

## **Life after University; what does the landscape look like for Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) graduates and what part does co-operative, work integrated learning play?**

### **Abstract**

Recent activities have raised awareness within the UK university sector of the attainment gap that exists between BME and non-BME students; but what about life after university? Achieving a good degree (i.e. First class honours  $\geq 70\%$  or Upper second class honours 60-69%) is a crucial influence on graduate success. BME graduates are less likely to possess a good degree leaving university, and more than three times as likely to be unemployed after graduation as compared to White UK and Irish students (The Bow Group, 2012). Drawing on this and other research; we will take a look at the available data and present some of the challenges faced by BME graduates. We then highlight some actions that we have taken to support the success of our BME students, primarily through the use of placements and internships and mentoring, three common forms of Co-operative and Work Integrated Education (CWIE) at our University. The 2008 data from the UK Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services (AGCAS) is stark:

- 56.2% of all white respondents secured full-time paid employment within six months, compared to **48.2%** of all BME respondents and 55% of all graduates.
- **10.1%** of all BME respondents were believed to be unemployed, compared to 5.7% of white respondents and 6.4% of graduates overall.
- Of those in work, **47.8% of Black / Black British graduates** are in non-graduate occupations, compared to 37.4% of white graduates and 37.4% of graduates overall.

There will be an opportunity to share data about what prompted our local interest in this agenda, and discussion about the positive steps that we have taken to help our BME students have a successful life after graduation.

## Introduction

The proportion of BME students studying within Higher Education (HE) in the United Kingdom (UK) has increased from 14.9% in 2003/04 to 17.8% in 2008/09 (Brill, 2010). The proportion of BME students who achieve a good degree (i.e. First class honours  $\geq 70\%$  or Upper second class honours 60-69%) is lower (49.2%) than the proportion of White students attaining good degrees (67.2%); this is known as the “attainment gap”, and it stands at an alarming 18% (Brill, 2010).

Broecke and Nicholls’ (2007) showed that even after controlling for the main factors one might expect to impact attainment<sup>1</sup> there remains a statistically significant gap in attainment between white and BME students. This attainment gap is prevalent across the Higher Education sector in the UK and has been the subject of several recent large scale projects supported by the Higher Education Academy and the Equality Challenge Unit; Summit Programme *Improving the Degree Attainment of Black and Minority Ethnic Students* (Berry and Loke, 2011) and the *Inclusive Cultures in Higher Education* (Wray, 2013).

Within our University, the performance of BME students reflects the national trend and we are determined to reduce this gap. The difference in degree attainment has been evident over a number of years and has been reported by the Student Performance and Monitoring Group. In April 2012, the University held a consultation process to identify a series of equality objectives in order to meet the Public Sector Equality Duty<sup>2</sup> which requires publicly funded universities to eliminate discrimination, harassment and victimisation and any other conduct that is prohibited by or under the Equality Act 2010; to advance equality of opportunity between people who share a relevant

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<sup>1</sup> such as prior entry qualifications, type of prior institution, parental attributes and language

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.herts.ac.uk/about-us/equality-and-diversity/how-we-advance-equality-of-opportunity/public-sector-equality-duty>

protected characteristic<sup>3</sup> and people who do not share it; and to foster good relations between people who share a relevant protected characteristic and those who do not share it. One of our agreed equality objectives is to work towards reducing the differential in degree attainment between White and BME students by 10 percentage points by 2014/15. Degree attainment is vital to student success in employment after graduation. Annual surveys by the *Association of Graduate Recruiters* show that of the 200 high profile, multinational companies which account for a significant proportion of private sector graduate recruitment in the UK, 76% require graduates to have a good degree before they even consider their application (Vasagar, 2012). Alongside activities to address the need to reduce the attainment gap there is a need for us to examine the impact of that attainment on graduate prospects and what positive interventions might be possible, and these interventions are the focus of this paper.

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<sup>3</sup> The following characteristics are protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010; age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, sexual orientation.

## Methodology - Exploring the Data

We know that nationally BME graduates are less likely to possess a good <sup>4</sup>degree leaving university, and more than three times as likely to be unemployed six months after graduation as compared to White UK and Irish students (The Bow Group, 2012). Figure 1 below shows the national data for students of UK origin graduating in 2010/11, and the proportions achieving each degree classification within ethnicity groups. Students are given the opportunity to self-declare their ethnic group on enrolment at the University against a standard set of definitions as used by the UK Office for National Statistics.

