

BACKGROUND

The under-representation of Black academics, particularly at senior levels, remains a pressing challenge in UK higher education. In response, universities are increasingly establishing positive action initiatives to address inequalities in research cultures. However, while growing attention has been paid to the outcomes of such interventions, far less is known about how they are conceived, established and implemented during their formative stages.

The Warwick PATHWAY Programme is a university-wide positive action initiative designed to support aspiring Black researchers from undergraduate research through to postdoctoral development. In 2025, researchers from the Doctoral Education and Academia Research Centre (DEAR) at the University of Warwick undertook an evaluation of the programme.



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The evaluation explored the programme's conception, design, governance and implementation while generating evidence to support organisational learning.

Project objectives

- To explore how the Warwick PATHWAY programme was conceived, how its aims were developed (including stakeholder engagement), and how the scheme was designed and established.
- To identify and explore the implementation of PATHWAY programme components, examining their cohesiveness, and the extent to which they form an effective 'pathway' for Black researchers.
- To refine an appropriate methodology of collaborative participatory evaluation that may be of use for similar EDI initiatives.

Research questions

- How was the Warwick PATHWAY programme conceived? How were its aims developed (including stakeholder engagement)? How was the scheme designed and established?
- How was the Warwick PATHWAY programme implemented? How effective is the implementation? Does the programme form an effective 'pathway' for Black researchers?

What did the research involve?

- **Literature review** of existing scholarship and grey literature on the experiences of Black researchers and their career trajectories, as well as positive action initiatives that aim to address inequalities in higher education.
- **Semi-structured interviews** with programme participants (e.g. undergraduate students, PGRs, ECRs), and mentors/supervisors who work with programme participants.
- **Key informant interviews, solicited diaries, and developmental workshops** with key stakeholders involved in the conceptualisation or ongoing management of the PATHWAY programme.



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CONCLUSIONS

The evaluation findings demonstrate that **establishing institution-wide positive action programmes is a complex organisational process rather than a straightforward 'launch'.**

While senior leadership and institutional commitment enabled the programme's creation, its development was shaped by a **reliance on existing initiatives and temporary structures**, evolving governance arrangements, and **differing stakeholder understandings of the programme's purpose** and intended beneficiaries.

The evaluation also highlights the **importance of embedding theories of change, evaluation planning and stable institutional governance from the outset** if positive action programmes are to become sustainable components of research culture rather than time-limited initiatives.

NEXT STEPS

We are developing several scholarly publications on the findings of the project, and we plan to evolve PATHWAY in line with these findings by:

- Establishing sustainable programme governance
- Clarifying scope and intended beneficiaries
- Developing Theory of Change
- Increasing internal stakeholder engagement
- Exchanging best practice with other institutions

REFERENCES

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Photos by PATHWAY participants Danielle Baptiste and Usoro Akpan

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