postgraduate researchers who spent time working for pay were the most satisfied group overall, and were also the ethnicity group whose working members were most likely to work 10 or more hours per week (84% versus an average of 71%). We should therefore consider that time spent in paid work is not to the detriment of the student experience for postgraduate researchers as it is for undergraduate students. This is perhaps due to the different structure of a postgraduate research degree being better suited to being balanced with a paid job than an undergraduate degree, or perhaps postgraduate students' greater experience of studying an academic discipline makes it easier for them to balance a job with their studies than those who are relatively new to academia.

8.2 Postgraduate taught students

A higher proportion of PGT students (57%) took part in paid employment compared with PGR students (42%). As we observed among the PGR population, Chinese PGT students were again the least likely to be in paid employment (18%) and Black students were among the most likely to take part in paid work (60%) alongside White students (also 60%).

Figure 30: Ethnic background and employment status (PGT students)



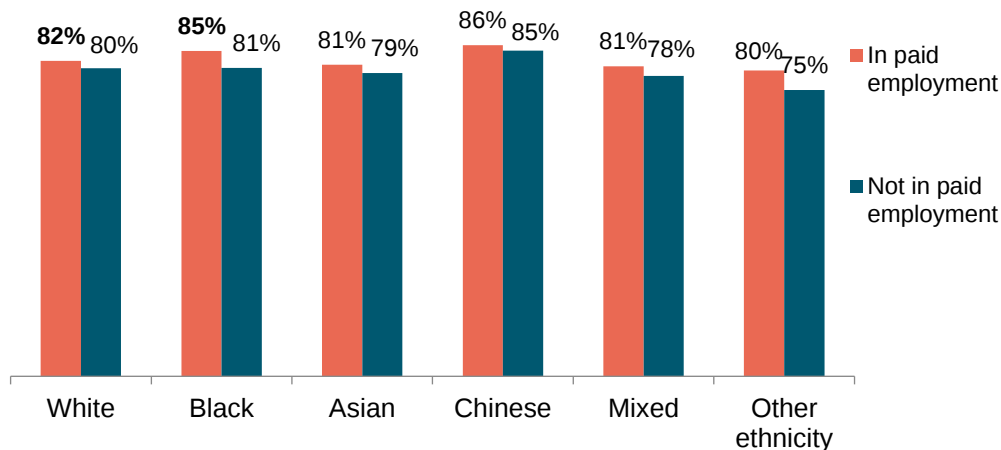
Among PGT students in each of the ethnicity groups examined, those in paid employment reported overall satisfaction with the quality of the course at least 1% higher than those who

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were not in paid employment. The largest difference in absolute terms was in the Other ethnicity group, in which 80% of students who were employed agreed that they were satisfied overall, compared with 75% of those not in paid employment (the least satisfied group), although due to small base sizes this difference is not statistically significant.

Figure 31: Overall satisfaction by ethnic background and employment status (PGT students)



Bases:

White n=27,873 (In paid employment: 16,687; Not in paid employment: 11,186)

Black n=2,331 (In paid employment: 1,397; Not in paid employment: 934)

Asian n=2,733 (In paid employment: 1,259; Not in paid employment: 1,474)

Chinese n=1,035 (In paid employment: 185; Not in paid employment: 850)

Mixed n=1,321 (In paid employment: 705; Not in paid employment: 616)

Other n=716 (In paid employment: 343; Not in paid employment: 373)

Bold font indicates a statistically significant difference between those in paid employment and those not in paid employment within the same ethnicity group

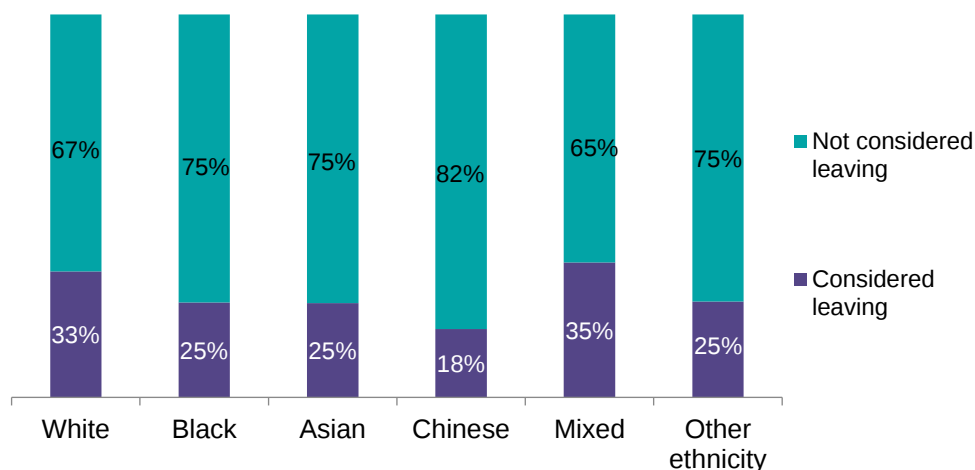
Again, this finding presents the opposite picture to that observed among undergraduate students, of whom those who worked for pay tended to perceive a smaller learning gain and be less satisfied with the value for money of their course than those who did not participate in paid employment. As we considered in section 8.1 of this report, perhaps working for pay is less detrimental to the student experience for postgraduate students thanks to their greater experience of academic study making them better able to balance their time commitments. Furthermore, it is possible that, thanks to having already completed their undergraduate degree, postgraduate students are able to take part in more specialised paid work which is related to their degree and thus enhances their learning experience and employability.

