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Researcher Academy

Postgraduate Researchers from Diverse Backgrounds: A Framework for Defining, Measuring and Supporting Success



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Introducing the Supporting Success for Postgraduate Researchers Framework

The “Supporting Success for Postgraduate Researchers Framework” offers practical approaches and actions that will collectively help to develop improved support for postgraduate researchers (PGRs).

The recommended actions and approaches are flexible by design and can be adapted to the structures and needs of different higher education institutions.

Underpinning recommendations

- Commit to recognising broader parameters for success and embed this in PGR processes.
- Co-create interventions with PGRs from diverse backgrounds and reward them for their contribution.



Drivers for this work

Equality, diversity and inclusion in postgraduate researcher recruitment is a key topic in the graduate sector at present, but it is crucial to start to think beyond recruitment and consider the way we support the success of our increasingly diverse postgraduate researchers.

Efforts to increase the diversity of the PGRs we recruit need to be accompanied by work to ensure that support is effective, rooted in inclusivity, and tied to the needs of our PGRs. Without these factors in place there is a risk not only to individuals who may not thrive in a system not built with them in mind, but also a risk to the research sector longer term which needs diversity to maximise the best research.

“Underrepresented groups produce higher rates of scientific novelty. However, their novel contributions are devalued and discounted”

– Hofstra et al, 2020



How would you describe your PhD experience in one word?

Focus group participants were asked to describe their PhD experience in one word.

The most notable outcome of this exercise was that no two participants chose the same word to describe their experience – 25 of 39 focus group participants participated in the exercise, and provided 25 different words. This very much underlines a theme which was clear throughout this research project – the individuality of the PGR experience.

Word cloud visualising focus group participant responses to question ‘how would you describe your PhD experience in one word?’



Inclusive parameters for success

Measures for success in postgraduate research are not well-established, nor is there broad agreement of how success in postgraduate research should be defined beyond narrow measures such as thesis submission and completion rates, career destinations and publication metrics.

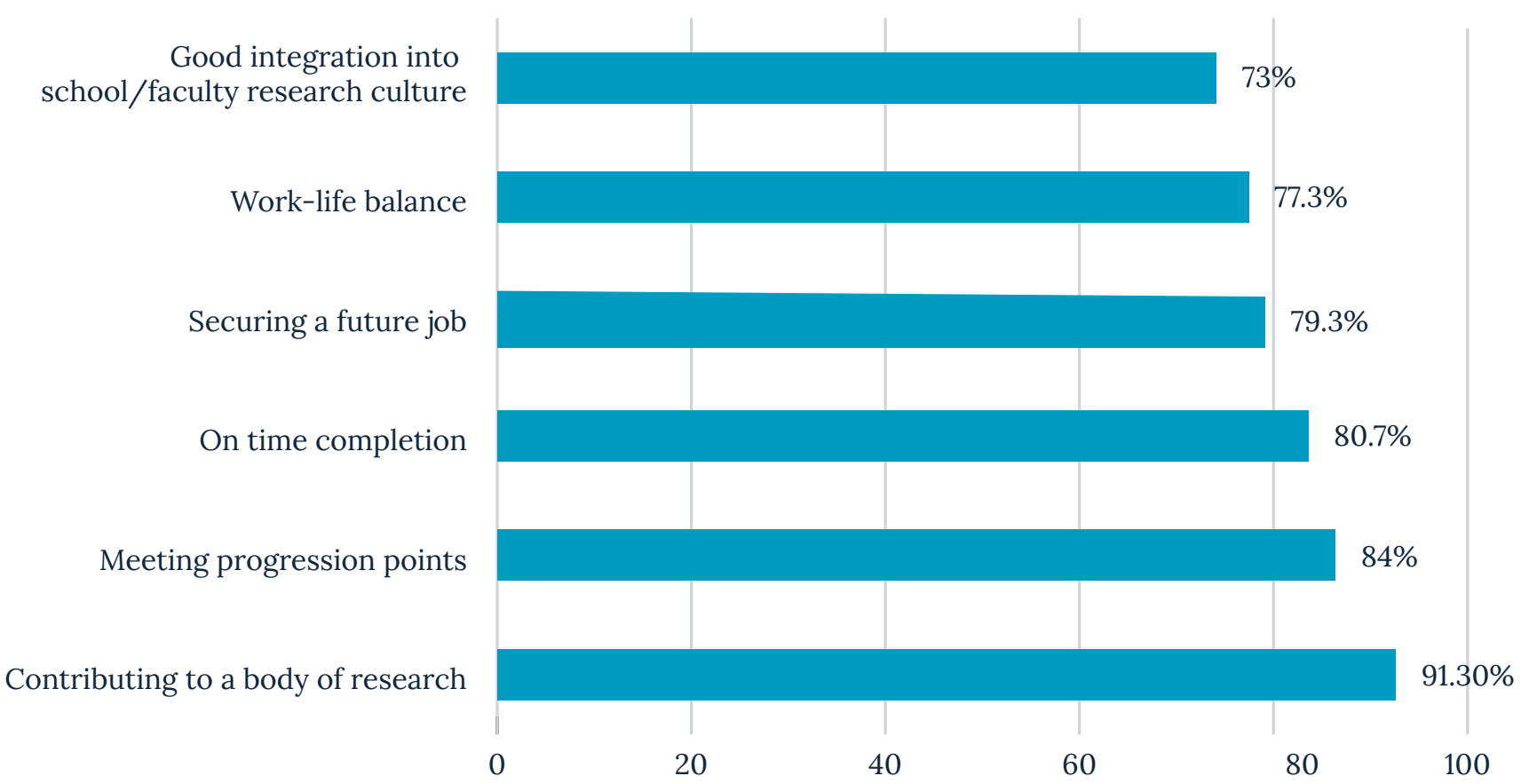
While these are undeniably part of the story of success in postgraduate research, this guide, based on PGR-led research with PGRs in the UK who self-identified as coming from diverse backgrounds, proposes **broad**er and **more inclusive** parameters.

These inclusive parameters of success in postgraduate research form a sound foundation for thinking about how to measure success and support our diverse PGR community effectively. We set out a framework for how to approach this, highlighting case studies of existing and emerging practice throughout. Specific experiences of PGRs from different backgrounds are highlighted in ‘research spotlights’ throughout this document.



How do PGRs from diverse backgrounds define success?

150 PGRs self-identifying as coming from diverse backgrounds were surveyed on their views regarding six pre-defined categories of success, and responded as follows:



Category of success	Percentage response
Good integration into school/faculty research culture	73%
Work-life balance	77.3%
Securing a future job	79.3%
On time completion	80.7%
Meeting progression points	84%
Contributing to a body of research	91.3%

PGRs surveyed or who participated in focus groups also suggested a number of additional factors that they identified as contributing to their own definitions of success in postgraduate research. These included:

- Achieving personal goals
- Becoming an independent researcher
- Gaining transferable skills
- Getting the PhD
- Growth of knowledge
- Happiness
- Having a professional network
- Meeting parental expectations*
- Presenting at conferences
- Publishing and other outputs (for example blogs or reports)
- Societal impact and a sense of purpose

“Publications are the currency of our success”
– Focus group Participant

Within these categories we can identify four key aspects of PGR success which allow us to create the following inclusive parameters:

Inclusive parameters of PGR success			
Accessing opportunities Transferable skills, training, getting a job, networking	Meeting expectations Own, supervisor’s, university’s	Outputs Impact, publishing, thesis, conference presentations, blogs, reports	Experience Happiness, sense of purpose, work-life balance, integration into research culture, belonging, becoming an independent researcher

*while parental expectations were a key driver for some participants, particularly international PGRs, we have not explicitly noted them within the parameters for two reasons. Firstly they are not something which we can realistically measure, and secondly they can be considered as a driver within the PGR’s ‘own’ expectations.

