



UNIVERSITY  
OF LEEDS

Impact Report

# I See Myself

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# Background

The I See Myself (ISM) initiative was developed by the Student Success team as a targeted intervention to address disparities in experience, engagement, and outcomes among Black-heritage students at the University of Leeds. Established with the principles of equity, representation, and student voice, ISM seeks to create a university environment where all students feel seen, valued, and supported to succeed. ISM ambassadors, who are Black students at Leeds University, are involved with reviewing and enhancing the initiative to help create a bigger impact.

## Planning and Theory of Change

The aims of the intervention were to deliver targeted events and opportunities that support the personal and academic success of Black-heritage students. The initiative sought to enhance students' confidence and skills development, cultivate a sense of empowerment, and create spaces where Black identities, experiences and culture are acknowledged and celebrated. A key objective was to help students build meaningful peer networks and strengthen their sense of belonging within the university. Further detail can be found in Appendix A.

The attendance of the events is outlined below.

ISM Event Attendance Category	Number of Students
Total students who signed up	39
Students who missed at least one event	20
Black-heritage students who attended $\geq 1$ event	16
Black-heritage students who attended $\geq 2$ events	3
Black-heritage students who attended 3 events	2

## Evaluation Methodology

To assess the impact of the ISM events, I conducted 1:1 interviews with the ISM ambassadors and a focus group of two students who attended 2 or more ISM events. A survey was sent out via email to 20 students who had signed up to ISM events but did not attend at least 1 event, where six students responded. All the feedback obtained was analysed and is included in this report.

# Findings

ISM was shown to centre Black student voices and provide a strong foundation for students to explore leadership on their own terms, while also developing meaningful skills for them to use to influence and shape their environment. ***"It really helped me realise my potential for leadership... seeing the effect I have on others and getting their feedback helped cement that idea."*** Although the initiative had limited engagement, it received positive feedback from participants, who highlighted how it supported their confidence, feelings of belonging and personal development, ***"...sometimes it's really difficult to find a space to belong, and seeing people from the 'I see myself' workshops, made me feel validated... I feel like it's just opened my eyes."***

Black students should have access to a broad range of academic and non-academic support that is tailored to their lived experiences. This includes facilitating identity-affirming spaces that help shatter self-limiting beliefs and develop leadership skills. Representation within the ISM workshops and events allowed students to see themselves in their future careers, understand barriers to progression, and connect with role models who have navigated similar challenges. ***"I was blown away when I met the team from KINSIS because I was like, these are boss black ladies, and I want to be like that."*** Participants described feeling more seen, supported, and connected through both the content and structure of the programme, particularly valuing the open conversations around Black lived experiences. ***"...it is important for students of Black heritage to have a space where they can like understand themselves."***

Several students directly linked their increased motivation to pursue professional and even personal goals, such as publishing creative work or applying for leadership roles, to the impact of the programme. Students also applied the skills and insights gained in practical ways, including understanding workplace culture and accessing relevant support networks. ***"...it helped me get out of my comfort zone and perhaps do more [and] take on opportunities."***

It was clear that communication about Black student support initiatives need to be more effective and consistent. Several students reported that they either discovered the I See Myself events by chance, either through word of mouth or enthusiastic staff and social media. While those who attended found the programme valuable, low levels of awareness of the initiative was identified as a barrier to reaching a wider cohort of students. These insights highlight that without clear and culturally relevant communication, even impactful initiatives risk being under-attended or overlooked by the students they aim to support.

While some long-term structural changes, such as narrowing awarding gaps cannot yet be measured, students overwhelmingly felt more empowered and equipped to navigate university life, indicating progress toward a more culturally responsive institution and embedding lasting change that supports Black students' success in meaningful and authentic ways.

