



Yorkshire Consortium for Equity in Doctoral Education

Postgraduate Diversity at The University of Leeds - from YCEDE to Beyond

This publication, authored by colleagues at The University of Leeds, outlines their institution's journey to improving postgraduate diversity across the university, starting with the conception of YCEDE through to discussing what can/should happen after the project has ended. While much of this reflection focuses on Leeds, colleagues at other institutions will undoubtedly find the discussions and reflections universally valuable/relevant.

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YCEDE cannot guarantee that all information contained in this resource is accurate at the time of reading, particularly with regard to dates, deadlines, and funding availability.

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This resource is intended for use in improving equity and outcomes for ethnically minoritised individuals interested in doctoral study or careers in research.

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Postgraduate Diversity at the University of Leeds: From YCEDE to beyond.

The [Yorkshire Consortium for Equity in Doctoral Education \(YCEDE\)](#), launched in July 2022, is a collaborative initiative designed to enhance access to doctoral studies for graduates from Black, Asian, and other minoritised ethnic backgrounds. This consortium includes five universities in Yorkshire and 12 UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) funded Doctoral Training Partnerships and Centres for Doctoral Training.

Read this story to find out how the University of Leeds has contributed, our impact so far, and how you can get involved.

Executive Summary

Challenges in Postgraduate Diversity

The University of Leeds faced significant challenges in increasing the proportion of postgraduate researchers (PGRs) from minoritised ethnic groups. As of July 2022, only 13% of the 'Home' PGR community at Leeds were from ethnic minority backgrounds, below the

UK university average of 18%. Barriers such as concerns about discrimination, lack of support, and self-doubt deter talented individuals from pursuing PhDs.

Key Factors Contributing to Underrepresentation

Several factors contribute to the lower proportion of ethnically minoritised students in postgraduate research:

- **Russell Group University Attendance:** Students from ethnic minority backgrounds are less likely to attend high-tariff institutions, impacting their chances of receiving PhD offers.
- **Concerns about Campus Cultures and Belonging:** Isolation and lack of progress on race equality deter students.
- **Financial Constraints:** PhD study is high stakes, and uncertainty about the route into doctoral study adds to the challenge.
- **Attainment and Awarding Gaps:** Significant attainment gaps at undergraduate and taught postgraduate levels impact competitiveness for PhD programmes.
- **Lack of Transparency in Recruitment and Admissions:** Recruitment and admissions processes often lack transparency, creating barriers for students from ethnic minority backgrounds.
- **PhD Offer Gap:** Despite similar qualifications, students from ethnic minority backgrounds are less likely to receive PhD offers compared to their white counterparts.

YCEDE Initiatives

YCEDE operates through four workstreams:

1. **Widening Opportunities for Equity of Access and Participation:** Providing targeted support such as research internships and ring-fenced scholarships.
2. **Changing Institutional Practices and Culture:** Redesigning admissions processes to be more inclusive and equitable.
3. **Delivering an Excellent Experience for Ethnically Minoritised PGRs:** Developing an institutional environment where these students feel valued and integrated.
4. **Evaluating Effectiveness and Sharing Best Practice:** Assessing the impact of initiatives and sharing successful strategies with the higher education sector.

Impact at Leeds

Since 2022, the University of Leeds has implemented various initiatives to widen access and improve student success:

- **Student Internships:** Ring-fenced opportunities for undergraduate students to gain hands-on research experience.
- **Virtual Events:** Regular events addressing barriers commonly experienced by minoritised groups.
- **Academics as Advocates:** A one-to-one support system where academic volunteers mentor applicants.
- **Postgraduate Contextual Admissions Toolkit:** Guidance to support contextual admissions for postgraduate research.
- **Leeds Opportunities Scholarships:** Ring-fenced scholarships for doctoral applicants from minoritised ethnic groups.
- **Postgraduate Student Network:** Expanded network providing support and mentoring for students from ethnic minority backgrounds.
- **Evaluating Effectiveness:** Collecting quantitative and qualitative data to measure the impact of YCEDE initiatives.