9. Considered leaving degree and ethnicity

9.1 Postgraduate research students

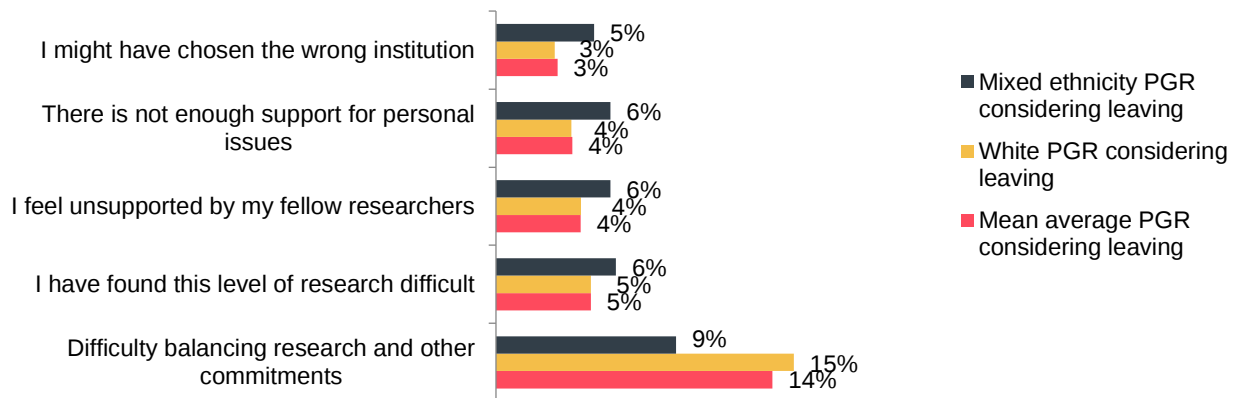
Overall, 32% of PGR students considered leaving their programme. The proportions of students who considered leaving varied across the different ethnicity groups. By a considerable margin, Chinese students were the least likely to have considered leaving (18%). Interestingly, while Other ethnicity students gave the lowest levels of satisfaction overall, it is Mixed ethnicity (35%) and White (33%) students who were most likely to have considered leaving. We will now investigate these groups in more detail.

Figure 32: Ethnic background and whether considered leaving (PGR students)



Whilst the reasons students from White and Mixed ethnicity backgrounds considered leaving their programmes are broadly in line with the average, there are some nuances. White students were slightly more likely than the average to leave because of problems juggling their studies and other commitments. Of note, White students and Black students (of whom 17% of students considered leaving for this reason) were the most likely to be employed alongside their studies.

Figure 33: Ethnic background and reasons considered leaving (PGR students)

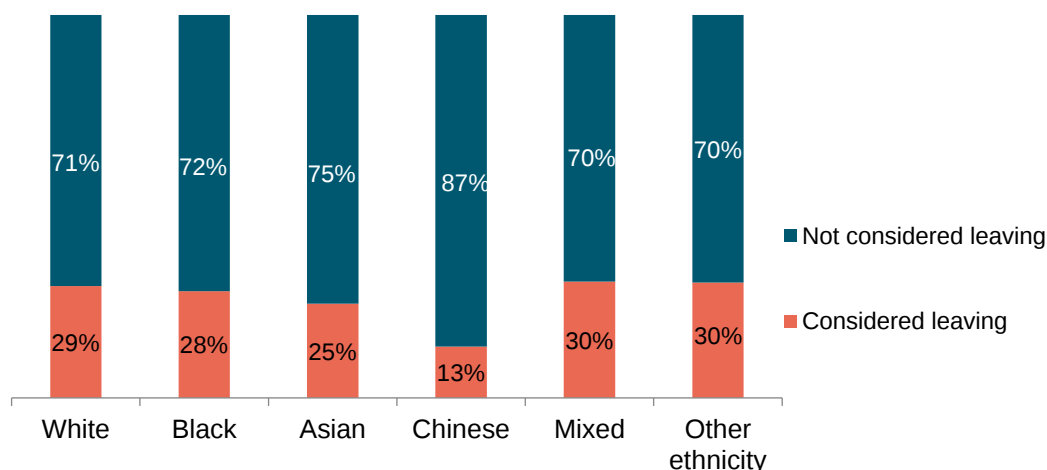


Mixed ethnicity students were considerably less likely to leave for this reason. However, they had higher than average levels of agreement that they considered leaving due to not having enough support from fellow researchers, support for personal issues, and because they found the level of research difficult, indicating that additional support and signposting to support services would be beneficial in retaining these students.