Reflective questions

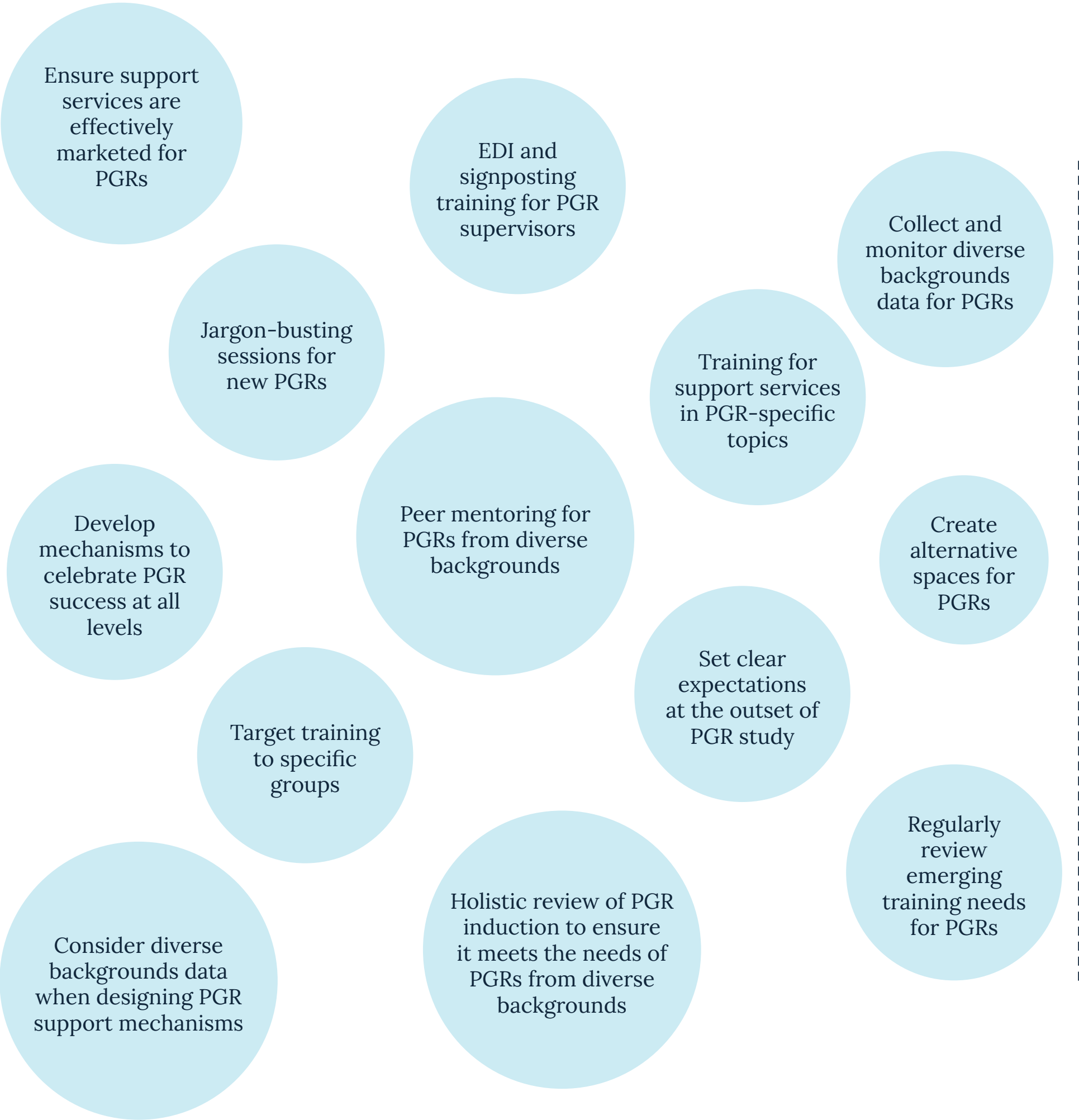
How can we recognise the individuality of the PGR experience? While all four of the areas within the inclusive parameters are likely to form part of an individual PGR's success, which different facets will be a higher priority for different individuals and at different stages of their PhD?

How can framing success using the inclusive parameters from the outset of a PhD support setting of expectations?

How could the inclusive parameters inform development of PGR processes, support and training to ensure the needs of a diverse PGR community are met?



Framework for supporting success

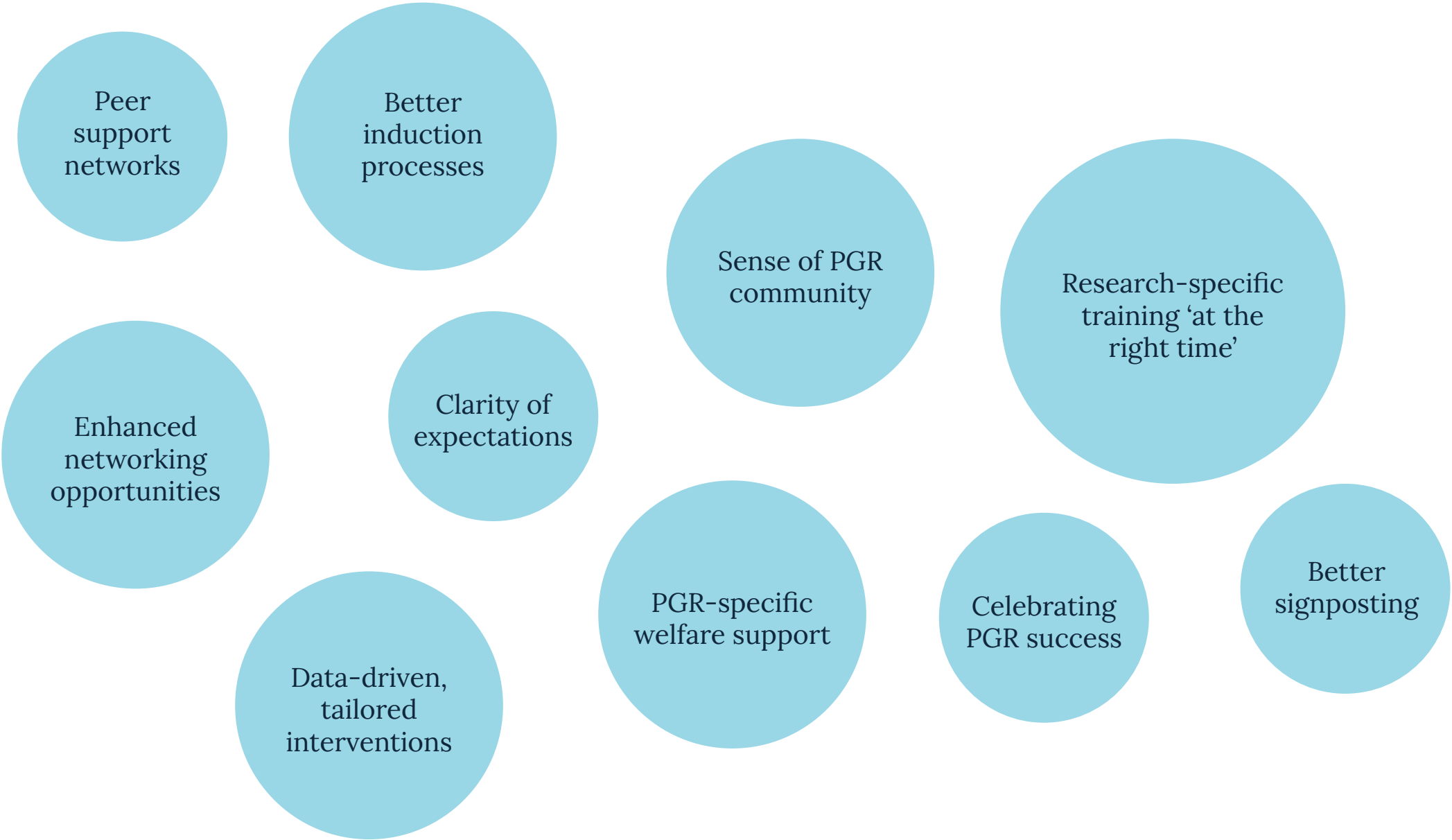


This guide explores flexible actions and approaches that can be easily adapted to the structures and needs of different higher education institutions under the following themes:

- Data driven interventions
- Improved induction processes
- PGR-specific support services
- Peer support networks and PGR community

Legend for the framework diagram:

- Activities (lightest blue circle)
- Intermediate Outcomes (medium blue circle)
- Final Outcome/Goal (darkest blue circle)