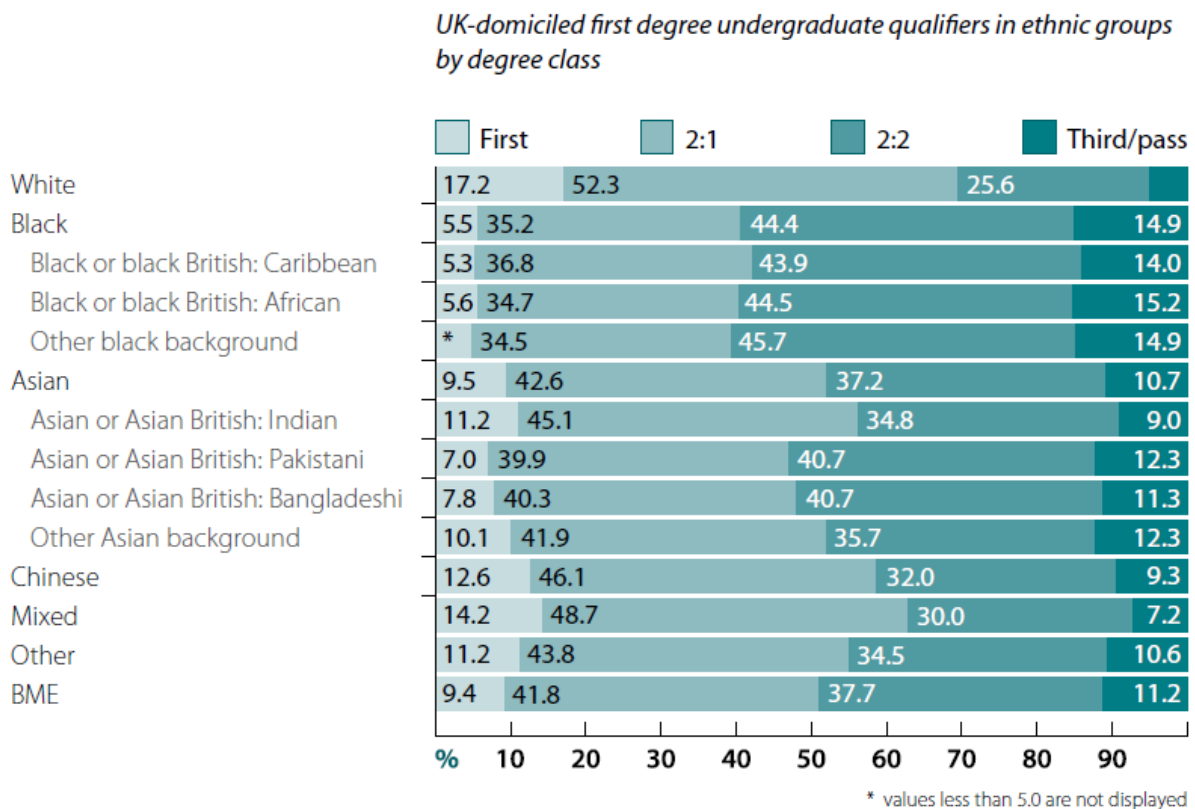


Figure 1: *Equality Challenge Unit, Equality in HE Statistical Report 2012*

As this data shows us; 69.5% of White graduates get a good degree, whereas only 51.2% of BME graduates do. This is concerning in itself as work done by Brill (2010), Berry and Loke (2011) and Morgan (2013) all shows that this gap exists even when you control for attainment levels and qualification type on entry; BME students entering HE with the same qualifications and grades as their White counterparts are more likely to leave with lower classifications.