Our Impact So Far

By 2024, Leeds has made significant progress, with UK BAME PGR recruitment standing at 21.7%, demonstrating the effectiveness of targeted outreach activities, scholarships, and contextual admission measures.

How Colleagues Can Help

The Postgraduate Diversity team at Leeds is here to stay. Get involved by:

1. **Meeting with the PGR Diversity team:** First, work with the PGR Diversity team to consider what diversity looks like in your faculty or organisational context, identify the gaps, and determine what is required to address them.
2. **Collaborate to develop a roadmap:** Then, collaborate with the team to develop a roadmap, utilising the following opportunities:
 - a. Run a bespoke outreach session
 - b. Provide a research internship
 - c. Offer 1:1 mentoring
 - d. Develop ring-fenced scholarships and funding
 - e. Embed equity, diversity, and inclusion in the interview and selection process

What's the problem with Postgraduate Diversity?



In 2022, the University of Leeds faced a significant challenge: increasing the proportion of postgraduate researchers (PGRs) from minoritised ethnic groups. As of July 2022, only 13% of the 'Home' PGR community at Leeds were from ethnic minority backgrounds, which was below the UK university average of 18%. This underrepresentation highlighted a critical gap in diversity and inclusion within the academic community.

Despite this, there was clear evidence that students from these backgrounds were eager to pursue PhDs. However, they often encountered barriers such as concerns about discrimination, lack of support, and self-doubt about their capabilities. These challenges could deter talented individuals from continuing their academic journeys.

Key factors - The lower proportion of ethnically-minoritised students in postgraduate research (PGR) at the University of Leeds can be attributed to several factors.

Russell Group University Attendance

UK students from ethnic minority backgrounds are less likely to attend Russell Group (RG) universities, which are often seen as a criterion for PGR entry. For instance, in the 2017-2018 academic year, black students made up only 3.8% of entrants to high-tariff institutions compared to 11.4% at low-tariff institutions. At Leeds, applicants from RG universities are 10% more likely to receive a PhD offer than those who have not attended an RG university.

Concerns about Campus Cultures and Belonging

Concerns about isolation and the lack of progress on race equality in institutions deter many students. One student shared, “I have heard so many horror stories and I’m trying to find a department that will support and stand up for me.” Fear and intimidation about meeting supervisors also pose significant barriers. Another student recounted, “I was told the way to do this is to knock on doors and speak to supervisors. I knocked on the door of every supervisor in my institution. They all knocked me back.”

Financial constraints make PhD study high stakes, and uncertainty about the route into doctoral study adds to the challenge. Questions about the feasibility of PhD study alongside part-time work or caring responsibilities, and the absence of relatable figures, contribute to feelings of not belonging. As one student noted, “Diversity is often a bolt-on and is not embedded,” and another added, “There aren’t many Black academics/students in my field. Most I’ve met online are international, but it would be comforting to have a network here.” These factors collectively contribute to a lower percentage of ethnically minoritised students applying to postgraduate study.

Attainment and Awarding Gaps

Significant attainment gaps at both undergraduate and taught postgraduate levels, coupled with awarding gaps, mean that students from Black and Minority Ethnic groups are less likely to achieve the highest grades compared to their white peers, impacting their competitiveness when applying for PhD programmes.

Negative experiences of the curriculum further exacerbate this issue, with concerns about cultural fit often stemming from earlier educational experiences. For example, one student noted, “In my department they’re still using very racist texts to teach core areas,” highlighting the persistence of outdated and insensitive materials. Another student shared, “I had a lecturer who suggested that I brought issues of race into my research. That’s the work that does well with marks in the 70s or above. When I don’t bring this into my work it doesn’t get the grades I want.” These experiences contribute to a lower percentage of ethnically minoritised students applying to postgraduate study, as they question whether the academic culture will be positive and supportive.

Lack of Transparency in Recruitment and Admissions

The recruitment and admissions processes for PGR programmes often lack transparency, creating barriers for students from ethnic minority backgrounds. To ensure all applicants have a fair chance of success, it’s essential to establish clearer and more equitable processes. Many students, for example, are unaware of the best ways to approach potential supervisors, whether through formal emails or networking at academic conferences. Discussing research ideas with potential supervisors before applying is another crucial step that is often overlooked, yet it can significantly impact the success of an application.