Data driven interventions

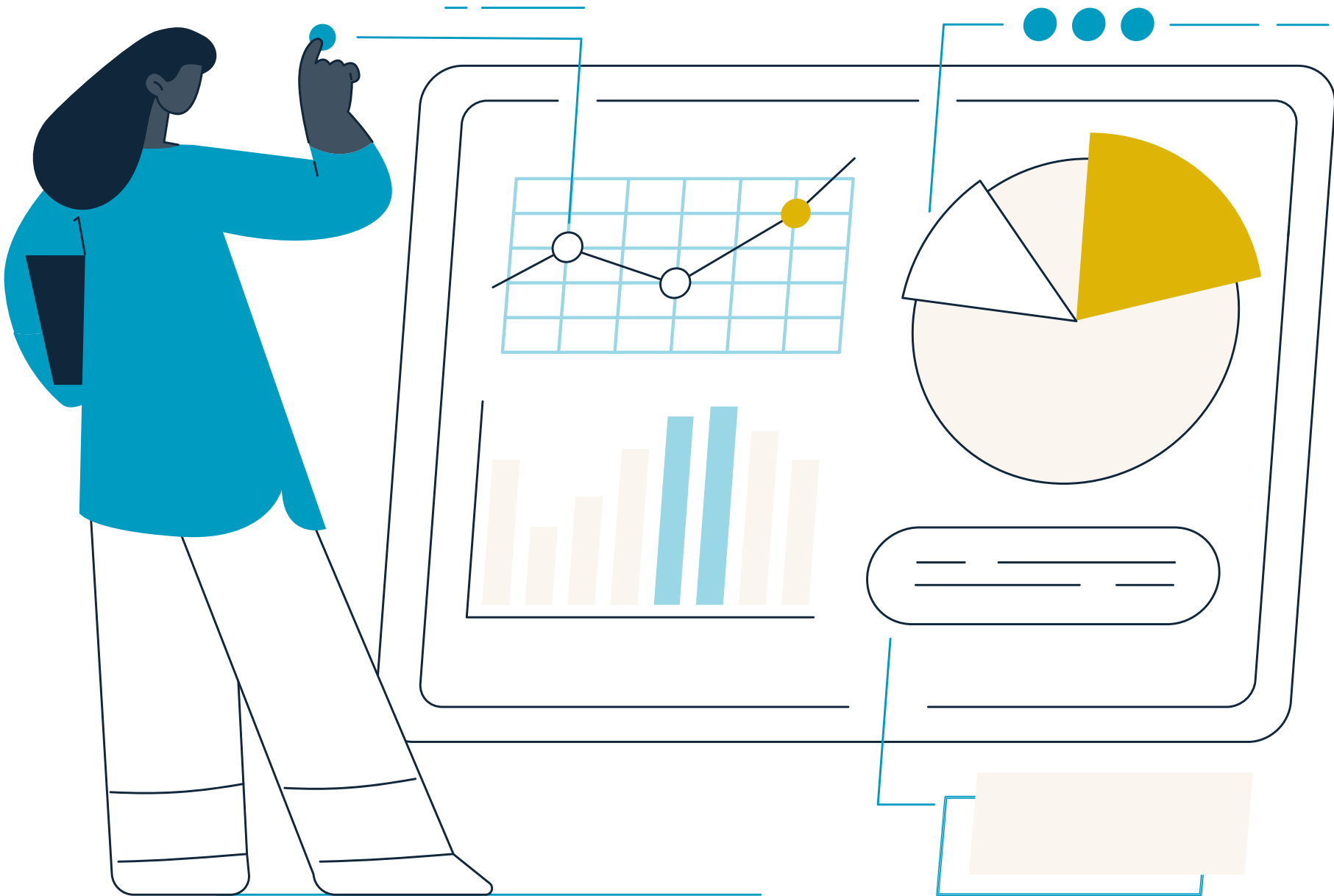
“It would help if the universities took deeper demographic information from students [...] – it would be helpful to know that I’m not the only one of my kind”
– Survey respondent

Collect and monitor diverse backgrounds data for PGRs
In order to effectively support PGRs from diverse backgrounds, it is critical that institutions collect and subsequently monitor diverse backgrounds data for PGRs. This should start with admissions and continue throughout the PGR lifecycle. This is primarily an institutional action, which could be broken down at faculty or departmental levels dependent on PGR numbers.

- Institutions should consider:**
- committing to better data collection of the backgrounds and identities of their PGRs to allow them to better analyse and review barriers to progress and success, and be responsive to what the data tells them.
 - monitoring outcomes throughout the PGR journey including registration, continuation, outcomes of annual reviews, engagement with training and support services (including hardship funds and additional funding opportunities, for example for conference attendance), progression, submission, final awards and publications.

Consider diverse backgrounds data when designing PGR support mechanisms
Use PGR diversity data to help target interventions co-developed with individuals from impacted groups. This will allow institutions to recognise where specific groups have particular support needs, and to target and communicate these support interventions appropriately.

- As a minimum, data can be used to support the development of effective Equality Impact Assessment for PGR activities.
- PGR-specific circumstances should be considered in the design of support processes – for example, financial support processes may need to be adjusted for PGRs compared to undergraduate students (or in some cases things which are taken into account at the undergraduate level, such as socio-economic background, should be considered in financial support processes for PGRs).



Research Spotlight

In terms of finances, PGRs from diverse backgrounds who we surveyed desired more support for conference attendance for those without access to funding:

“The cost to attend conferences is very high – the support needs to be catered to the different needs of the students”

– Focus group participant

The strain of looking for and managing the demands of a job whilst studying in order to be able to support oneself also came up as a significant challenge among respondents.

“Trying to work to cover student fees and costs of living is kind of huge”

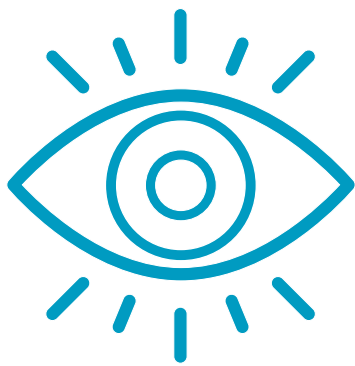
– Focus group participant

Data driven interventions

Focus on...
socio-economic background

Those with Free School Meal status (home students only) were the most likely group (where n=>10) to note financial issues as a barrier (77% vs 55% of all respondents).

In addition, 90% of those who had FSM status and also had parents without HE qualifications, highlighted financial challenges. 86% of individuals with FSM status indicated that additional financial support would be a key intervention to support their success (vs 61% of respondents without FSM status). Estranged PGRs (those who 'have no communicative relationship with either of their living biological parents and often their wider family networks as well' – Office for Students) and care experienced PGRs were the second and third most likely groups to face financial barriers to their success as PGRs. It should be noted that these socio-economic impacts exist irrespective of funding status. 80% of those with FSM status noted imposter phenomenon as a barrier to their success (compared to 64% of respondents overall).



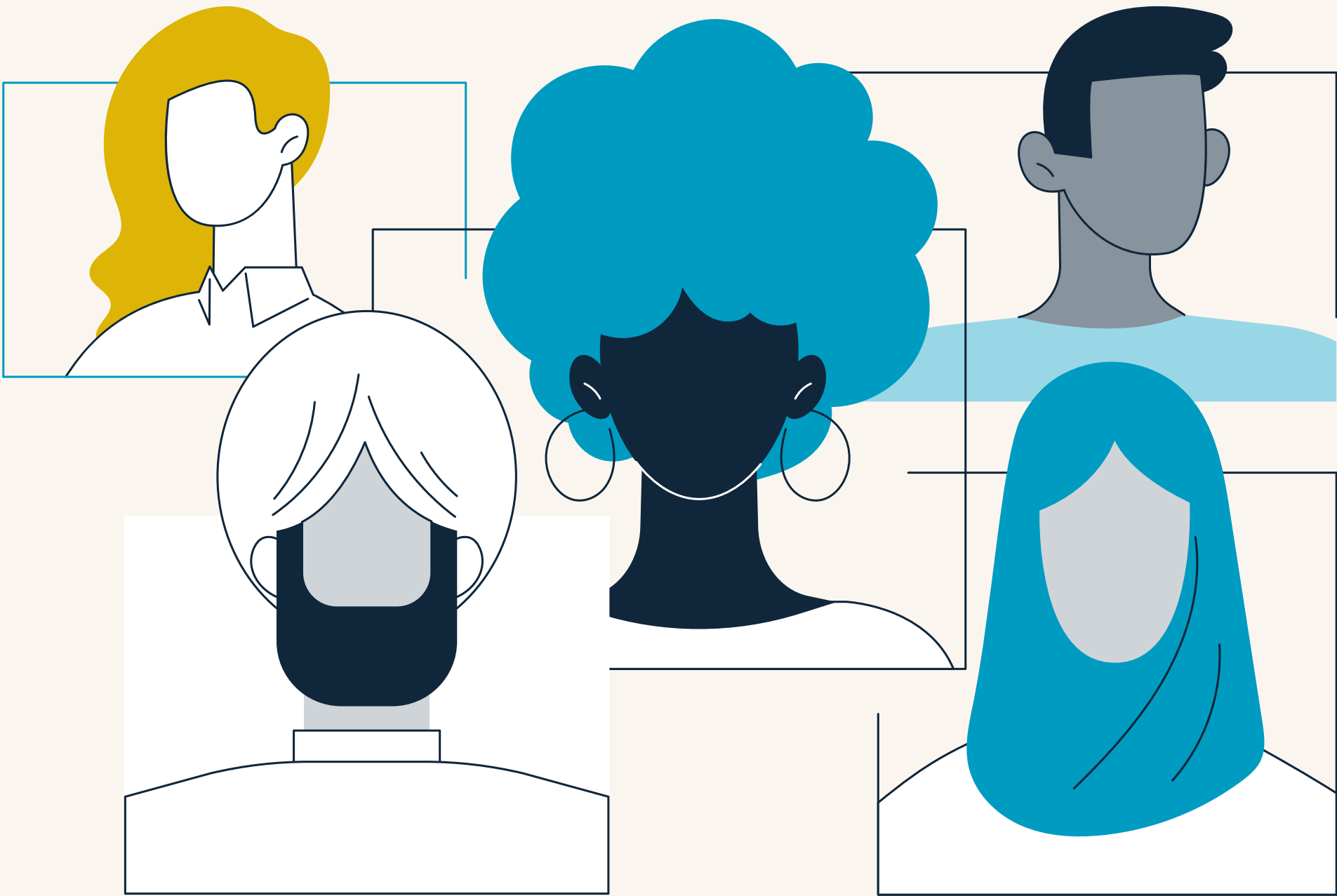
86%
of individuals with FSM status indicated that additional financial support would be a key intervention to support their success

Focus on...
ethnicity



60% of BAME PGRs (home and international) highlighted financial challenges as a barrier to their success (compared to 55% of respondents overall), but 88% of Black PGR respondents indicated that finances were a challenge for them (7 out of 8 respondents).

