

**89%**OF THE  
GAMING INDUSTRY  
IN THE UNITED KINGDOM  
IS WHITE**£500,000**OVER 4 ACADEMIC YEARS  
PLEGGED BY  
SONY INTERACTIVE  
ENTERTAINMENT**264**STUDENTS WILL BENEFIT  
FROM SONY INTERACTIVE  
ENTERTAINMENT'S SUPPORT  
FROM 2021-25

# CLOSING THE GAP IN GAMING AND TECH

**Sony Interactive Entertainment (SIE) and the University of Westminster are working in partnership to create greater diversity within the gaming, tech and entertainment industries.**

I've had students joining with A Levels in Psychology, Religion and Geography," says Markos Mentzelopoulos, Senior Lecturer in Computer Science and Engineering at Westminster. "None of these subjects have anything to do with computing. All of them, they had a passion for games. And that's the most important part for me – the passion."

Markos has been running the Saturday Skills Club, where 16 to 18-year-olds work to produce a publishable game demo, for some time. This course has always been an effective way to introduce students from diverse backgrounds to the world of gaming and computer programming. It is now a central part of Westminster's new partnership with Sony Interactive Entertainment (SIE).

SIE's PlayStation Career Pathways Program aims to bring more Black students and students of colour into tech, entertainment and gaming. Students at the Skills Club can now present their prototype games directly to SIE professionals.

"The Saturday Skills Club provides an amazing opportunity for aspiring pre-university game devs, which is exactly

what the PlayStation Career Pathways Program is about," says Asia Larkin, DE&I Portfolio & Project Specialist at SIE.

At the next stage in these young students' career paths, SIE and Westminster are offering the Level-Playing Field Scholarships. These scholarships are open to all students of colour who are UK-based, have a financial need and are studying computer science and engineering courses at Westminster. (Students do not have to have attended the Skills Club).

"This collaboration between the University of Westminster and SIE is going to directly support students of colour," Asia says. "Especially in the form of financial support, which is often the biggest barrier for young people of colour, so they can focus on their studies."

These scholarships can transform students' university experiences and future prospects.

"It meant a lot to me, actually," says Favour Ekengwu, a BSc Business Information Systems student and Scholarship recipient. "When I got it, I was actually at work. I literally screamed!"

Favour has worked since she was 16. During this period, she became estranged from her family and had a period of homelessness. In her first year at Westminster, she was fighting a legal battle for guardianship of her two younger brothers, who now both live with her in London.

"The first year was really hard actually, because the student finance wasn't enough for me," she says.

Favour was often forced to miss classes simply to go to work and pay for her studies. Even with the Scholarship she still struggles, but it has allowed her to take a break from work, to concentrate on her course and take care of her brothers. She has seen her marks going up as a result, she says.

"I was over the moon. I was sort of jumping up and down," says Abdul Ibrahim, an MSc Cyber Security and Forensics student, who was awarded the postgraduate Level-Playing Field Scholarship. "I think it relieves a lot of stress."

Before he got the scholarship, Abdul was weighing up postgraduate loan repayments against graduate salaries and wondering whether he could afford to do a Masters at all. Now, not only is

## “ WE COULDN'T BE PROUDER TO WORK ALONGSIDE THE UNIVERSITY OF WESTMINSTER TO ACHIEVE THIS SHARED MISSION

he free from this financial pressure, he is also working fewer hours, allowing him to focus more on his course. He has also managed to secure a job for September – something he says may not have been possible, without the time the scholarship has given him back.

“I have seen both sides,” he says. “Because I was applying for internships when I was in my undergrad, I was working a lot more hours and I wasn't able to fully focus on getting an internship. I'd be up until 1 or 2am to do an assessment for these internship opportunities and by doing that you're feeling tired and you're not feeling 100 per cent focused.”

In the end, Abdul was unable to secure an internship during his undergraduate degree – something which was frustrating at the time. And it is sometimes hidden pressures like this which can hold some students back, regardless of their ability. This, amid a whole mesh of other issues, means people from certain backgrounds and ethnic groups remain worryingly

underrepresented in certain industries.

“As beautiful as the gaming industry is, when it comes to diversity, there is a lot of work to be done,” Asia says.

In Asia's view, 2020 was a turning point. “The world witnessed the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and Ahmaud Arbery. What would have previously been rationalised as general bias, was highlighted truthfully as structural and institutional racism and social injustice in our society. In this moment, SIE and the wider Sony Group chose to take action. Sony Group launched a \$100m Global Social Justice Fund, and SIE began establishing strategic partnerships to help more people of colour break into tech and gaming. To achieve this, a central priority has been improving access to education for Black talent, at an early stage,” Asia says.

It was no accident SIE chose to partner with Westminster to do this.

“We couldn't be prouder to work alongside the University of Westminster to achieve this shared mission,” Asia says.