Moreover, there's a common misconception that a master's degree is always required for PhD entry. In reality, some programmes accept candidates with relevant undergraduate experience. The terminology surrounding studentships, competition funding, and other financial support options can be confusing and inaccessible, making it difficult for students to navigate their options. Additionally, the timing of application deadlines for scholarships and funding opportunities is crucial, yet often not clearly communicated, leaving many students at a disadvantage.

PhD Offer Gap

One of the biggest hurdles for students from ethnic minority backgrounds is the conversion of applications to offers. Despite having similar qualifications, these students are less likely to receive offers for PhD programmes compared to their white counterparts. This is reflected in the notable PhD offer gap between UK white and BAME candidates. Between 2016 and 2020, 19% of PhD applicants to Leeds were from ethnic minority groups, which is similar to the percentage of ethnic minority students graduating with a first or upper second-class undergraduate degree in the UK. However, only 19% of these applicants received an offer, compared to 34% of white applicants. Additionally, 71% of students from ethnic minority backgrounds who were offered a place accepted it, compared to 77% of white applicants.

[Ragy's story](#)



Ragy Tadrous, a first-generation Egyptian immigrant and PhD candidate at Leeds, provides a compelling example of the potential and passion that ethnically-minoritised students bring to postgraduate research. Growing up in Dublin, Ireland, Ragy pursued a degree in Physiotherapy at Trinity College Dublin and later completed a Research Masters in Sleep Medicine. His enthusiasm for research led him to undertake a PhD at Leeds, focusing on reducing sitting time in older adults.

Ragy's journey was not without its challenges. He grappled with questions about his abilities, fears of being overlooked, and concerns about discrimination. *"Am I good enough to do this? Will I be passed on for somebody else? Will I be taken seriously? Will I be discriminated against?"* he recalls.

However, Ragy's experience at Leeds has been overwhelmingly positive. *"Now that I am doing my PhD, I'm overjoyed. I get to spend my days researching a topic that I am passionate about, and I love the problem-solving nature associated with research,"* he shares.

He enjoys the flexibility and problem-solving aspects of research and values the skills he has gained, such as project management, communication, public speaking, and collaboration. *"I love the flexibility of research degrees and being able to work hours that best fit me,"* Ragy notes. *"I believe that a PhD will really help me in accomplishing my career goals of becoming a lecturer. It has also taught me incredibly valuable and transferable skills."*

Ragy's story underscores the importance of providing support and opportunities for students from diverse backgrounds to thrive in academia. He adds, *"I've thoroughly enjoyed my time so far in Leeds. I love the amount of green spaces that really make me feel like I'm back in Ireland!"*

Increasing Postgraduate Diversity: Enter YCEDE



"It's all about creating a collective voice. By bringing together our best people and pooling resources, we've been able to develop approaches that are evidence-based and collaboratively tested. That's the weight behind YCEDE's impact" - Prof Luke Windsor, Dean of the Doctoral College, University of Leeds.



The Yorkshire Consortium for Equity in Doctoral Education (YCEDE) enhances access to doctoral studies for graduates from Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME) backgrounds. This collaborative initiative includes five universities in Yorkshire and 12 UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) funded Doctoral Training Partnerships and Centres for Doctoral Training. YCEDE operates through four workstreams:

Workstream 1: Widening Opportunities for Equity of Access To, and Participation In, Research

This workstream aims to create more opportunities for ethnically-minoritised students by providing targeted support, such as research internships and ring-fenced scholarships. These initiatives help to level the playing field and make postgraduate research more accessible to all students. Additionally, it offers information and guidance for applicants in the form of webinars and advocacy.

Workstream 2: Changing Institutional Practices and Culture to Reduce Inequality in Offer Rates

This workstream involves redesigning admissions processes to be more inclusive and equitable, as well as addressing unconscious biases that may affect decision-making. By fostering a more inclusive culture, the university aims to ensure that all applicants have a fair chance of success.