Considering Leading Routes' 2019 report 'The Broken Pipeline' which highlighted that only 1.2% of research funding was awarded to Black PGRs in the three years from 2016/17 to 2018/19 (Williams et al, 2019), this emphasises the importance of not treating BAME PGRs as an homogenous group.



Improved induction processes

Holistic review of PGR induction processes to make sure they meet the needs of PGRs from diverse backgrounds

Institutions are encouraged to consider the effectiveness of their PGR induction as a whole. The difficulty of navigating the first few months of the PhD was a recurrent theme throughout this project. Information tended to be spread across many different places (if it could be located at all), and a lack of in-person opportunities to find out key information particularly impacted upon international PGRs (who were also potentially dealing with culture shock and a lot of change beyond the PhD).

Institutional recommendations:

Where a central Graduate School or equivalent exists, develop a regularly updated induction resource with appropriate signposting to information for different parts of the university:

- Share this resource with incoming PGRs prior to arrival as part of central university arrivals information, and supported with opportunities for online and in-person (post-arrival) drop-in sessions to seek clarity on any areas of uncertainty or concern.
- Pre-arrival information could include online sessions for specific groups (along the lines of the international student pilot activity described below) with the opportunity to submit questions in advance and access a recording afterwards.

- Work with contacts in academic schools and departments to ensure that they have accurate information about Graduate School and other central provision and that this is reflected in any pre-arrival information sent to incoming PGRs.

Consider how to effectively offer in-person support to PGRs – this may mean representatives from a central team supporting departmental inductions, or creating a complementary offering.

Departmental recommendations:

- Those responsible for PGR induction in schools, departments or programmes should ensure links with central induction plans to ensure flow of information and effective signposting between the two.
- Share all induction information with supervisors as well as new PGRs to ensure everyone is on the same page.

Supervisory team:

- Be aware of induction information shared by the university, department and/or programme and discuss with new PGRs.
- Expectation setting (see below).
- Support with initial Development Needs Analysis and goal setting to launch project.



Research Spotlight

A recurring theme in survey responses, and amplified in focus groups, was around the importance of induction, a key point at which issues around provision of information about how PGR works can be addressed.

“I learned everything on the fly from other PGRs”

– Survey respondent

“There must be a better way to manage induction and progress through a doctorate”

– Survey respondent

Focus group participants specifically noted that induction was an opportunity to provide effective support on imposter phenomenon but that this was not present in their induction, along with highlighting induction as a key opportunity to support new PGRs in understanding the hidden curriculum (‘the unwritten rules and norms in higher education that students are assumed to have an understanding of but are not explicitly taught or explained’ – QAA).

Improved induction processes

Transition to PhD training session (University of Nottingham)

Feedback received from postgraduate researchers studying as part of the Nottingham BBSRC Doctoral Training Partnership indicated that one of the things they found challenging at the beginning of their studies was understanding how their PhD might differ in practical terms from their previous educational experiences.

This was particularly true of those coming straight into their PhD from taught provision, but also for individuals who had undertaken their studies in a different country or those who had been in the world of work for a period of time before returning to their studies.

The session was delivered to both BBSRC DTP PGRs and offered to PGRs across the institution as part of induction programmes in 2021 and 2022, with a mixture of online and in-person delivery for different sessions. It was an hour long, and co-delivered by specialist PGR Welfare and EDI Officers and an academic member of staff.

The session focuses on ‘taking the research leap’ and how undertaking a PhD differs from previous levels of study. It puts wellbeing and self-care at the forefront of approaching the new challenge, covering themes including managing change, the supervisory relationship, building confidence, identifying skills development opportunities and imposter phenomenon.

120 PGRs have participated in the session across two years, and it has been a well-received element of their induction training.

The 2022 DTP iteration of this course received a 4.7/5 average feedback score, with no attendee scoring it under a 4. Attendees noted that the session offered ‘lots of invaluable insight’, and that the session made attendees feel ‘like wellbeing of the students is really a priority for the DTP team’.



120

PGRs have participated in the session across two years

4.7/5

average feedback score in 2022 for the DTP iteration of this course

Focus on... mature students

Mature students (those starting their undergraduate degree when over the age of 21) highlighted some of the benefits of coming to a PhD following a period of professional experience. Several focus group participants also noted that their previous work experience made them feel more able to lead their own project, manage their time, keep track of their objectives and take personal accountability for their work. However, these benefits were most keenly felt where they had been working in an area specifically related to research, and those coming from other professional backgrounds found the transition to PhD study more of a challenge.

Focus on... socio-economic background

“

Coming from a journalist background has been difficult to transition into academia [...] because academic writing, learning and research is completely different from what journalists do.”

– Focus group participant

Estranged PGRs were the most likely to identify poor induction as a barrier to their success as PGRs.

72% vs 40%

of all survey respondents

Individuals with FSM status were the most likely group to identify a lack of information about how academia works as a barrier to their success (88% vs 59% of all survey respondents). This rate was highest of all amongst participants who identified as female and as having FSM status (94%).



Improved induction processes

Navigating life as a postgraduate researcher in the UK

As part of this project and utilising the networks and communication channels of the steering group, we recruited five international PGRs from the Universities of Nottingham, Leeds, Edinburgh and Warwick. Their experiences varied, and benefitted from intersectionality across age, gender, home country, sexual orientation and other characteristics.

The format of the session was 10-minute presentations from the PGRs with a focus on their experiences, followed by a Q&A session including pre-submitted questions and questions raised on the day.

The event was in a webinar format, with attendees able to register and submit their questions in advance. It was promoted via email and social media channels at all institutions involved in the project. There were 34 registrations and 29 attendees, with 8 questions pre-submitted. These covered topics including the job market in the UK, ‘dos and don’ts’ for a first year PGR, dealing with homesickness and what helps with feelings of belonging as an international PGR in the UK. There was a lively discussion from our panellists on all of these topics and many positive comments in the chat from attendees.

A feedback survey was circulated after the event, with respondents rating the panellists and the accuracy of the session description as ‘excellent’ and responding that the session met their expectations as ‘good’. The session was recorded, and plans are being made to include it as a wellbeing and open day / induction resource at all of the institutions involved in this project.



34
registrations

29
attendees

Focus on...

International PGRs

International PGRs who engaged with our study noted a distinct set of challenges around arrival in the UK and orientation. These challenges were principally around navigating the practicalities of relocation – the complexity, cost and uncertainty around visa applications, accommodation and housing were highlighted in particular as very stressful and difficult to navigate. One focus group participant described their experience of finding housing in the UK as ‘a disaster’ and others agreed it ‘causes a lot of stress’.

These issues were made more difficult for those arriving with a family, as it was felt that university accommodation and support was not set up for them. International focus group participants agreed that they felt they were left to figure things out for themselves without assistance, and that local (within an academic department) rather than central support (such as being referred to the International Office) would be more helpful.

Disability

Disabled students who participated in this project noted that they were aware of sources of support (such as Disabled Students Allowance) but they didn’t always feel that the support was tailored to their needs as postgraduate researchers.

“[Support for the application for Disabled Student Allowances was] tailored towards undergraduate learning and mainly about software.”

– Focus group participant

Further, it was suggested that while support and adjustments might be agreed, this wasn’t always supported in practice, and culturally, there can be expectations of working in a particular way. One disabled PGR noted:

“[I] have to work differently to other people, but there is peer pressure to work in one way.”

– Focus group participant

44% of disabled respondents to our survey highlighted that they felt their induction was poor and this had proven a barrier to success in their postgraduate research, compared to 38% of those who did not disclose a disability.

Neurodiversity arose as a specific theme within focus group discussions and survey responses. A lack of support and understanding of neurodiversity within universities was highlighted, and some neurodiverse individuals felt that information they needed was not easy to find and this was very problematic for them.

Ethnicity

Black PGRs are one of the most likely groups to perceive their induction as poor (62% compared to 40% of BAME PGRs and 40% of survey respondents overall) and are also considerably more likely to identify a lack of information about how research works as a barrier to their success (75% of Black respondents vs 46% of BAME PGRs, and 59% of respondents overall).



