

Designing, measuring and supporting success for PGRs from diverse backgrounds

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For the past three months, I have been working as a PGR Project Consultation Officer on a funded QAA Collaborative Enhancement Project (CEP) aimed at understanding and defining how postgraduate researchers (PGRs) from diverse backgrounds measure and understand success: [Defining, Measuring and Supporting Success for Postgraduate Researchers \(PGRs\) from Diverse Backgrounds \(qaa.ac.uk\)](https://www.qaa.ac.uk/Defining-Measuring-and-Supporting-Success-for-Postgraduate-Researchers-PGRs-from-Diverse-Backgrounds). This cross-institutional project is an initiative led by the University of Nottingham in partnership with the University of Warwick, University of Leeds, and the Scottish Graduate School of Social Science (SGSSS).



Methodology

Audit

A cross-institutional audit was conducted by three PGR Project Consultation Officers from the University of Nottingham, University of Leeds and SGSSS. Information about support services was gathered using websites for each institution (for example, doctoral college websites, students' union). A summary report of support services for all partnership institutions was documented. Furthermore, a list of support services for each institution was recorded on an Excel spreadsheet.

Survey and focus groups

To understand and define how PGRs from diverse backgrounds measure and understand success, a survey and focus group interviews were conducted. The survey aimed at exploring PGRs' perspective on defining and measuring success at a national level, while focus groups explored PGRs' perspective in-depth at each institution. Both data collection methods comprised of questions relating to PGRs' perspectives on defining success within their PhD. Further questions assessed postgraduate researchers' experiences; knowledge and awareness of measures and support services across institutions; barriers to success within a PhD; and recommendations for support services.

Ethical approval was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee, School of Sociology and Social Policy, University of Nottingham. Detailed methodology of the data collection stages is outlined below.

Survey

An electronic questionnaire-based survey was distributed nationwide to PGRs across the UK for a duration of two weeks (2-16 August 2022). The questionnaire-based survey was anonymous and comprised open-ended questions. To reach a wider audience, recruitment strategies included using social media platforms such as Twitter, LinkedIn, doctoral college websites, Microsoft Teams, PGR WhatsApp groups, sending emails using PGR email lists and to relevant stakeholders across the universities. Participants consented to taking part in the survey.

A total of 150 responses were gathered. Data collected included demographic information in addition to in-depth qualitative (participant interpretation and quotes) and quantitative data. The quantitative data was analysed using SPSS and qualitative data was analysed thematically.

Focus groups

Two focus group interviews were conducted by each PGR Project Consultation Officer at each partnership institution (Nottingham and Warwick, Leeds and SGSSS) from 23 August - 9 September 2022.

Focus groups' recruitment strategies employed included sending emails to PGRs in various faculties, doctoral college teams, student unions, postgraduate tutors, PGR reps and by asking other university staff to spread the word about the project. Participant information leaflets and consent forms were distributed to participants during the recruitment stages.

A total of 39 participants engaged in the focus groups across the partnership institutions. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed via Teams. Each PGR Project Consultation Officer initially analysed the data per institution independently. All three PGRs then discussed the results and themes. Data from all the institutions was further merged after the final group analysis by PGR Project Consultation Officers.

What we found out

Some of the findings from the survey data are outlined below:

Figure 1: Proportion of survey respondents per region

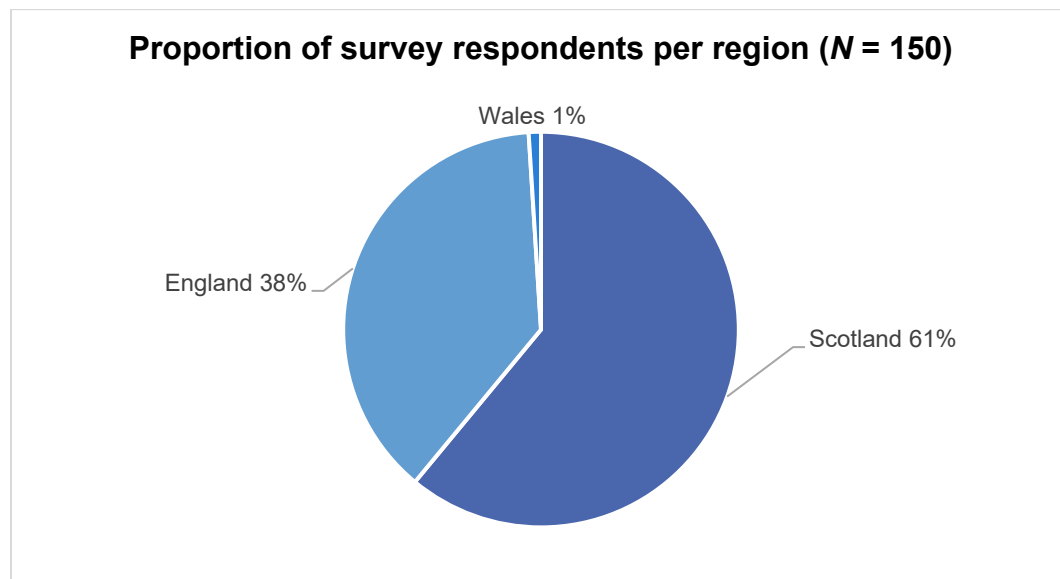


Figure 2: Diversity characteristics