Workstream 3: Delivering an Excellent Experience for Ethnically Minoritised PGRs by Making Students Feel Part of the Community

The goal is to develop an institutional environment where these students feel valued and integrated into the wider community. This includes providing mentorship, creating supportive networks, and promoting a sense of belonging.

Workstream 4: Evaluating Effectiveness and Sharing Best Practice with the Higher Education Community

In collaboration with Sheffield Hallam University, this workstream evaluates the effectiveness of the interventions implemented in the other workstreams. By assessing the impact of these initiatives, the university can provide an evidence base to share with the higher education sector and beyond. This helps to ensure that successful strategies can be replicated and scaled up to benefit more students.

What has happened at Leeds?

Leeds' Postgraduate Diversity team – situated within the Educational Engagement department – are at the forefront of driving change for students from ethnic minority backgrounds at postgraduate level. Since 2022, the team have been working across all workstreams to establish initiatives and activities at our university to widen access and improve student success.

Workstream 1: Nurturing the pipeline

Student internships

New and ringfenced opportunities for undergraduate students have been established at the University, typically lasting around six weeks. Interest in research is generated, and students are provided with hands-on experience, potentially motivating them to pursue postgraduate research.

The programme was initiated in 2022 with about five participants meeting YCEDE's criteria. Over the years, participation has increased, with around 12 students in 2023 and about 15 in 2024 from various schools, including both STEM and arts disciplines. Some of these students have progressed to postgraduate studies, and two are now serving as ambassadors, sharing their experiences.

You can read more about their experiences in these case studies:



1 - [*Sophia's story*](#)



2 - [Sumayyah's story](#)

Virtual events

Virtual events are run regularly to address barriers commonly experienced by those marginalized in PGR study, particularly Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic groups. These events began in 2022 and continue to the present day, focusing on topics ranging from 'What is a PhD' to 'Managing relationships on your PhD'.



[A full list of events running in 2024/25 is available on the YCEDE website.](#)

Academics as Advocates

A one-to-one support system, shaped by students who identified the gap, is available for students from ethnic minority backgrounds considering a PhD.

Academic volunteers mentor applicants, helping them find their research focus and complete their applications.

This initiative supports prospective students while allowing advocates to learn from them, fostering a mutually beneficial relationship.



An Advocate's perspective: Dr Eric Hewitt mentors potential postgrads

Dr Eric Hewitt is an Associate Professor in the Faculty of Biological Sciences at Leeds and quickly got involved with YCEDE's Advocacy Scheme. He shares his interest in YCEDE and his reasons for putting himself forward as an Advocate:

"YCEDE is an organisation that promotes diversity and equity in postgraduate research. This is important because, as you move from undergraduate degrees to postgraduate research degrees, there's a drop in the diversity of the student population. To me, this results in losing talented individuals who don't feel that postgraduate research is for them. The Advocacy Scheme is important as it's all about encouraging and supporting applicants from more diverse backgrounds in their applications for postgraduate research, particularly PhDs."

Dr Hewitt is now mentoring his third student as part of the Scheme. Students are matched with suitable Advocates through a standardised process:

"A member of the PG Diversity team at Leeds connects advocates with students who are interested in applying for PhDs. The process is stratified by the students' areas of interest and then, when you see a student whose needs match your expertise, you put your name forward to mentor that student."

Once it's agreed that the proposed partnership is a good match—meaning personalities and expertise align—it's all about supporting the student. This can include reviewing CVs and supporting statements, discussing the PhD application process, and advising on how to actually find PhDs. If they're invited for interviews, you help prepare them for that as well.

The idea is to guide students through each stage of the process, helping them present their capabilities effectively. Some students can be a bit reserved about showcasing their skills, so it's about building their confidence and encouraging them to highlight their strengths. I also emphasise that interviews are a two-way process—the students need to ensure the role or project is the right fit for them and I can help them construct the right questions to this end.”