Set clear expectations at the outset of PGR study

Institutional and departmental:

- Institutional expectations of PGRs, and how these align with department-level expectations, should be made clear as part of induction.
- Where a PGR is part of a collaborative or cohort-based PhD programme, which may have different processes to a 'standard PhD', the programme should communicate its processes and where they differ from departmental or school processes clearly to both colleagues and PGRs. PGR support staff within both central support services and the department or school should have a clear understanding of how the PGR journey may vary for those who are part of a specific DTP, CDT or other cohort-based programme.
- Consider introducing specific support for transition to PhD study to help new PGRs explore their new context (cf: **Transition to PhD Study case study**), or potentially offering 'jargon-busting' sessions for new PGRs.

For the supervisory team:

- Supervisors are encouraged to have an open and honest two-way conversation about expectations at the outset of PGR study and at regular intervals throughout the course of study as the relationship develops.
- Supervisors should be aware of university, departmental and programme-level expectations for their individual students, so they are able to advise them on their specific PGR journey.



Research Spotlight

Participants in our research project said that having clearer expectations set by supervisors would help to support success.

“It’s difficult to know what they [my supervisors] want and sometimes the communication falls apart.”

– Focus group participant

PGR-specific support services

In this section, we include all activity that supports a PGR to be successful, both academically and in terms of their wellbeing.

Ensure support services are effectively marketed for PGRs

While the vast majority of university support services are offered to PGRs as well as undergraduate students, participants in our research gave overwhelming feedback that they felt that the support that is on offer is not for them, both in terms of accessing it in the first place and in terms of the support received meeting the needs of PGRs, and PGRs feeling understood by the services they access.

In terms of communications for PGRs, there are simple ways to be inclusive in the way support services are signposted:

- Mention postgraduate researchers specifically in marketing materials, on websites and in email newsletters.
- Include PGR examples in any case studies, or examples used in support sessions.
- Ensure that support services are advertised via PGR communication channels as well as undergraduate channels – for example, as part of Graduate School communications rather than just student newsletters.
- Offer PGR-specific sessions on relevant themes – for example imposter phenomenon.

Training for support services in PGR-specific topics

To address the issues raised regarding support services meeting the needs of PGRs, and making sure PGRs feel understood by support services, the following actions should be considered:

- Delivery of PGR-focused training to central support teams/wellbeing teams by colleagues with PGR expertise.
- Annual briefings from specific programmes (DTPs/CDTs) to academic and administrative colleagues.
- Collation of PGR-specific information and resources by a central Graduate School – internal and external resources – as a reference guide.
- Where specialist support staff are employed to work with PGRs, they should be integrated into university support networks.



Research Spotlight

In some cases, it seems that a lack of awareness or appropriate signposting to existing support services is the key issue driving some of these barriers – for example, many institutions offer specialist PGR careers support, or have sick leave policies in place. Variations in the support available to students with different funding sources can also complicate the picture – not everyone is eligible for the same support, and information found in one place may not apply to all students.

“I don’t feel that support is well advertised. I’m unaware of what is available to me as a self-funded student.”

– Survey respondent

PGR-specific support services

The Plus Programme – Learning from Undergraduate and PGT Practice (University of Leeds)



The Plus programme is an initiative aimed at undergraduates (UG) and postgraduate taught (PGT) students from underrepresented groups. This may include care leavers, students with no parental support (estranged), former young carers and students who enroll on the BAME PG Coaching scheme. Learning from this service, which, is specifically aimed at UG and PGTs, the University of Leeds have recently developed another service called the ‘PGR Diversity Service’ (under the Educational Engagement Team). This service aims to support PGRs from underrepresented groups. The service focuses on contextual admissions of PGRs and providing on-call support through provision of programmes that ensures that PGRs are successful in their studies.

PGR-specific support services

Supervisor training

Signposting and support training for PGR supervisors

Supervisors should be provided with training which:

- helps them to signpost effectively to the right places, based on PGR need
- equips them to deal confidently with wellbeing, support, career and development questions whilst maintaining the boundaries of their role as supervisor
- recognises the potential risks to both supervisor and PGR if specialist guidance and involvement is not sought in welfare support cases

It is also recommended that supervisors should have access to communities of practice where they have the opportunity to anonymously share their experience of managing support challenges – this allows not only for sharing of practice but also for peer support and professional development.

EDI training for PGR supervisors

It emerged very strongly from this project that individuals from a range of different backgrounds felt that supervisory teams would benefit from EDI training. This view was particularly strongly felt by participants from an LGBTQIA+ identity. It is recommended that:

- EDI training is included as part of institutional mandatory supervisory CPD
- Specialist EDI training on specific topics is offered for supervisors to access on a rolling basis
- The availability of EDI training for PGR supervisors is made clear to PGRs



Research Spotlight

Only 9% of survey respondents agreed that there was tailored support available to someone from their background at their institution. 48% of respondents weren’t sure.



Research Spotlight

Where PGRs were aware of support services, some respondents nonetheless felt that (while the services you would expect in place were technically in place) the services ‘are either inaccessible, oversubscribed or inadequate’ (survey respondent), and are not tailored sufficiently to either PGRs or individuals from diverse backgrounds. Some respondents also observed that adjustments to meet the needs of certain groups of students (for example disabled students) could be better built in to processes as standard.

“I have on occasion been met with, let’s say, a lack of enthusiasm when suggesting small changes to be more inclusive (for example, providing more dyslexia friendly course information as default).”

– Survey respondent

PGR-specific support services

Focus on...
LGBTQIA+

40% of LGBTQIA+ survey respondents felt that a lack of support from the University was a barrier to their success, and only 12% of the LGBTQIA+ group of respondents felt that there was tailored support available to someone from their background within their University. This supports research from Student Minds on the LGBTQIA+ experience of student support, which included some representation of PGRs (6% of respondents) which recommends:

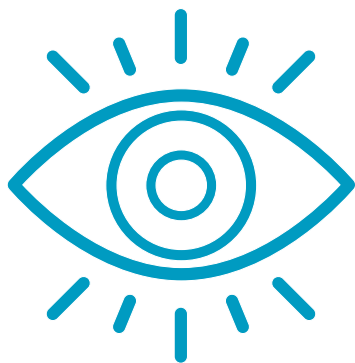
“Student support services need to hire staff who are LGBTQ+ and / or have specialist knowledge and understanding of gender identity issues. All staff should be trained to be better aware of LGBTQ+ issues. Student support services need to be proactively engaging the LGBTQ+ community so they feel more comfortable accessing and engaging with university support services.”

– Smithies and Byrom (2018)

40% of LGBTQIA+ respondents to our survey indicated that a lack of interest or engagement from their supervisor was a barrier to their success during their PhD studies (compared to 28% of all respondents), with this rising to over half (54%) of respondents identifying as a sexuality other than heterosexual, gay, lesbian or bisexual.

40%
of LGBTQIA+
survey respondents
felt that a lack of
support from the
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PGR-specific support services

Research Spotlights



1.

On the whole, across our research participants, it was felt that supervisory teams are a key enabler to PGR success, and in most cases supervisors were identified as very supportive, in contrast to ‘the university’ as a whole, which tended to draw criticism around high levels of bureaucracy and impenetrability, being too focussed on undergraduates and therefore not feeling inclusive of postgraduate researchers and not being sufficiently flexible around timelines to meet the needs of PGRs from diverse backgrounds.

“My supervisory team were excellent, they believed in me which made a huge difference”

– Survey respondent

2.

10% of survey respondents noted that they had raised a complaint or had a problem with their supervisor which had proved a barrier to their success during their PhD studies. 19% of respondents identified a lack of research alignment with their supervisor as a particular challenge. Those with caring responsibilities, estranged students and those identifying as LGBTQIA+ were the most likely to identify a lack of interest or engagement from their supervisor as a barrier (29%, 27% and 26% respectively).

3.

Where supervisory relationships were difficult, this had a significant negative impact on those affected, and while overall views on supervision were positive, it was widely noted that improved signposting and awareness of EDI issues from supervisory teams would further support the success of PGRs from diverse backgrounds:

“Supervisors need more training in project management and people management.”

– Focus group participant

“Supervisors have to take into consideration different cultures, perspectives, expectations.”

– Focus group participant

“Supervisors need to update their training [on EDI].”

– Focus group participant

Focus group participants recognised that it is difficult to reach those most in need of such training, as they are potentially less likely to engage.

PGR-specific support services

Regularly review training needs for PGRs through a diversity lens

Focus group participants noted a range of different training interventions which had proved useful during their studies. This included centrally offered PGR development courses (thesis writing and research methods training were mentioned specifically), peer review workshops at a departmental level and online training resources offered centrally and by the library to support areas such as data management and academic writing.

Opportunities to engage in coaching (individually and as part of a group) were also noted as positive interventions.

However, a theme which was apparent in this project was that PGRs with diverse backgrounds felt that training on offer didn't always meet their needs based on their individual circumstances, whether this was part-time study, non-standard start dates, caring commitments or existing level of knowledge.