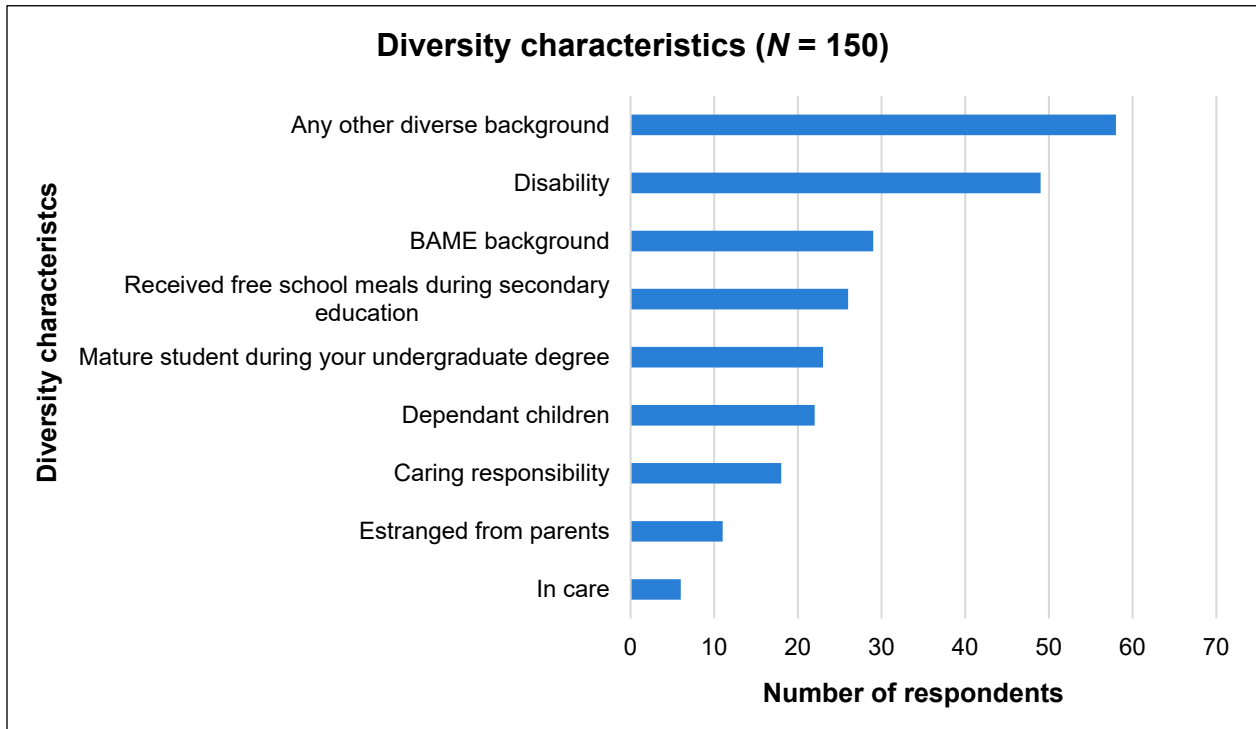


Figure 3: PGR success dimensions

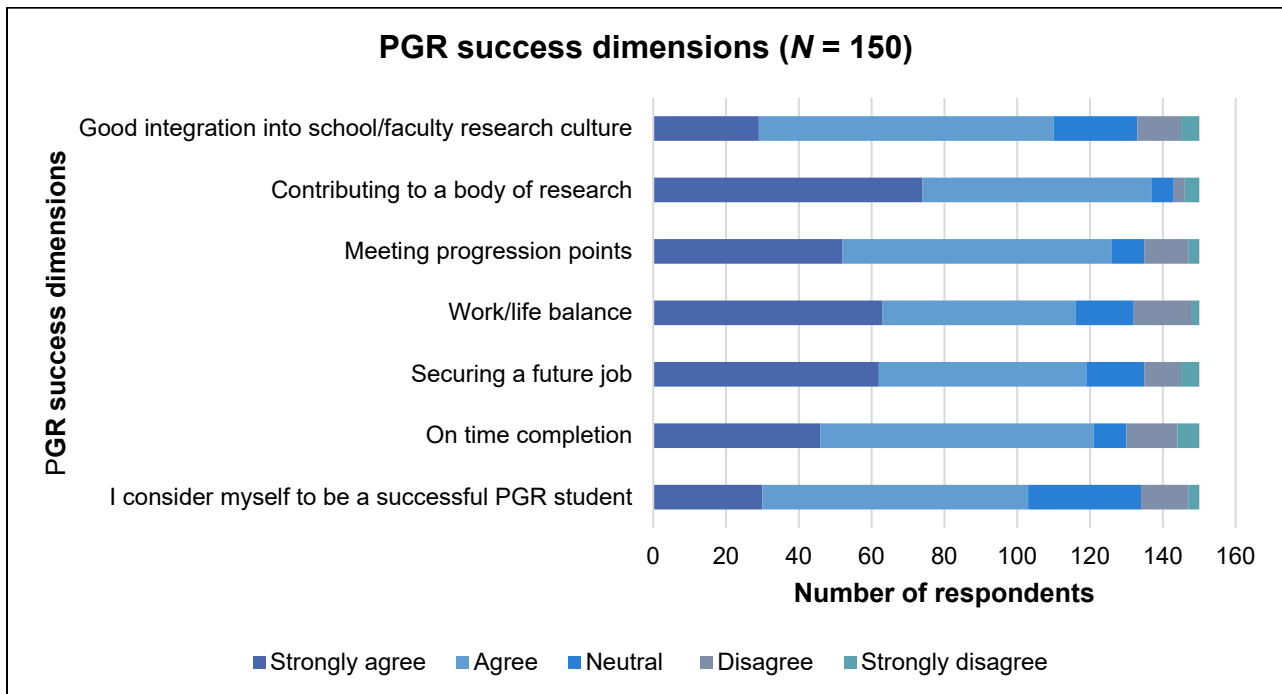