Dr Hewitt is more than happy to continue his role as Advocate, he says:

“I genuinely enjoy the process. With my role in postgraduate research, I’m very invested in this work. I’ve even done similar mentoring outside of YCEDE for my personal tutees and others, so it’s something I’m happy to do.

It’s also not too time-intensive—probably four or five meetings per student, along with email discussions.”

Workstream 2: Progressing contextual admissions

Postgraduate Contextual Admissions Toolkit

Leeds has been proactive in widening access to postgraduate research through contextual admissions. Initially, we planned to pilot a review of contextual admissions with the School of History and the School of Physics. The aim was to examine their admissions processes and explore interventions inspired by a study school project in the US. However, these Schools faced challenges mainly due to the lack of a standardised admissions process for postgraduate students. Consequently, we shifted focus to other ideas to support contextual admissions.

One significant outcome of this shift was the development of a toolkit full of guidance to support contextual admissions for postgraduate research. This toolkit provides guidance that Faculties and Schools can embed in their own contexts with the support of the Postgraduate Diversity team. Faculties or schools can independently implement the guidance or seek support from the PG Diversity team, offering flexibility in how they approach contextual admissions.

Additionally, Leeds has supported several bids to UKRI (UK Research and Innovation) competitions for doctoral training funding. These competitions now require an Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) statement or strategy. Leeds has worked with academics to incorporate contextual admissions into their EDI strategies, encouraging progress in a

supportive manner. This approach allows us to promote diversity and inclusion in postgraduate research admissions, providing both structured support and flexibility for Faculties and Schools.

Leeds Opportunities Scholarships

At Leeds, we are actively working to change institutional practices and culture to reduce inequality in offer rates through the Leeds Opportunities Scholarships. These scholarships are specifically ring-fenced for doctoral applicants from minoritised ethnic groups and are a distinct part of our efforts to promote diversity and inclusion since their inception four years ago.

Initially, the uptake of these scholarships was slow due to limited awareness. However, over time, student applications have increased significantly, and the latest round has seen a promising number of enquiries.

In addition to the central Leeds Opportunities Scholarships, we have been collaborating with various schools to create their own ring-fenced awards. For instance, there are specific scholarships in the School of Music, the School of Media and Communications, and a faculty-level award in the Social Sciences. These awards are separate from the central scholarships but align with the same goal of widening access.



3 - Liam Carson, Postgraduate Diversity Officer at Leeds

Collaboration across Campus: Applying the PG Contextual Admissions Toolkit

Liam Carson, Postgraduate Diversity Officer at Leeds, explains how the team have been working with Schools at Leeds to embed new approaches:

“Our approach to these initiatives has been a mix of proactive outreach and responsive support. For the faculty-level scholarship in Social Sciences, we approached them to update

their processes, while the Schools of Music and Media and Communications reached out to us for assistance. To facilitate these efforts, we have also developed detailed guidance available on our SharePoint site, enabling schools to start the process independently and seek support as needed."

Workstream 3: Enhancing the on-course PGR experience

Postgraduate Student Network

Leeds has made significant contributions to the YCEDE (Yorkshire Consortium for Equity in Doctoral Education) student network, which aims to support students from ethnic minority backgrounds in achieving success.

This expanded network includes institutions such as Sheffield, Sheffield Hallam, Bradford, and York, and provides a significant platform for support and mentoring.

The network has been active in organising both virtual and in-person events for postgraduate students, as well as mentoring sessions. One of the key initiatives has been the "circle mentoring" sessions, where 2-3 experts discuss career opportunities and potential with postgraduate researchers in small, focused groups: a format which allows for personalised and impactful mentoring.

Feedback from students indicates that the expanded scope of the network has been beneficial. The larger platform has enhanced the support and mentoring available, helping students from ethnic minority backgrounds to succeed in their academic and professional endeavours.

Workstream 4: Checking our effectiveness

Leeds has played a pivotal role in supporting the evaluation of the YCEDE programme, led by Sheffield Hallam University. Our contributions have been multifaceted, focusing on both quantitative and qualitative data collection to enhance the understanding and impact of YCEDE.