- Acknowledge the tension between the need to offer in-person training to support community development and networking, and the need to offer online training options to meet flexibility requirements for specific groups.
- Consider offering courses on different days and times across the academic year to meet the needs of part time students and those with non-standard start dates.
- Recognise that different levels and types of training may be required for different groups – for example, academic writing needs may differ significantly across different PGR groups, from those who are conducting their research in a second language to those who have limited experience of academic writing, or who have had a significant break since last engaging with academic writing.



PGR-specific support services

Multi-institutional training collaboration in the Social Sciences (Scottish Graduate School of Social Sciences)



The Scottish Graduate School of Social Science (SGSSS) provides funding, training, and support across 16 partner higher education institutions in Scotland. The SGSSS has a comprehensive doctoral training programme of 700 hours which is open to Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) students and the wider Social Sciences (SoSS) PGR community in Scotland.

The comprehensive support provided by the SGSSS is based on a training needs analysis of the PGR population. The SGSSS PGR support starts at the Induction Event in which SoSS ESRC students from all universities in Scotland have the opportunity to meet and network.

The SGSSS PGR support extends to provide several training opportunities, delivered throughout the academic year. For instance, Spring into Methods is a series of interdisciplinary training workshops on specialist methods while the Summer School is a three-day event of advanced training methods as well as providing wellbeing and employability advice.

Training on advanced methods is also provided through the Advanced Training Programme delivered throughout a series of half-day sessions. The Hub Festival is a series of activities and sessions with a disciplinary and interdisciplinary focus to elicit wider engagement and discussion while the Pathway Training Fund is a series of advanced and specialist disciplinary training events. The SGSSS also offers a series of films led by academics named When Methods Meet, which focuses on how to combine various research methods.

16 partner higher education institutions in Scotland

Peer support networks and PGR community

Peer mentoring for PGRs from diverse backgrounds

There was a strong appetite for ‘buddying’ or ‘peer mentoring’ for new PGRs throughout the survey and focus groups, both in terms of supporting the transition to PGR study/orientation and in terms of becoming part of a PGR community and developing a sense of belonging.

- Peer mentors should work in a similar area to the mentee.
- Where possible, links with peer mentors with similar background or experiences are preferred.

Support the development of ‘alternative spaces’ for PGRs to find community

PGRs throughout this project highlighted a need for both physical and virtual ‘alternative spaces’ (Meadhbh-Murray et al, 2022) specific to them beyond their immediate research group, to develop their community and network, and to build their identity within the broader PGR community of the institution. For those working in Arts and Humanities research areas, this need was even more pronounced. This could include:

- shared PGR office spaces within departments
- institutional PGR ‘common rooms’ or centres
- development of PGR networks

In our research, a high value was placed on the opportunity to develop networks between PGRs, but it was noted consistently that there should be staff support to provide structure to these, and manage the associated administration:

“It’s difficult for students to take on the administration for projects like that, especially those from diverse backgrounds.”

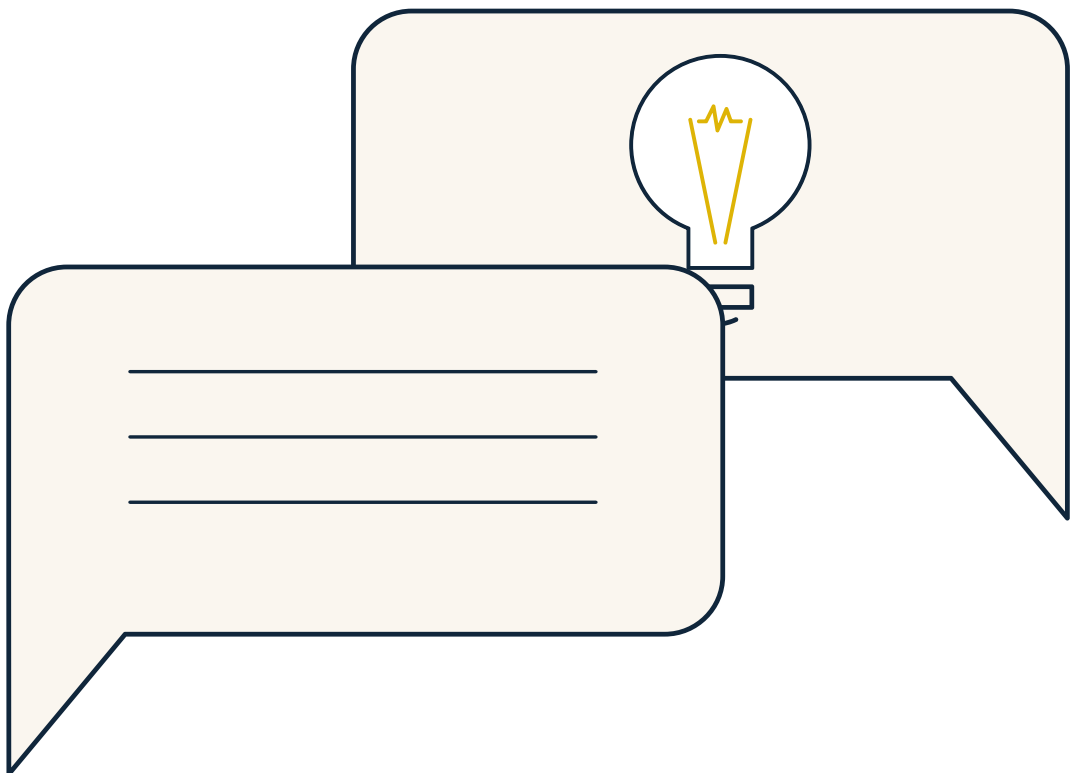
– Focus group participant

Regular PGR networking opportunities within academic departments and the opportunity to come together for small group discussions focussed on their research were highlighted as effective means of supporting PGRs by focus group participants.



Research Spotlight

Having access to a PGR-specific workspace (some focus group respondents felt that a lack of a dedicated desk space, or even a dedicated PGR hotdesking space, was a very practical barrier to achieving a sense of belonging) was repeatedly mentioned as a supportive measure to increase community and belonging, but positive experiences are largely centred around the immediate small community the individual PGR has built around them, rather than feeling part of a broader PGR, student or research community.



Peer support networks and PGR community

Adapt Together

Adapt Together is a postgraduate researcher peer support scheme at the University of Nottingham. Adapt Together provides support, training and resources for PGRs to form peer support groups based around a common theme or interest. PGRs can either set up a new group or join an existing group and there are currently four active groups offering support for School of English PGRs, international PGRs, Horizon Centre for Doctoral Training PGRs and PGRs who have an interest in the environment and sustainability.

Groups set their own ground rules in terms of where to meet, how often and how the meetings will run. They share experiences of being a postgraduate researcher and provide peer support and signposting to university support services as needed. The Adapt Together team also run monthly online seminars on PGR specific topics which are well attended and they arrange in-person social events open to all PGRs who want to connect with their peers in a friendly environment, even if they are not part of an Adapt group.

The scheme is run by two Adapt Together Co-ordinators who work part time (4 hours per week) alongside their PhD study and is managed by a PGR Welfare and EDI Officer based in the Researcher Academy. As such it provides an effective example of staff and PGRs working together to support a programme of peer networking support.

4
active groups
offering
support



Peer support networks and PGR community

Networking Support (University of Warwick)

The University of Warwick’s Doctoral College funds several networks aimed at PGRs from diverse backgrounds. The Network for Ethnic Minority Postgrads (NEMP) provides a community space for postgraduates from minority ethnic backgrounds to connect and network through events, such as book clubs and seminars. They also host a weekly ‘Diversitea’ chat session for members.

Another group called the Parent Juggle provides a network for PGRs who are parents to connect, support and encourage one another. The Global South Initiative is a student led initiative set up to connect PGRs and early career scholars from the Global South.

The Doctoral College also offers a Networking Fund, specifically designed to support PGRs to set up networking events and opportunities that ‘bring people together, create dialogues and promote friendship’, ‘educate, stimulate or support each other’ and ‘make our PGR community a more inclusive and supportive one’. The fund offers up to £300 to support PGR-led networking activity, and looks to support sustainable and inclusive networks.

Offers up to
£300
to support
PGR-led
networking
activity



Peer support networks and PGR community

Create opportunities to celebrate PGR success

‘Opportunities to celebrate successes big and small (‘micro-successes’)’ was a strong theme that emerged when discussing what would support success for PGRs from diverse backgrounds.

- On an institutional level, this could mean including PGR categories in institutional award ceremonies, recognising the breadth of contributions PGRs make to both teaching and research (including research culture).
- Within a department, this could mean ensuring PGR success stories are represented in newsletters and team meetings.
- Within a supervisory team this could look like provision of positive feedback and recognition of small-scale successes, recognising motivating factors for the individual PGR.