<sup>4</sup> Overall classification of First class honours  $\geq 70\%$  or Upper second class honours 60-69%

All UK universities are required to survey their students six months after graduation, record their status in terms of employment and/or further study and to return this data to the central Higher Education Statistics Agency for national reporting; this is known as the Destination of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) Survey<sup>5</sup>. The UK Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services (AGCAS) report from 2008 is stark:

- 56.2% of all white respondents secured full-time paid employment within six months, compared to 48.2% of all BME respondents and 55% of all graduates.
- 10.1% of all BME respondents were believed to be unemployed, compared to 5.7% of white respondents and 6.4% of graduates overall.
- Of those in work, 47.8% of Black / Black British graduates are in non-graduate occupations, compared to 37.4% of white graduates and 37.4% of graduates overall. (AGCAS, 2008)

The situation has not improved in the intervening years; the most recent data we have at a national level (2010/11 graduating cohort, in figures 2 and 3 below) shows that outcomes for graduates still vary considerably by race:

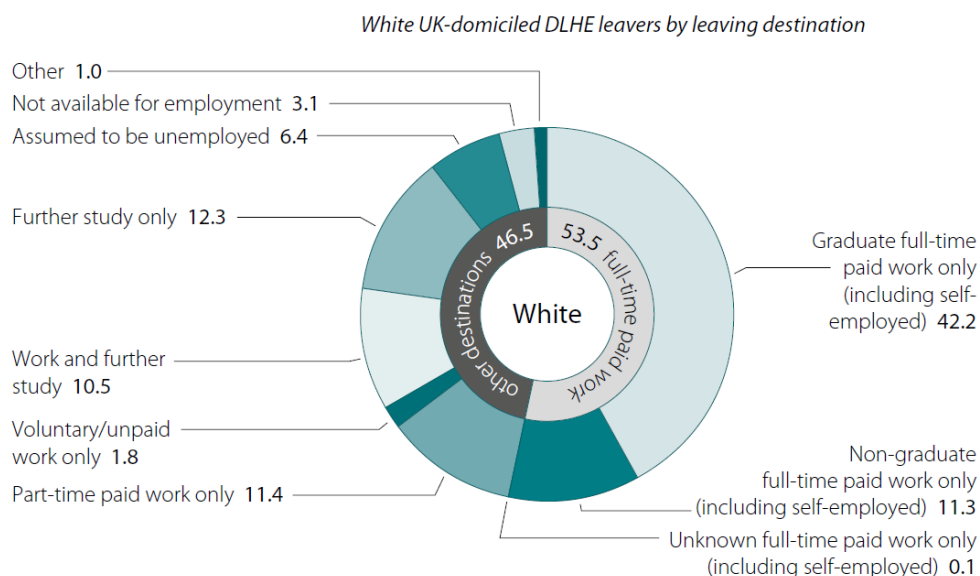


Figure 2: White UK Domiciled DLHE leavers by leaving destination  
*Equality Challenge Unit, Equality in HE Statistical Report 2012*

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.hesa.ac.uk/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=1899&Itemid=239](http://www.hesa.ac.uk/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1899&Itemid=239)