Figure 4: Barriers to PGR success

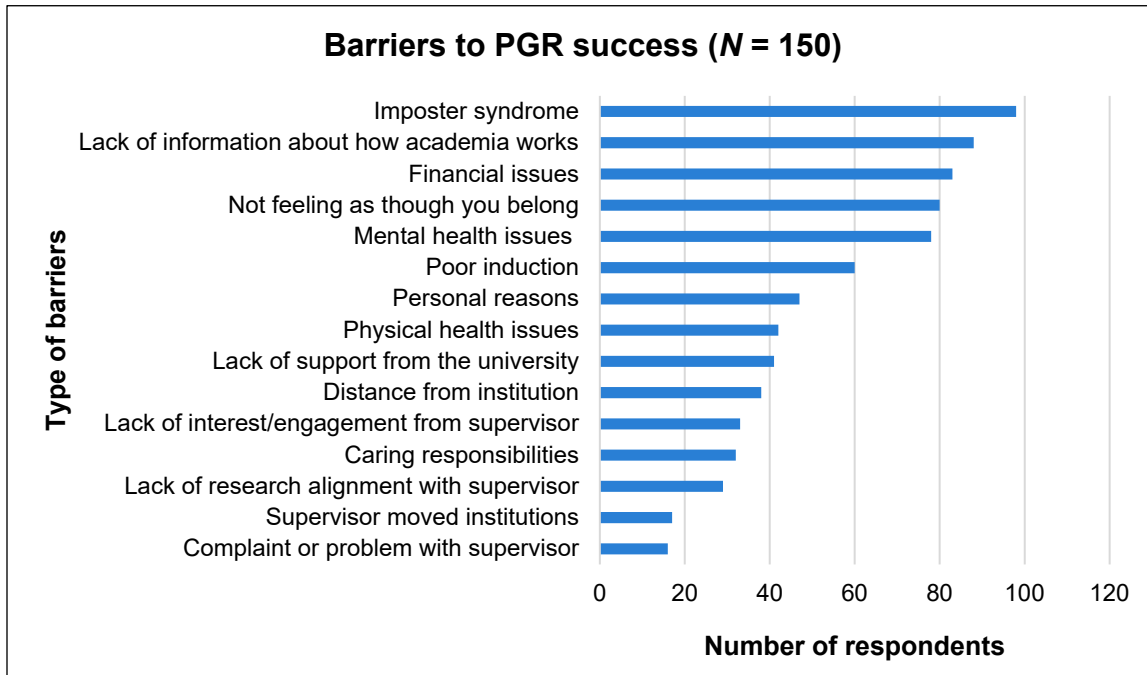
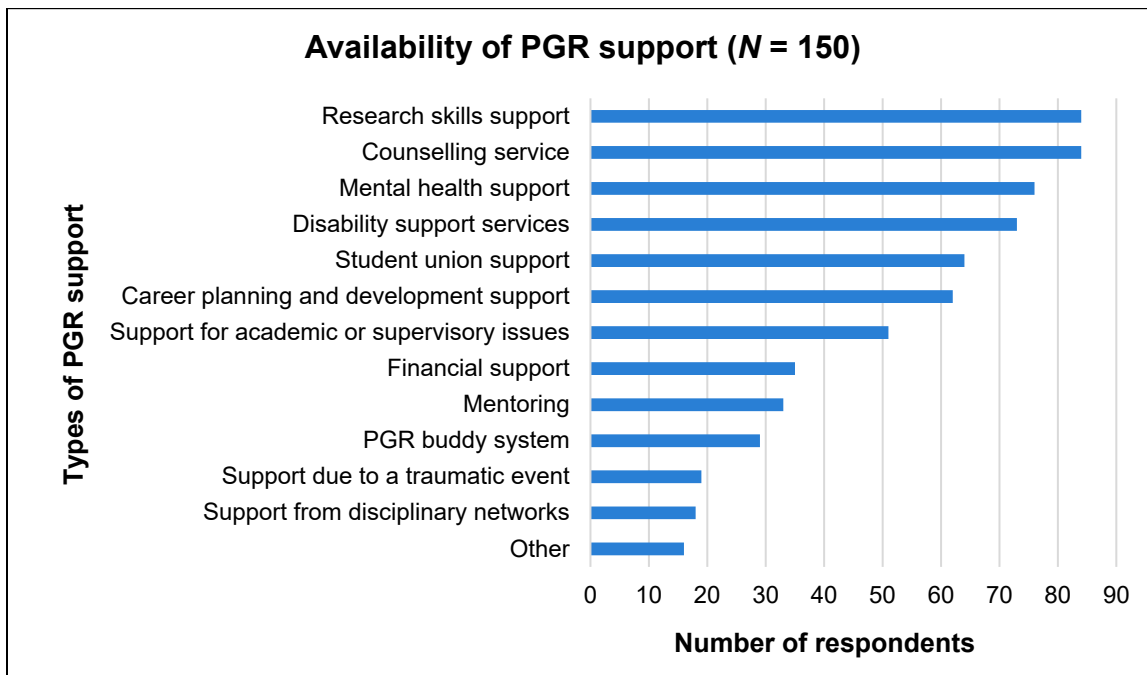