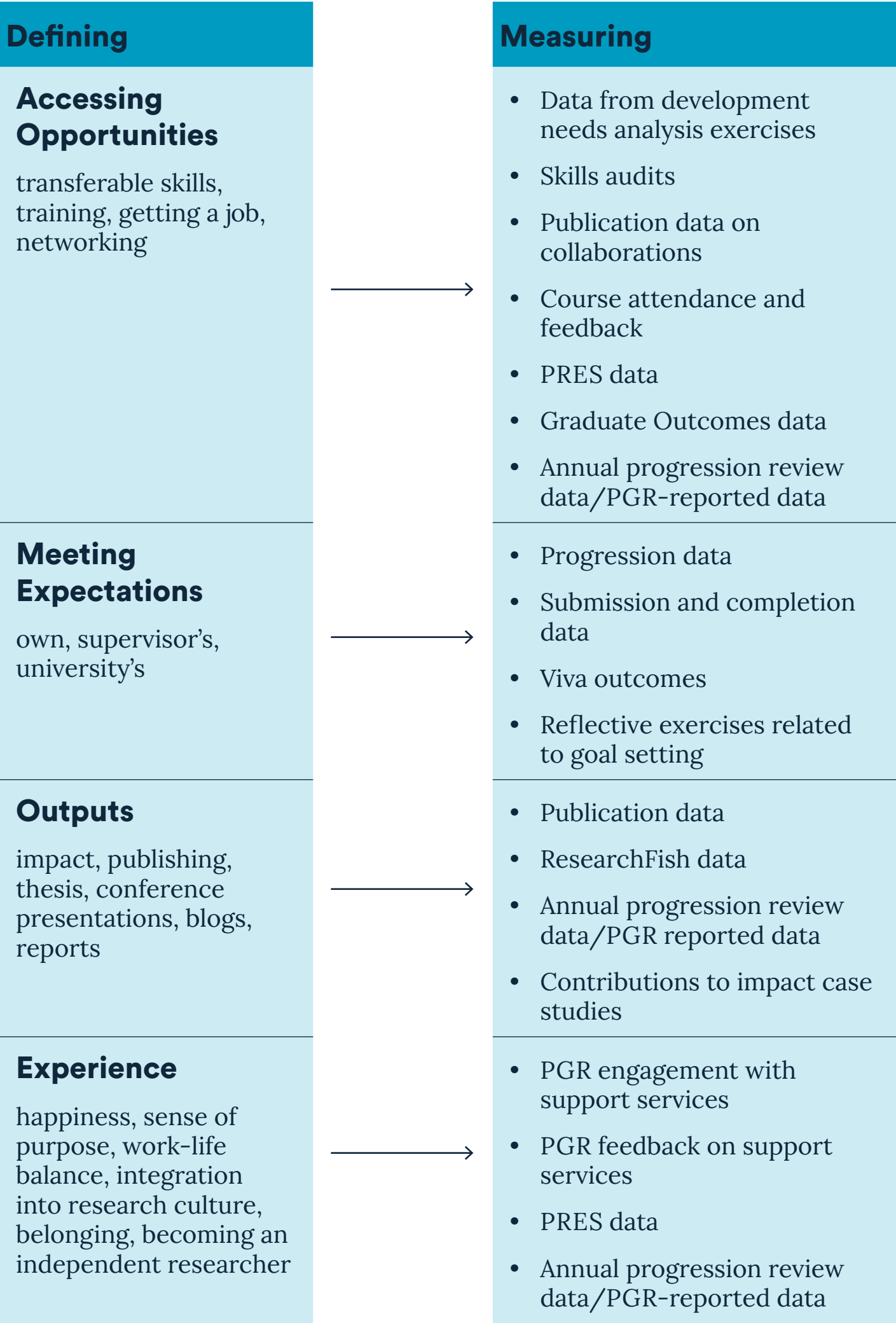
Research Spotlight

Focus group participants were keen to see celebrations of PGR success and contributions embedded in their experience – they noted that celebration of ‘micro-successes’ was something which they felt really contributed to their sense of wellbeing. Celebrating PGR success and contribution also has the potential to help PGRs feel more valued within the University.

“There seems to be an attitude of not fully recognising PhD students as researchers who make contributions to the university as a whole, and so that makes me feel less supported”

– Survey respondent

Measuring success



Building inclusive measures for success into PGR management

The annual progress review is an opportunity at which success could be assessed and monitored against all four aspects of the inclusive parameters, both for the individual PGR and across PGR cohorts. It is likely that different aspects will be more of a priority at different points in a course of study, and also that different elements of each aspect will be more of a priority for any individual postgraduate researcher. Providing an opportunity to review success against each aspect on an annual basis would integrate inclusive ideas about what success looks like into existing processes.

Ideally, it would be possible to collect data across an institution against each aspect of the inclusive parameters of success, but it is recognised that PGR data collection and systems are a challenge in many institutions, and it might be more reasonable to review feedback at a more local level where systems are not ready to support a bigger picture approach.

Other aspects of the suggested approach to measuring success using the inclusive parameters outlined above require consideration of existing data sets with the inclusive parameters. For example, the Postgraduate Researcher Experience Survey could be used as a barometer for work to support success inclusively, particularly with the addition of institution-specific questions which reflect the four aspects of the inclusive parameters.

All recommendations around using data for measurement described in the following pages should ideally be considered in the light of data around the diverse backgrounds of the PGR community – wherever possible differences in experience and outcomes between different groups should be interrogated, and this should form the basis of intervention design.

“[The] annual review process has no space to check on how a student is going. The focus is more on the lab work rather than the person.”

– Focus group participant

Measuring access to opportunity

	Cohort Level	Individual Level
Training	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Development Needs Analysis exercise data and skills auditsCourse attendance dataPRES dataAnnual progression review data/PGR-reported data	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Addressing individual training needs and identifying additional training needsCourses attendedReflection on skills developmentAnnual progression review data/PGR-reported data
Transferable skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Development Needs Analysis exercise data and skills auditsCourse attendance dataPRES dataAnnual progression review data/PGR-reported data	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Addressing individual training needs and identifying additional training needsCourses attendedReflection on skills developmentAnnual progression review data/PGR-reported data
Collaboration	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Publication data on collaborationsPRES dataAnnual progression review data/PGR-reported data	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Reflection on ‘what opportunities have I had to collaborate?’Annual progression review data/PGR-reported data
Networking	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Monitoring engagement with networking opportunities and events at institutional and departmental levelMonitoring of diversity of uptake of conference/ mobility fundingPRES dataAnnual progression review data/PGR-reported data	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Reflection on ‘what opportunities have I had to network?’Receipt of funding to support networkingAnnual progression review data/PGR-reported data
Employment	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Graduate Outcomes dataProgramme level alumni outcomes monitoring	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Achievement of personal career goals

Measuring meeting expectations

	Cohort Level	Individual Level
Own expectations		<ul style="list-style-type: none">Meeting individual milestones (formal and informal)Individual reflection linked to goal settingDiscussion at progression review
Supervisor expectations	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Progression dataSubmission and completion dataViva outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Meeting individual milestones (formal and informal)On time submissionDiscussion at progression review to include reflection on agreed goals
University expectations	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Progression dataViva outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Meeting individual milestones (formal)On time submissionIndividual viva outcome

Measuring outputs

	Cohort Level	Individual Level
Impact	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Monitoring of PGR contribution to impact case studiesAwards made to PGRs for impactAnnual progression review data	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Contribution to impact case studiesFeedback
Publishing	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Publication dataAnnual progression review dataPGR reported data	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Individual publications/ plans to publish
Thesis	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Submission/completion rates	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Submission of thesis
Conference presentations	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Annual progression review dataPGR reported dataData from conference attendance funding awards	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Individual conference presentations/plans to present at conference
Blogs/reports/ other outputs	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Annual progression review dataPGR reported data	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Records of own outputs