9.2 Postgraduate taught students

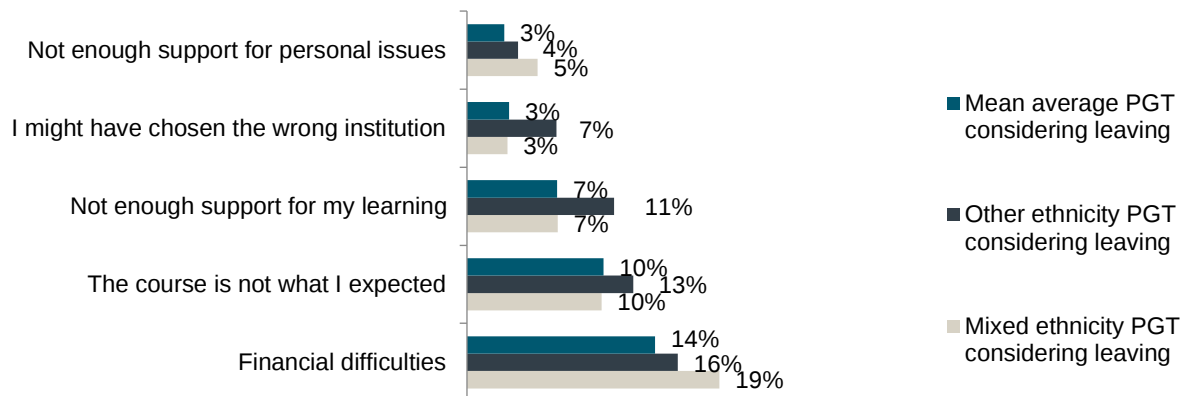
Among the PGT population, it was again Chinese ethnicity students who were least likely to consider leaving their course. Asian ethnicity students (not including Chinese) were also less likely than the average (28%) to have considered leaving. Among all other ethnicities, around 3 in 10 students considered leaving their PGT course.

Figure 34: Ethnic background and whether considered leaving (PGT students)



The Mixed and Other ethnicity groups are the groups with the highest proportions of PGT students who considered leaving. Higher than average proportions of students from these ethnic backgrounds considered leaving due to financial difficulties and a lack of support for personal issues, indicating that these cohorts in particular would benefit from additional signposting to support services.

Figure 35: Ethnic background and reasons considered leaving (PGT students)



Students of Other ethnicity were also more likely than students from other backgrounds to have considered leaving due to feeling insufficiently supported in their learning, again highlighting that support is a particular issue for this cohort. Perhaps as a result of this perceived lack of support, higher than average proportions of Other ethnicity students considered leaving due to expectations about the course not being met, and the sense that they chose the wrong institution.

10. Conclusions and recommendations

This report has considered how students' overall experiences vary by certain demographic characteristics in addition to their ethnic background. The matrix below summarises the demographic characteristics considered, ethnicity groups in which there are particularly large differences in overall satisfaction when combined with different demographic characteristics, areas of the student experience which may be driving these differences, and recommendations for improvements.

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Demographic characteristic combined with ethnicity	Student group of concern	Area of concern	Recommendations to improve students' experience
Age	Black PGR students aged 30 or younger	Supervision	• help supervisors identify the development needs of students and advise as to how these can be met • encourage supervisors to connect students to their wider network of academic and research colleagues.
		Isolation	• organise formal social and networking events for the research community • publicise information about staff expertise and available training sessions.
		Skills and confidence	• offer 'refresher' workshops covering the fundamentals of research.
	Black PGT students aged 30 or younger	Assessment and feedback	• conduct formative assessments during courses • provide prompt and thorough responses to queries about assessments • provide constructive feedback at earlier stages of courses.
		Course organisation and workload	• maintain a similar pattern of contact hours throughout courses where possible • release timetable information and course materials as soon as possible • ensure an appropriate split of individual and group tasks.
		Guidance and support	• improve diversity of teaching staff and course content, and make students aware of plans to improve diversity • advertise staff contact details and office hours • contact students with hints and tips relevant to their course stage • relate skills and knowledge learned to employability • early signposting to support services.

	Other ethnicity PGT students aged 30 or younger	Assessment and feedback	- provide information about assessments and marking criteria at the beginning of courses - provide detailed feedback on coursework - hold drop-in feedback sessions.
Face-to-face and distance learners	Face-to-face PGT students of Other ethnicity	Assessment and feedback	- provide detailed marking criteria as early as possible during modules - at the beginning of courses, provide information about what feedback will be provided and when - set expectations early about how much assessed material will be taught and how much must be learned independently - provide staff with training on how to ask for and receive feedback.
		Career planning	- additional signposting to careers services, including online and self-access materials - relate skills and learnings to employability.
Full-time and part-time learners	Full-time PGT students of Other ethnicity	Guidance and support	- encourage staff to update course content and materials regularly - provide assessment details and marking criteria early in courses - additional signposting to support services.
		Preparedness for future career	- additional signposting to careers services, including online and self-access materials - relate skills and learnings to employability.

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