One key area of support has been the provision of data to evaluate Workstream 1 activities. Leeds has supplied pre- and post-internship surveys, which are instrumental in measuring how students' understanding of research and its opportunities evolves over time. Additionally, surveys from virtual workshops have been shared to assess their impact on participants.

In addition to quantitative data, Leeds has also facilitated the collection of qualitative data through 'listening rooms'. These sessions involve direct interviews with interns and virtual event attendees, providing richer, more nuanced insights into their experiences and perceptions. This qualitative data complements the survey results, offering a more comprehensive evaluation of YCEDE's impact.

Furthermore, Leeds has contributed applicant data for Workstream 2, which focuses on UK home fee-paying minority ethnic groups. The analysis of this data by Sheffield Hallam has been essential for understanding and addressing the needs of students from ethnically minoritised backgrounds and how best to support their transition into postgraduate research.

This workstream has helped us consider what success looks like in a programme aimed at diversifying PGR study. In particular, we have learned that the outreach activities developed by YCEDE have been effective, as participants have engaged with the activities, found them useful, and applied this knowledge to their PGR applications.

Students have clearly benefited from scholarships and contextual admission measures, as evidenced by the increased diversity among those who have begun, continued, and concluded PGR study.

Overall, we now understand that measuring success requires maintaining contact with YCEDE participants and consistently gathering feedback at different stages, as it can be challenging to keep track of PGR students and determining, above all, what has worked.

Our Impact so Far



In 2022, the University of Leeds faced a significant challenge: increasing the proportion of postgraduate researchers (PGRs) from minoritised ethnic groups. At that time, only 13% of the 'Home' PGR community at Leeds were from ethnic minority backgrounds, below the UK university average of 18%. This underrepresentation highlighted a critical gap in diversity and inclusion within the academic community. Despite clear evidence that students from these backgrounds were eager to pursue PhDs, they often encountered barriers such as concerns about discrimination, lack of support, and self-doubt about their capabilities.

Fast forward to 2024, and the impact of the YCEDE programme is evident. Current Leeds UK BAME PGR recruitment stands at 21.7%, with 4% Black and 10.9% Asian students. This progress demonstrates the effectiveness of targeted outreach activities, scholarships, and contextual admission measures. These initiatives have not only increased diversity among new entrants but have also supported students throughout their academic journeys. By exceeding or nearly meeting institutional recruitment targets, Leeds has made significant strides in redressing the gaps in representation. This journey from 2022 to 2024 showcases the positive impact of YCEDE and underscores the importance of continued efforts to foster an inclusive academic environment.



Widening access

Virtual Events

The virtual events have significantly impacted student attendees, provided valuable insights and boosting their confidence in various aspects of their academic journey. Some examples include:

In the session on 'YCEDE Directly Funded Routes into PGR,' students found the information comprehensive and highly relevant. One attendee remarked, *"Today's session was really comprehensive and useful for me. Many of my concerns and questions were addressed. I am more confident about my path towards a PhD now. Thank you."* Another student appreciated the shared experiences, saying, *"Every detail shared was spot on for me. The shared experiences of the current students stood out to me."*

The session on 'Funding your PhD' received an impressive average rating of 4.75 out of 5 for usefulness. Students found it particularly helpful in demystifying the scholarship application process. One student shared, *"This session also really helped to clear up the scholarship application process. Prior to this session, I was dreading applying for scholarships; however, this has helped to make it a little bit clearer."*

The session titled "What is a PhD really?" was also well-received, with an average rating of 4.29 out of 5. Students valued the diverse panel, with one noting, *"The range of the panel was really helpful. Getting insight from PhD students and supervisors has been quite hard, so being able to receive input in one go was really great."*

The session on 'PGR Research Methodologies' also achieved a good average usefulness rating of 4.88 out of 5. One student commented, *"The presenter really demystified research*

methodology! It was a struggle for me to write a proposal, but attending this session has enlightened me to implement the principles discussed."