Measuring experience

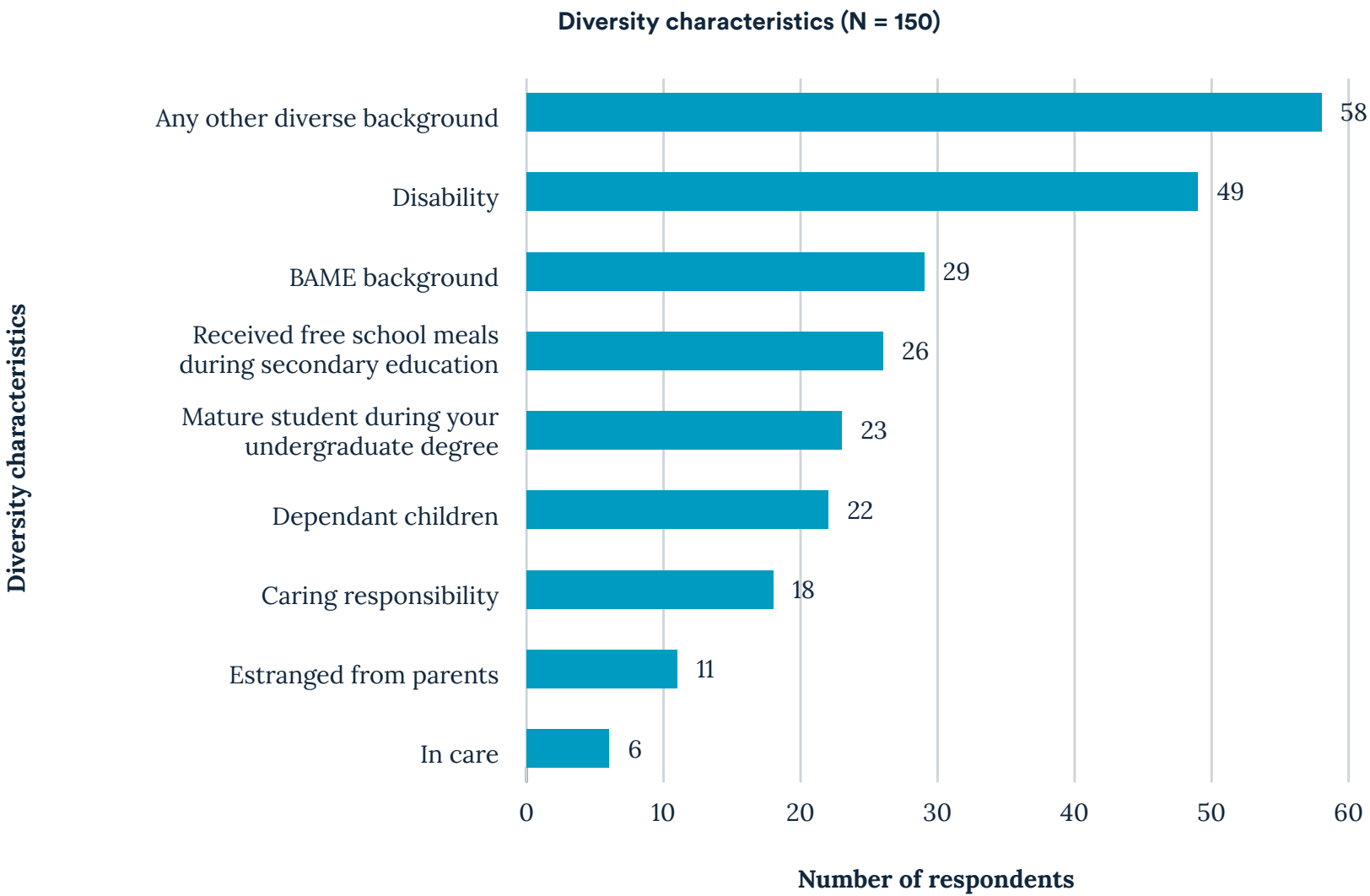
	Cohort Level	Individual Level
Happiness	<ul style="list-style-type: none">PRES dataPGR engagement with support servicesPGR feedback on support servicesAnnual progression reviewMonitoring ad hoc PGR feedbackPGR focus on Research CulturePGR complaints data	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Individual and supported reflectionFeeling able to access support for individual needs throughout PhD studyHaving the opportunity to provide feedback on support services
Sense of purpose	<ul style="list-style-type: none">PRES data	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Individual and supported reflection
Work-life balance	<ul style="list-style-type: none">PRES dataMonitoring ad hoc PGR feedbackPGR feedback on Research CultureMonitoring engagement with flexible study options	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Individual and supported reflectionBeing able to meet deadlinesBeing able to meet commitments associated with study and personal lifeFeeling able to maintain individual wellbeing
Integration into research culture/ belonging	<ul style="list-style-type: none">PRES dataMonitoring ad hoc PGR feedbackPGR feedback on Research CultureInclusion/engagement of PGRs in institutional awards	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Individual and supported reflectionBuilding professional networksHaving the opportunity to contribute to local research cultureFeeling valued as a member of the University
Becoming an independent researcher	<ul style="list-style-type: none">PRES dataMonitoring ad hoc PGR feedbackPGR feedback on Research CultureGraduate Outcomes data	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Individual and supported reflectionFeedback from supervisorSecuring desired job role

Our research

The research was undertaken by a PGR Project Coordinator based at the University of Nottingham in collaboration with PGR Consultation Officers based at the University of Leeds and Heriot Watt University.

In Summer 2022, a survey was conducted across UK HEIs, and a series of focus groups including postgraduate researchers from the Universities of Nottingham, Leeds, Warwick and the Scottish Graduate School of Social Sciences took place. An audit of current practice to support diverse PGRs across this partnership of institutions was carried out, and case study examples from the institutions are included throughout this report.

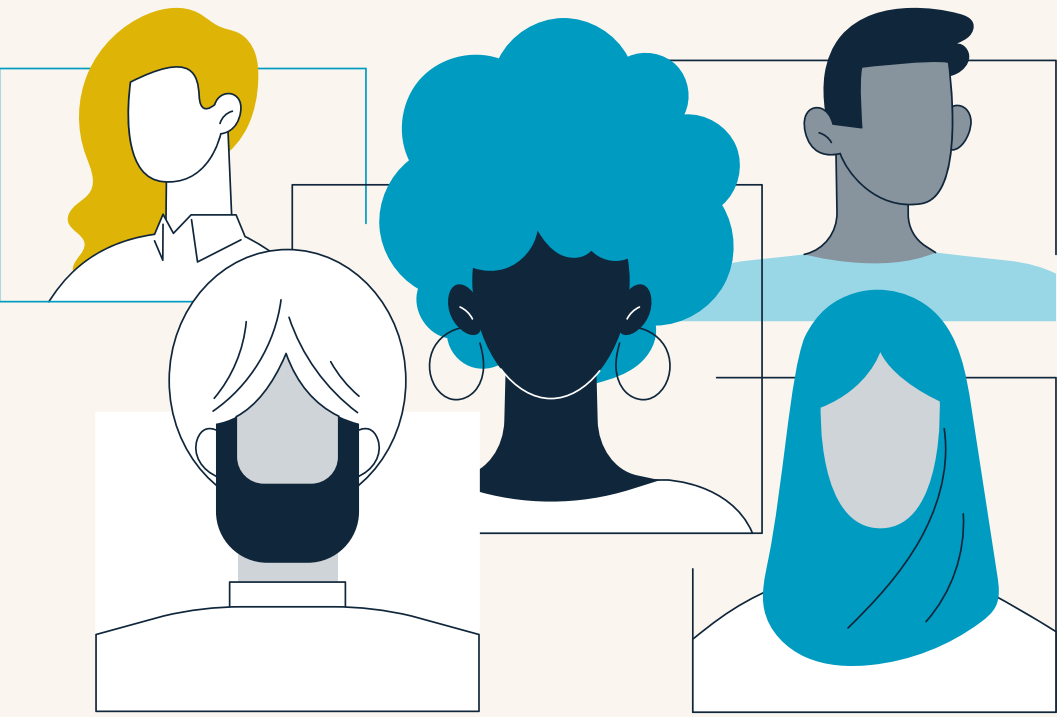
The survey received 150 responses from around 20 UK HEIs, and 39 PGRs participated in 5 online focus groups. For both the survey and the focus groups, the invitation requested that participants identified as coming from a diverse background (figure 1). 41% of respondents indicated that they identified with two or more of the diversity characteristics.



Diversity characteristics	Number of respondents
Any other diverse background	58
Disability	49
BAME background	29
Received free school meals during secondary education	26
Mature student during your undergraduate degree	23
Dependant Children	22
Caring responsibility	18
Estranged from parents	11
In care	6

Diverse backgrounds

The project has used the NEON working group on Widening Participation in Postgraduate Study’s definition of ‘diverse backgrounds’ to inform its work.



This definition includes protected characteristics, but extends to include postgraduate-specific widening participation criteria to ensure inclusion of a broad range of underrepresented groups such as those who identify as coming from a working class background, those with caring responsibilities and those who identify as neurodiverse. Further, we have included international students in our ‘diverse backgrounds’ definition.

It is recognised that PGRs from diverse backgrounds are not a homogenous group, and that there are intersectional factors at play within each individual’s experience of postgraduate research. While there are shared experiences expressed throughout our research across different groups, there are also specific groups who face distinct challenges, or experience challenges more than other groups. We have tried to highlight some of these specific challenges throughout this document, with some reference to cases where intersectional factors seem to have a particular influence. In some cases, the numbers of respondents who fell into specific intersectional categories was too low to fully interpret.

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NEON working group on widening participation in Postgraduate Study: <https://www.educationopportunities.co.uk/programmes/working-groups/wp-in-students-post-graduate-study/>

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The project is led by the Researcher Academy at the University of Nottingham in partnership with the Scottish Graduate School of Social Sciences, the University of Leeds, and The University of Warwick.

Find out more about Collaborative Enhancement Projects on the QAA website.

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