

Equity in Leadership

Programme Evaluation Cohort 1 & 2

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
December 2025



About Research Toolkit



With over 20 years of experience as a trusted vendor for the University of Leeds, Research Toolkit has played a pivotal role in both the development and independent evaluation of numerous university-led programmes. We are proud to be based in the prestigious Nexus Building on the university campus and have been a Nexus member since its inception. Our reputation is built on robust research methodologies and a strong evaluation framework that delivers clear, evidence-based insights. We bring extensive expertise in handling and interpreting large, complex data sets – transforming raw information into compelling narratives through action-oriented, accessible reporting. This storytelling approach not only highlights the outcomes of a project but also offers clear direction for next steps, ensuring our work supports both strategic decision-making and iterative change.



Executive summary

Introduction and context

The White Rose University Consortium Equity in Leadership programme was established to address persistent inequalities in leadership representation across the Universities of Leeds, Sheffield and York. Informed by institutional commitments to equity, diversity and inclusion, and shaped by national frameworks such as REF2029 and the Race Equality Charter, the programme aims to support racially minoritised staff to develop leadership capability, navigate institutional barriers and strengthen their visibility within leadership pipelines. Through a blend of workshops, coaching, mentoring, sponsorship and cross-institutional activity, the programme seeks to build confidence, enhance leadership readiness and contribute to wider cultural change across the consortium.

Evaluation data sources

The evaluation drew on three key sources of evidence: anonymised application materials, programme feedback data (collected and collated by the programme team), and a series of one-to-one interviews with stakeholders and programme participants, with a particular concentration on participants.

Review of application information and survey data

Application materials provided valuable insight into participants' motivations, leadership journeys and development needs. Many applicants articulated ambitions to progress into more senior roles, develop confidence in organisational spaces and influence institutional culture.

General reflections

Participant and stakeholder reflections were overwhelmingly positive. Workshops were described as supportive, inclusive spaces where individuals could share lived experiences, reflect on challenges and explore new approaches to leadership. Coaching and mentoring were valued for providing tailored guidance and space to apply learning directly to everyday practice. Many described the programme as confidence-building, validating and, at times, therapeutic. Networking across institutions was particularly appreciated, though some stakeholders called for more structure and more consistent engagement from senior leaders.

Evidence of tangible outcomes and lasting impact

Promotion and career advancement

Several participants secured promotions, expanded responsibilities or increased institutional visibility during or after the programme. It supported individuals to prepare stronger applications, demonstrate strategic leadership behaviours and actively pursue opportunities.

Confidence and self-advocacy

Participants reported enhanced self-belief and a clearer sense of their leadership identity. Many felt more willing to contribute in senior forums, influence decision-making and advocate for themselves and others.

Leadership growth

Through coaching, reflection and peer support, participants reported feeling better equipped to lead, and several noted that senior colleagues had begun to recognise and endorse their leadership potential.

Networking and mentorship

Structured support from coaches, mentors and sponsors helped broaden visibility and open new opportunities, while cross-institutional peer networks offered fresh perspectives and long-term mutual support beyond the programme itself.

Skill and competency development

Participants reported clear gains in skills, confidence, and readiness for leadership, often linking improved performance and resilience directly to the programme. Some noted that the programme enabled them to manage responsibilities more effectively and pursue new opportunities within and beyond their institutions.

Well-being and personal fulfilment

The programme had a marked positive impact on well-being. Participants felt seen, legitimised and supported, sometimes in contrast to their day-to-day working environments, resulting in increased optimism and resilience.

Building relationships across partner universities

Cross-departmental and cross-institutional connections strengthened participants' professional networks and sense of belonging. New collaborations and invitations to contribute beyond their immediate roles were frequently cited outcomes.

Collaboration and team dynamics

Participants reported that the programme strengthened cross-faculty and cross-institutional collaboration, fostering deeper relationships and modelling inclusive, team-based leadership in practice.

Key challenges and suggestions for improvement

Programme pacing, structure and momentum

Some participants noted that long gaps between sessions reduced momentum and that programme days could feel intense. Suggestions included tighter timekeeping, additional reflective time and exploring short residential components to deepen cohort cohesion.

Networking design and senior leader involvement

Stakeholders recommended more structured networking sessions with clearer purpose and consistent senior leader attendance. Unstructured or lightly attended events were seen as missed opportunities for relationship-building and visibility.

Clarifying roles: sponsorship, mentoring and coaching roles

Confusion between sponsorship, mentoring and coaching was widely reported. Clearer role definitions, improved matching processes and better preparation for senior sponsors were identified as priorities.

Work shadowing and practical exposure

Stakeholders advocated for formal work-shadowing opportunities – observing committees, senior meetings and decision-making processes – to provide practical insight into leadership realities and institutional governance.

Post-programme support

There was a strong call for ongoing communities of practice, alumni networks and extended coaching or sponsorship to avoid a “cliff-edge” effect when the formal programme ends and to sustain developmental gains.

Institutional recognition and visibility

Participants and stakeholders consistently felt that the Equity in Leadership programme lacked the visibility and endorsement given to more established schemes like Aurora, limiting both its institutional status and its wider cultural impact. Many emphasised that stronger promotion, recognition of alumni achievements, and active institutional celebration are essential for the programme to be fully valued and to realise its potential across the White Rose University Consortium partners.



Sponsor availability and seniority constraints

Securing suitable sponsors, particularly for senior academic staff, proved difficult due to the limited pool of senior leaders and competing demands on their time. This led to uneven sponsorship experiences across participants and institutions.

Burden placed on global majority colleagues

Stakeholders highlighted the disproportionate reliance on a small number of global majority leaders to provide mentoring, sponsorship, panel contributions and EDI expertise. This recurrent demand places additional emotional and practical pressure on individuals who are already under-represented in senior roles.

Sector-wide job market instability

Institutional restructures, redundancies and a constrained job market limited immediate opportunities for progression, even where participants felt more ready and confident to move into senior roles.

Recommendations

Structured and purposeful networking

Networking should be more clearly designed, with consistent senior leader involvement and clearer expectations for sponsors, mentors and coaches.

Improved pacing and delivery

Shorter gaps between sessions, optional online touchpoints and a potential short residential would help maintain momentum. Formal work-shadowing opportunities would deepen experiential learning.

Collection and use of promotion data

Adopt a more consistent and transparent approach to collecting and analysing data on promotion, progression, and leadership appointments for global majority staff. Collection of these data will support a more robust assessment of the programme's longer-term contribution to equitable progression.

Mandatory training for senior leaders acting as sponsors

Senior leaders involved in the Equity in Leadership programme should undertake mandatory training prior to engagement with the programme as sponsors. Such preparation would support more consistent, meaningful engagement between sponsor and programme participant.

Sustained post-programme support

To avoid the "cliff-edge" effect, institutions should provide ongoing support through alumni networks, extended coaching and continued cross-institutional engagement, while raising the programme's institutional profile.

Reducing reliance on a small pool of global majority staff

Universities should distribute EDI responsibilities more equitably, reducing the burden on a small pool of global majority staff and supporting more sustainable cultural change.



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