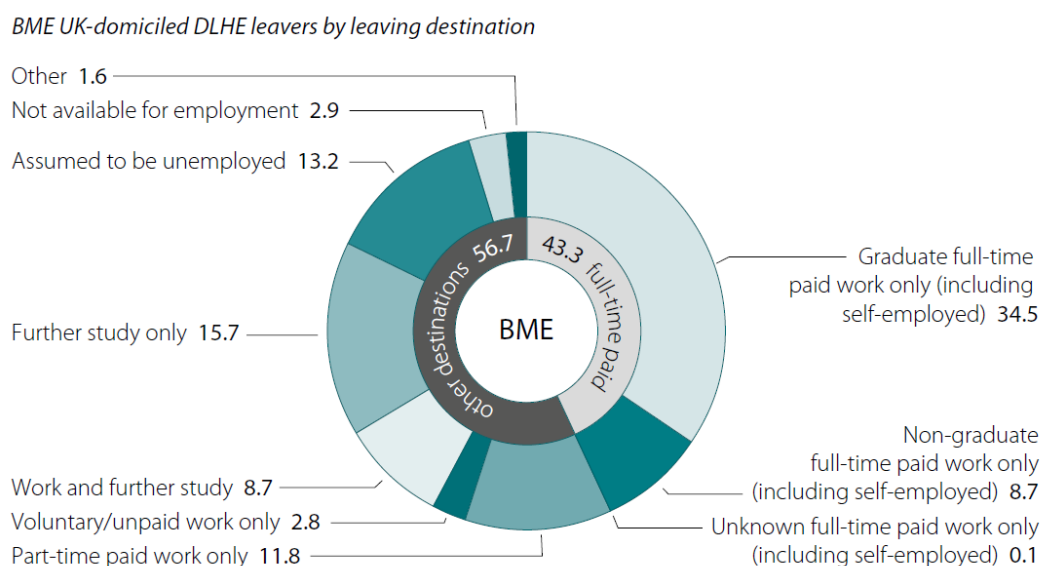


Figure 3: BME UK Domiciled DLHE leavers by leaving destination  
*Equality Challenge Unit, Equality in HE Statistical Report 2012*

The key points from the two figures above that are worthy of note are; the difference in the proportion of those in graduate level, full time paid work (including self-employment) that is, 42.2% of White graduates compared to 34.5% of BME graduates, and the proportion of those assumed to be unemployed 6.4% of White graduates compared to 13.2% of BME graduates. So we see a graduate employment gap, in addition to the attainment gap, when comparing the outcomes for graduates by ethnic group.

Over the past eight years, the proportion of UK-domiciled BME students increased from 14.9% to 18.4% (2003/04 – 2010/11); the largest increase has been in the proportion of UK-domiciled black students, which has risen from 4.4% to 5.9% and the proportion of UK-domiciled mixed race students has doubled from 1.4% to 2.8% over the same period. Alongside this, 53% of white UK-domiciled leavers were in full time paid work, including self-employment, compared with 43.3% of BME leavers. Black or Black British African leavers were least likely to be in full time paid work (38.4%) and most likely to be assumed to be unemployed (16.3%) (ECU, 2012).

Working on the basis of nationally available headline data, we wanted to explore the data available at a local level to see if the trend in the attainment gap was matched by the trend in graduate employment. The UK student population is overwhelming White, although the situation changes when you consider the student body in London, as figure 4 shows:

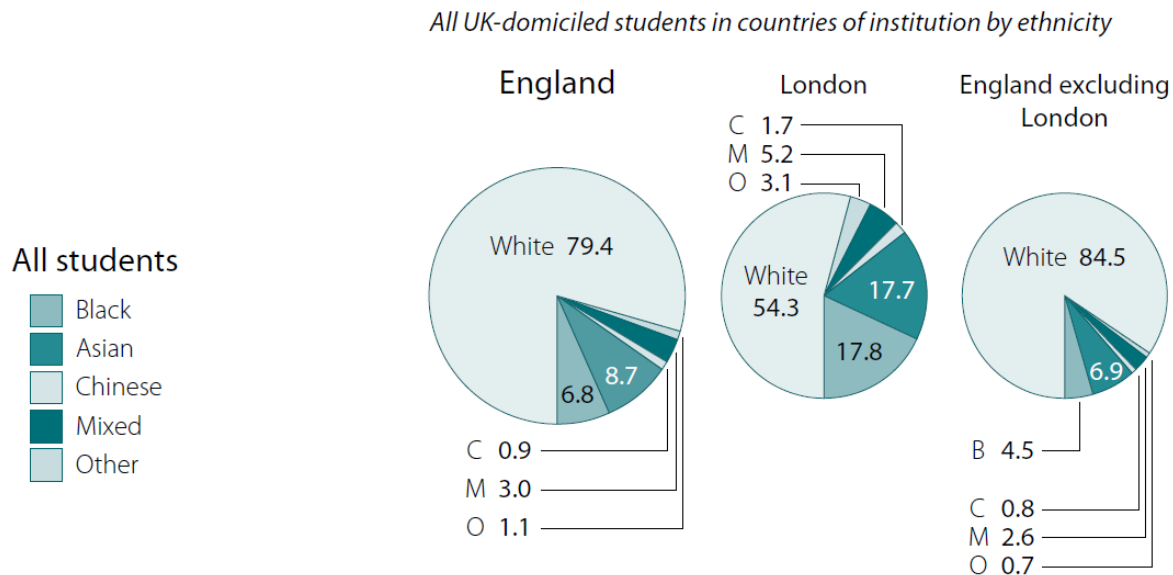


Figure 4: All UK-domiciled student in countries of institution by ethnicity  
*Equality Challenge Unit, Equality in HE Statistical Report 2012*

Whilst our University is not in London it is geographically close, and many of the student body are drawn from the London population. At our University, in the same cohort; 47% of students are White, 16.3% are Black, 22.1% are Asian, 5.5% are Chinese, 3.5% are Mixed and 5.6% are Other.