Figure 5: Availability of PGR Support



Focus group results

A summary of some of the main emerging themes and barriers to PGRs' success during the focus groups are depicted below:

PGR barriers

Financial constraints	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High cost of living • Scholarships funding issues • Self-funded students mostly financially constraints
Poor mental health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Balancing work and study as a self-funded PGR • Losing interest in topic • Lack of finances • Loneliness • COVID-19 led to working in isolation, less networking, and no sense of belonging
International PGRs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficulties finding accommodation. • Cultural differences • Language barrier • Visa issues • NHS costs
Imposter syndrome	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Insufficient support in early stages of PhD
Training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of induction training • Lack of fieldwork training
Supervisor relationship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If relationship not working well • Lack of supervisory time
Hot-desking systems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Insufficient PGR hot-desking spaces • Disparities between faculties in hot-desking systems
Caring responsibilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family commitments • Juggling between study and parenting

Recommendations and next stages

The project findings have resulted in a wide variety of suggestions on how to support the success of PGRs from diverse backgrounds. Financial support was a major emerging theme across all focus groups and survey data. Thus, loosening of hardship fund criteria, particularly, for self-funded PGRs; better signposting to funding opportunities for conferences and fieldwork; increasing support budgets and stipend, more flexibility around timelines and completion in view of other responsibilities outside of the PhD to gain additional income were suggested.

Other suggestions are grouped into the following themes illustrated in Box 1.

Box 1: Themes and accompanying recommendations

Supervisory relationship <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Recommendations around training and raising EDI awareness.• Replicating this project with academics as participants.	Opportunities <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Increasing transparency on academic recruitment positions, and providing a range of networking and connection opportunities.	Resources <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Improving understanding around processes and ensuring all PGRs have a suitable place to work as hybrid working arrangements come into place.
Wellbeing and support <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Provision of tailored support for PGRs from diverse backgrounds.• Provision of UK crash course on how to become a PGR in the UK, specifically, for international students.• Tutor support for PGRs outside of the supervisory team.	Communication and meetings <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Enhance the induction process by providing both modes (online and in-person), and recording the sessions.• Provide both online and in-person events.• Improve signposting to PGR support services.	Success <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Being clear and transparent on the identity of PGRs was suggested. For instance, students who undertake teaching and training should have access to employee benefits and regulations.

The next stages of this project will include:

- A pilot study of support interventions based on feedback from the survey and focus groups from November 2022 onwards.
- The creation of a guide that supports the success of PGRs from diverse backgrounds including approaches to measuring and monitoring success - this will be published on the [project web page](#).
- In March 2023, we will host an event for QAA Members to showcase a range of useful resources that support the learning experiences and attainment of PGRs.

You can explore QAA's other [Collaborative Enhancement Projects](#) on the QAA website.