Finally, the session on 'Managing Professional Relationships' garnered an average usefulness rating of 4.71 out of 5. Students appreciated the diverse backgrounds of the hosts, with one stating, *"How diverse the backgrounds were of the hosts, including supervisors and students, gave helpful perspectives."*

Advocacy Scheme

The Advocacy Scheme has significantly benefited students preparing for postgraduate research (PGR) programmes. From the feedback collected, 90% of students reported a good match with their academic advocate, indicating effective mentor-student pairings. One student noted, *"He had an interest in my passion, listened to my challenges, and tried his best to help me out."* Another mentioned, *"He has the subject knowledge and already has his PhD; he was able to give me excellent advice."*

In terms of confidence, 80% of students felt more confident about applying for a PhD after participating in the scheme. One student shared, *"My advocate has been quite approachable and provided me with good insights into what PhD supervisors are looking for in an applicant."* The remaining 20% reported no change in confidence, but the scheme did not negatively impact them.

Students appreciated the advocates' personalised support and valuable advice. Even when research directions changed, the feedback on key areas of improvement was useful. One student remarked, *"It has been a brilliant pairing. I've learnt a lot from my advocate about the process of making an application."*

Student Stories

Sophie Lambert

"YCEDE's resources made the PhD process smoother and gave me access to additional opportunities."

Sophia Lambert is now pursuing a PhD at the University of Leeds after completing her undergrad at Leeds Beckett. To prepare for her PhD application, she participated in YCEDE virtual events, completed a research internship, and applied for a Leeds Opportunities Scholarship.

Sophia shares her motivations to pursue PhD study:

"I've always loved university. I thrive in an academic environment, and I knew I wanted to go into academia. For someone wanting to work in arts and humanities, having a PhD is almost essential because it's difficult to get lectureships or other academic positions without one. Beyond that, I love research, so continuing with a Masters and then a PhD just made sense for me."

Sophia's first interaction with YCEDE was during her Masters when she completed a YCEDE-funded research internship with a member of staff in Leeds's School of Law:

"The internship gave me valuable skills and experiences. I had opportunities to present at conferences, like the Student Education Conference and another in Lincoln. These experiences set my application apart. I also gained project management experience and worked with live participants for primary research—something new to me as a historian. I learned about ethics, participant recruitment, and advertising, all of which have been helpful in my PhD."

Whilst applying for her PhD, Sophia attended several of the YCEDE online events:

"The sessions were really useful. They ran sessions on crafting strong applications, preparing for interviews, and finding funding opportunities. Above all, the access to information was great - they introduced me to funding opportunities I wouldn't have known about and websites to explore for further research."

Sophia also applied for and successfully received a Leeds Opportunities Scholarship:

"It's provided incredible opportunities. I've joined the Young Scholars Board and attended a symposium at Cambridge, where I met others from similar backgrounds. These experiences have given me a platform to share my story, build a community, and connect with other students. Doing a PhD can be isolating, especially as a first-generation university student, so finding people like me has been invaluable."

Ola Fagbohun

"Honestly, without YCEDE, I might not have pursued a PhD at all. The programme has provided me with a supportive community, practical resources, and the confidence to move forward."

Ola Fagohun has a rich educational history with qualifications in Nutrition and Dietetics, International Business, and Psychology. During the COVID-19 pandemic, she began exploring health psychology and wellness through CPD courses, independent research, and journal access via academic colleagues. Encouraged by a colleague to pursue a PhD, Ola utilised YCEDE's support to navigate the complex application process for a research degree.

Ola shares her experience of YCEDE's virtual events:

“The webinars were incredibly helpful, especially those on funding and finding supervisors. One webinar, in particular, changed my perspective on funding. A participant shared that she started her research without funding and managed to secure it during her programme. That insight alleviated a lot of my anxiety.

The networking events were also invaluable. I met researchers at various stages of their PhD journeys and formed meaningful connections. These interactions not only broadened my understanding of the research landscape but also provided a sense of community. I even reached out to some of the presenters afterward to discuss their experiences further, which was enlightening.”

Ola also completed an internship with YCEDE and took part in the Advocacy programme, both of which she found useful in preparation for her PhD application:

“During the internship, I focused on writing a 1,500-word mini literature review. My mentor guided me through the entire process, providing feedback and helping me refine my work. I started by reading articles and creating an annotated bibliography, which then formed the foundation for the literature review. By the end, I had a solid piece of writing and the confidence to include it in my research proposal. The experience was transformative. It broke down what seemed like a daunting task into manageable steps, which really helped me.”