# Recommendations

## Creating Culturally Affirming Spaces

Students reported feeling seen, heard, and validated through workshops and discussions that centred Black identity, experience, and resilience. The presence of relatable Black facilitators and role models allowed for authentic conversations that resonated deeply with participants. This creation of safe spaces and affirmation played a crucial role in boosting students' confidence and engagement.

## Peer Connection and Community Building

Students formed organic support networks through group discussions and often speaking on personal experiences, making the space vulnerable and connective. Following the initiative, WhatsApp groups and LinkedIn connections were made and continued after the formal sessions ended. These relationships created a sense of accountability, mutual encouragement, and community that extended beyond the space of the programme. "And in terms of community... we formed a WhatsApp group and it's been really nice to have a group of black friends. It really has." In environments where Black students can feel isolated or underrepresented, these networks provided essential social connection and support. The experience suggests that Universities should prioritise opportunities for peer connection and community-building within targeted activities to cultivate long-term engagement and belonging.

## Combining Holistic Learning

Sessions explored self-identity, empowerment from their unique experiences and goal setting, alongside more tangible and academic skills such as navigating and demystifying workplace culture. This contextualised approach enabled students to connect leadership development with their own lived realities and aspirations, making the learning feel relevant and empowering.

It also equipped students with the tools to make informed decisions about their next steps, both within and beyond university. **“I would recommend this programme to other students definitely. This programme allows you to connect with other people... but it also gives you this insight into yourself, in terms of what you want to do in life and like, just academically.”**

## **Communication is Key.**

To create the desired impact, clear and culturally relevant communication is essential. Some students shared that they would not have attended the events if it hadn't been clearly communicated that they were specifically for Black-heritage students. This clarity signalled to them that the space would be safe, affirming, and created with their experiences in mind. Students recommended clearer, more targeted promotion through trusted channels such as the Student Union, Black student societies (e.g. ACS), and during busy periods like Welcome Week and Freshers. They also suggested physical presence on campus (e.g. stalls) and improved communication about the benefits of attendance, including community-building and food offers.

The ISM initiative will run again next academic year, incorporating different events and opportunities, such as Black History month events and alumni panel events. To increase the success of ISM next academic year, I will focus on deepening student involvement to help create lasting impact. This includes collaborating more with students from the beginning, ensuring their voices directly shape the content, format, and priorities of the initiative. I'll also work to build stronger collaborations and partnerships with student societies, academic departments and key university services to help amplify ISM's visibility and reach, and to embed ISM more firmly across the institution, so students encounter this support in multiple areas of their university experience.

To increase engagement with ISM, I will prioritise more targeted and relatable communications that speak directly to the experiences and ambitions of Black-heritage students. This includes using student promotion through ISM ambassadors, spotlighting student feedback, and ensuring that opportunities are accessible, relevant, and valuable. Feedback also emphasised the importance of making ISM spaces accessible and inclusive, while maintaining high-impact delivery. In response, some events will be offered in a hybrid format to ensure that commuter students, those with caring responsibilities, and others who may not be able to attend in person can still fully engage with and benefit from the experience. By making the initiative responsive to student needs, I hope to create more consistent and meaningful engagement throughout the year. Ultimately, success will be about continuing to create spaces where Black students feel seen, heard, and empowered.

# Appendix A

## Aims

### **To Cultivate Belonging and Cultural Connection**

ISM seeks to provide culturally affirming spaces where students can connect through shared experiences. Activities are designed to support a sense of belonging by recognising and validating the lived experiences of Black-heritage students, encouraging community-building, and celebrating culture and identity

### **To Strengthen Institutional Support, Student Voice and Partnership**

ISM aims to embed a more coordinated approach to supporting Black-heritage students. By working collaboratively across faculties, student groups to embed student voice, and university services, the initiative seeks to share best practice, align with broader Student Success aims, EDI strategies and wider institutional goals and empower students to step into leadership roles.