So we know the following to be more prevalent, nationally, amongst BME graduates:

- Lack of full time employment
- Under employment
- Unemployment

This is assuming they get to graduation as, according to Morgan (2013), Black students are twice as likely (13%) as White students not to complete their studies (6.2%). BME students account for over half of our student population – therefore this is a significant issue for our students and graduates, and therefore is a significant challenge for all of us working in the University. It is not just about individual student outcomes, the difference in outcomes for White and BME students impact on

half the criteria commonly used for university league tables; student satisfaction, good honours degrees, completion rates and graduate prospects.

Students are not ignorant of these national trends; research by the National Union of Students (2011) showed that students felt that even if they were able to achieve a good degree or qualification, existing discrimination within the workplace meant that their educational background would have little impact on their career and job prospects, greatly affecting their motivation to succeed, as these quotes show:

*“I think most students from ethnic communities believe no matter how well [they] do there is a ceiling on their career progression compared to whites”. Black British student*  
*“The job prospects for minority people are limited as compared to their white counterparts. Therefore, they feel less encouraged because they know they will be struggling for jobs even when they get qualified”. Black African student*

So, do we see these trends replicated at a local level? This was a more complex question than first anticipated; getting to the data and interrogating it to analyse for outcomes by race was complicated and a recent change in record management system made a trend analysis impossible. However, it was possible to prepare a comparison of data from our University with the averages from a set of Universities identified as our competitor set, with the averages from the set of Universities in our mission group (University Alliance) and finally with the whole UK University sector. Therefore, the approach taken was to record the baseline data on graduate unemployment in 2013 by ethnicity against the back drop of actions taken to address issues that have been identified at a national level.

### **Potential Issues Identified in the National Data and Literature**

A review of the literature (Byfield 2008, Sewell 2009, NUS 2011) suggests that there are four major hurdles which are particularly faced by BME graduates; social deprivation, low social capital, poor self-esteem and racism. Social deprivation must be tackled to ensure students know about, and make use of, all the academic and pastoral resources. It is important that we look for opportunities



to signpost free resources and activities, with 'no-cost' or 'low-cost' being crucial here, and an emphasis on creating opportunities for paid work experience as opposed to voluntary internships. Low social capital is challenging to address, but the University must adopt the role of facilitator and look for opportunities to introduce students to the networks they need for entering work, like encouraging well-prepared attendance at careers events, empowering students to build interpersonal and social skills wherever possible.

Student with poor self-esteem is another complex challenge for educators in higher education; and to positively impact on self-esteem it requires an approach designed to build student confidence throughout their University experience, with a particular focus on the language academics use with their feedback, in general and on assessment, with clear signposting for improvement. Tackling racism within the University environment is a topic worthy of more attention than we can give it here, but it worth highlighting to need to make classrooms inclusive places, and the ensure that the learning, teaching and assessment environment is fair, safe and without bias.

The same literature also tells us of the important of positive influence factors; the need to engaging families, to link the University with the wider community (cultural and professional) and the influence of membership groups like religious affiliations (Byfield, 2008). There is also the need to provide positive and consistent interventions, role models with whom the students can identify, and mentoring and support, particularly for non-traditional students recruited through widening participation routes who suffer more if support is remote or absent (Sewell, 2009).

Interventions were then designed to minimise the negative factors, and maximise the positive factors.

## **Discussion of Interventions**

The starting point for the careers service was in researching and publicising the placement, internship, mentoring, scholarship schemes and networks that were already in existence with regards to diversity. It was important to combine this with identifying and creating visible role models and increase engagement with the services provided by using the voice of students and their current networks.

Identifying which of the significant number of existing placement, internship, mentoring and scholarship schemes were targeted at specific ethnicities was a challenge because of the range of opportunities available; but it was taken as a chance to catalogue by protected characteristic or diversity issue (e.g. race, sex, disability, social mobility) and by industry sector using employers and professional bodies as our starting point for the research. The schemes were collated as hand-outs and placed at appropriate points in the academic Schools, put on-line and promoted in careers talks. Where there were deadlines, the careers service publicised these one month in advance of the closing date. The research has also enabled us to ensure the targeting of employers engaged with diversity issues to invite them onto campus to meet our students.