“The advocacy programme matched me with an academic mentor, who I treated almost like a semi-supervisor. This relationship allowed us to explore how we’d work together and assess our compatibility. My mentor’s feedback and guidance introduced me to new theories and methodologies, which enriched my proposal. For example, he suggested exploring decolonising methodologies, which was a concept I hadn’t encountered before. This opened up new avenues for my research and helped me articulate my ideas more effectively.

They were also incredibly supportive during moments of doubt or overwhelm, which was invaluable. For instance, when I was struggling emotionally and practically to meet deadlines, my mentor encouraged me to take a step back and reassess my priorities. That kind of understanding made a huge difference.”

“YCEDE is more than an advocacy programme —it’s a supportive guide. The process of applying for a research degree can be daunting, and YCEDE helps demystify it. It walks you through finding the right supervisor, preparing a proposal, and identifying funding options. It’s also a fantastic networking platform that connects aspiring researchers with academics and peers who are at different stages of their journeys.

For me, it was like having someone hold my hand while navigating what can sometimes feel like a murky process. The programme gave me access to resources and a network of supportive individuals who understood the challenges of entering academia as a non-traditional student.”

How can you help?



“We believe in the longevity of this work. YCEDE is coming to an end, but we’ve been deliberate about ensuring its impact continues... The biggest impact is the creation of the PGR Diversity Team. Through YCEDE, we employed experts who now provide professional advice on everything from undergraduate access to PGR success. They’ve become an integral part of the university, and colleagues actively seek their input. That’s a huge shift.

The team is a centralised, dedicated resource that’s streamlined how we approach widening participation and best practices. The team’s expertise has been critical, and it’s a legacy I hope continues long into the future.”

- Prof Luke Windsor, Dean of the Leeds Doctoral College.

The funding for YCEDE will be coming to an end in 2026. However, at Leeds, the Postgraduate Diversity team is here to stay as a permanent part of the university structure.

There are several ways you can get involved with increasing postgraduate diversity here at the University of Leeds and we need your help to create cross-institutional impact.

First, work with the [PGR Diversity team](#) to consider what diversity looks like in your faculty or organisational context, identify the gaps, and determine what is required to address them. Then, collaborate with the team to develop a roadmap, utilising the following opportunities:

- Run a [bespoke outreach session](#) – We can work with you to co-develop and deliver progression to postgraduate research support for your Faculty, School or Programme.
- Provide a [research internship](#) – We can support academic staff who are interested in offering research internship opportunities as a way to promote progression to postgraduate research among underrepresented and minoritised groups.
- Provide 1:1 mentoring – Become a [YCEDE Advocate](#) and be matched with a student who you are best-placed to offer support to.
- Offer scholarship and funding support - We can work with you to develop ring-fenced [scholarships and funding](#).and support you with [UKRI doctoral training grant applications](#)
- Edit your interviews – Our [guidance](#) can help you embed equity, diversity and inclusion in the interview and selection process for doctoral recruitment.
- Share with your students - The PGR Diversity Team organises regular socials and networking events throughout the course of each academic year to help connect underrepresented and minoritised doctoral students across Schools, Faculties and disciplines at the University of Leeds. For dates of specific events, check out our [Events calendar](#).

A multi-faceted approach is essential for creating meaningful impact. Focusing solely on scholarships, for example, has limited effect. Your involvement is crucial in creating a more inclusive and diverse postgraduate research community at Leeds.

Information about all our activities, as well as resources and guidance, are available on the [PG Diversity SharePoint](#).

We are more than happy to support any PGR Diversity work. If you have a specific question or would just like a chat, please don't hesitate to email us at pgrdiversity@leeds.ac.uk.



4 - George Gisborne, PGR Diversity (Access)



5 - Liam Carson, PGR Diversity (Access)



6 - Sherry Iqbal, PGR Officer