### **To Amplify Representation, Opportunities and Engagement**

The initiative aims to increase representation of Black heritage students and through structured events, alumni panels, and collaborative projects, encourages greater engagement with academic, extra-curricular, and professional development opportunities. This includes creating spaces where students can see their identities, cultures, and contributions reflected and celebrated, enabling them to develop skills that align with their ideas of success.

# Appendix B

## **Ambassador Interview Questions (including themes):**

Sense of Belonging (SoB)

# Appendix A

- 1. Has participating in the programme influenced how connected and safe you feel within the university community? How?** *Prompt: For example, did you feel more comfortable in campus spaces and more connected to peers and staff?*
- 2. In what ways did the programme create space for your identity, culture, or lived experiences to be seen and valued?** *Prompt: Were there specific events, discussions, or speakers that reflected your background?*

## Skills and Empowerment

- 3. Did this programme help you feel more prepared for life after university?** *Prompt: This could be in career planning, employability, or leadership.*
- 4. Has the programme shaped your confidence in working towards your academic or personal goals? How?** *Prompt: Did you gain clarity on your goals, take new opportunities, or feel more motivated?*
- 5. Can you share any moments or aspects of the programme that made you feel empowered or inspired?** *Prompt: This could be from a workshop, a speaker's story, a group activity, or a conversation with another student.*
- 6. Did anything in the programme challenge how you see yourself or what you believe you're capable of?** *Prompt: For example, did it make you realise you had leadership skills or that your voice matters in academic spaces?*

## Community Building

- 7. How did the programme support you in connecting with others — whether students, staff, or professionals?** *Prompt: Were there networking sessions, group projects, or informal chats that helped?*
- 8. Do you think you'll continue any of the relationships or networks you formed during the programme? Why or why not?** *Prompt: This could be staying in touch with a peer, attending future events, or joining a society.*

## Overall Feedback

- 9. What part of the programme had the biggest impact on you?** *Prompt: Was there a specific workshop, relationship, or opportunity that shifted your thinking, encouraged you to take action, or helped you feel seen?*

10. From your perspective, what could make the programme even more supportive and meaningful for Black heritage students in the future? *Prompt: Think about format, topics, speakers, timing, or ways to reach more students.*

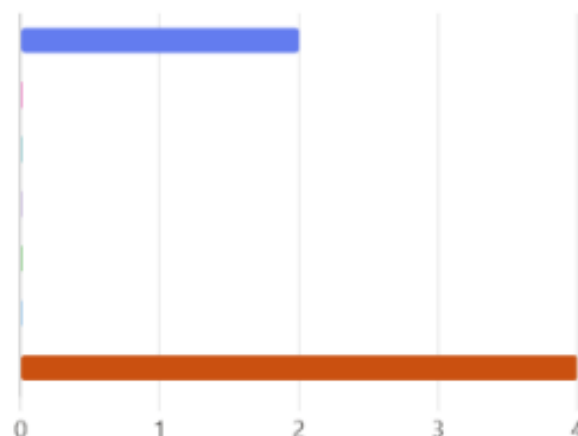
11. Would you recommend this programme to other students? What would you tell them about it? *Prompt: Consider what you gained personally, academically, or socially. What would you highlight as the biggest benefit of taking part?*

## Survey Results:

### 1. What stopped you from attending the event you signed up for?

(Select all that apply)

● Timing didn't work for me	2
● Location wasn't accessible	0
● I forgot	0
● I wasn't sure what to expect	0
● I didn't feel confident attending alone	0
● The format didn't suit me (e.g. in-person vs online)	0
● Other	4



### 2. What type of events or topics would you be more likely to attend in future?(Select all that apply)

● Informal meet-ups/networking and social spaces	1
● Career and employability-focused sessions	4
● Panel talks from inspiring speakers with lived experience	6
● Networking with professionals or alumni	3
● Wellbeing and mental health support	3
● Creative or expressive sessions (e.g. art, writing, music)	4
● Academic and study skills support	1
● Other	0