The next step was to establish role models for students to inspire them to see all careers as accessible to them irrespective of race. Sector focused question and answer panels are commonly used to raise student awareness of working life in particularly careers, but now care is taken to ensure that the panel is comprised of a diverse range of speakers who represent and reflect our student body. Whilst it has been important to work with the Alumni Office to accept the offers of those enthusiastic alumni who want to get involved with the current students and support them in their career choices, but to ensure that these could be complemented with other speakers from employers and professional bodies who share the protected characteristics of our students.

We have also started to gather case studies of BME students as role models, students who have done an internship or placement, been involved in extra-curricular activities or gone on to get a job in an area not known for diversity. This project was led by one of our own journalism students who is from a BME background and is passionate about the diversity work; for example, she interviewed a BME student who participated in the Pearson Diversity Scheme to create a case study that will hopefully inspire other students to apply when the scheme opens again.

It has been important to work closely with student societies around promoting diversity schemes; for example when the Foreign and Commonwealth Office of HM Government came onto campus hoping to attract candidates from a BME background, it was crucial to promote the event in partnership with the Student Afro-Caribbean Society. Students have been supported to set up a branch of the nationwide Bright Futures Society which has given them access to top graduate employers who might not typically have considered applications from them in open competition. A ‘student buddy’ scheme for placements has also been set up to encourage other students to do a placement year; this also helps students develop their networking skills and industry awareness as they share experiences.

Working with a diverse range of students in the planning and evaluation of all careers activities and offering them the opportunity to act as advisors, enables the careers service to target our services effectively. This year has seen the establishment of a pilot scheme of ‘Careers Links’, students who work with the careers service on an advisory forum and in promoting the service, in return for paid work opportunities. The careers service also employs placement students and graduate interns to ensure that the service is informed by a student viewpoint; in addition to this student bloggers, film crews and writers have been asked to create material to appeal directly to students and who all bring their own audience with them. The students in all these areas are representative of the student

population and therefore include BME students, this helps spread the word about the existing schemes and networks that are already in existence with regards to diversity.

Next steps include working with the Alumni Office to launch an Alumni Careers Network which will be run via LinkedIn and will offer informal careers support to students from all years; it will be an important and very visible channel for our BME student case studies. There is still work to do on increase the amount of work experience and internship provision to enable the meeting of an institutional target of all undergraduate students taking work experience at some point in their studies, but positive steps have been taken in the right direction. There can be no doubt that this work has increased awareness amongst the staff and student body of the attainment gap, the impact on graduate employment and the need to increase the amount of placement, internship, mentoring, scholarship schemes and networks accessible to our BME students. But what does the data tell us? When comparing data on graduate unemployment from our University with the averages from a set of Universities identified as our competitor set, with the averages from the set of Universities in our mission group (University Alliance) and finally with the whole UK University sector, we see a positive outcome, as shown in table 1 below:

	<b>Asian</b>	<b>Black</b>	<b>White</b>	<b>Other</b>
Our University	11	10.3	5.9	10.9
Our competitor set of Universities	15	16.3	5.9	14.1
Our mission group of Universities	13.7	15.6	5.6	11.1
All Higher Education leavers	11.7	13.9	5.3	9.8

Table 1: Percentage of 2011/12 leavers reporting their status as unemployed in the DLHE survey

When looking at the unemployment rate for Asian and Black graduates, we can see that our University is performing better than the national average and considerably better than both our competitor set and our mission group, whilst our performance is less good for White graduates. The national gap between White and Black graduates is 8.6% whereas for our graduates the gap shrinks to 4.4%.

## Conclusion

Despite the attainment gap in degree classification being in line with national trends, our unemployment rates for our Asian and Black graduates is below the national average, and significantly better than those Universities considered as our competitors. This work is in its early stages, and there is much more work to be done in terms of evaluation, monitoring and trend analysis as we move forward. Early outcomes and feedback appear to be positive, and we intend to continue the work in the future.

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