Westminster's mission and values are “strongly aligned with SIE's commitment to creating meaningful opportunities for talent from underrepresented communities,” Asia explains.

As well as being a moral imperative, Asia is quick to point out diversity's potential as an energising force for gaming, and the content it produces.

“A team from diverse backgrounds will allow for different thoughts which means that the diversity and authenticity of stories and characters in the games that are being developed will increase,” Asia says. “This is an exciting opportunity for the gaming industry, if you ask me.”

But gaming is more than just gaming, for the teenagers attending Saturday Skills Club.

Over a period of 10 weeks, participants learn, not just technical, but also entrepreneurial and communication skills. They work as a team with people they've just met and have the opportunity to network with established industry professionals. Creating a game demo is also an excellent introduction to broader computer programming, Markos says. It is therefore a great introduction to a range of tech career options, which it is often harder for young Black Britons to break into.

“I think the big challenges come from your childhood,” says Abdul. “At younger ages, you haven't been given a lot of the same opportunities. In my local area, for example, my high school didn't prioritise tech and the modernisation of technology. We had ITC classes, but nothing for people who wanted to go further.”

After going to university, Abdul found other students had had these opportunities at school, and found himself playing catch up, as a result.

To some extent, Favour is currently having a similar experience. She was focused on business when she first discovered IT at college.

“I fell in love with it and just got intrigued by it,” she says.

Studying IT at degree level has only confirmed Favour's passion for the subject and she plans to move away from business to study pure computer science. Like Abdul before her, she



The Saturday Skills Club introduces students from diverse backgrounds to the world of gaming

knows she has an uphill climb, however. Her coding grades are lower than her overall average, she says, and she can see how much easier more experienced classmates find coding. None of this is going to stop her, however.

"I'm a hard worker, so I know I can make up for it and be on their level in no time."

Are they all in a foundation role?"

"Companies need to stand up actually," she adds.

This is a viewpoint Asia concurs with.

"Recent data from the 2022 census conducted by Ukie found that the ethnic makeup of the gaming industry in the UK remains the same as in 2020 – 89 per cent White," Asia says. "With

student body – and its tech courses are no exception.

"We have 40 to 45 per cent BAME students," Markos says. "That's quite a big number."

The problem, he says, lies not in admissions, but in course completion rates. And this, once again, comes back to many BAME students not having the same opportunities to gain the right skills earlier on.

"The degrees are very technical," he says. "A lot of students struggle – especially in the second year."

Markos says maths teaching is a serious problem across UK schools. He believes this issue is only exacerbated for students from more deprived areas.

He also feels many students – particularly those from BAME backgrounds – are not getting the right advice about what modules to take in A Level and BTEC courses. From both a university's and a company's perspective, Markos says, the best way to tackle this problem head-on is to engage in more initiatives like the Skills Club – where students are made to understand these things at an earlier stage.

"There can be smaller academies – like for two, three weeks only, that they can do in Year 11 or something," he says. "Which means it's before they even make A Level, BTEC choices. So, students can become more aware of STEM from an even younger age."

SIE's ambitions go even further. "Our long-term vision is to establish the PlayStation Career Pathways Program as an educational talent pipeline that starts in primary school and extends through to job placement," Asia says. "Imagine if talent gets the opportunity to develop the required skill set and industry network from an early age."



16 to 18-year-olds work to produce a game demo at the Saturday Skills Club

As a Black woman, Favour represents a uniquely underrepresented group in tech. Men outnumber women around three to one, in her IT modules, she estimates. She agrees lack of education opportunities are a part of the problem – but far from the whole problem.

"There are a lot of barriers for Black women in everything, to be fair."

Favour is particularly concerned by the fact that while Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) workers often feature lower down the chain in tech companies they are notably absent from senior roles. She even knows another woman of colour who changed careers, because she felt she could not progress, she tells me.

"It's very rare to find a company that has management including somebody who's of colour – Asian or Black – and that's big," she says. "A company says that it has a lot of people of colour, then if you look at management there are none to be seen, so where are they?

data also showing Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic groups are less likely to be directly promoted in their role. According to the 2021 International Game Developers Association (IDGA) Developer Satisfaction Survey, in the gaming industry overall, Black people represent about 4 percent of the workforce, a small increase from 2 percent in 2019."

All of this demonstrates just how much work needs to be done, for the industry to achieve true diversity at senior levels.

Westminster has always had a strong commitment to diversity, reflected in its

## PARTNER WITH US

A growing number of organisations are choosing to support Westminster's diverse student demographic, recognising our position as an institution which can truly help to create a level-playing field in today's graduate market. If you are interested in becoming a corporate partner and making a real difference to society, we would love to hear from you. Get in touch via [development@westminster.ac.uk](mailto:development@westminster.ac.uk)