



# POSTGRADUATE RESEARCHER ADMISSIONS REPORT

Equity in Doctoral Education through Partnership  
and Innovation (EDEPI)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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The data which inform this report were collected and analysed by Caroline Wheeler, Jessie Taylor and Isadora Rackham at Shift Learning.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

DTP	Doctoral Training Partnership
EDI	Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion
EDEPI	Equity in Doctoral Education through Partnership and Innovation
HEI	Higher Education Institution
LJMU	Liverpool John Moores University
HESA	Higher Education Statistics Agency
NEON	National Education Opportunities Network
NHS	National Health Service
NIHR	National Institute for Health and Care Research
NTU	Nottingham Trent University
OfS	Office for Students
PGT	Postgraduate Taught
PGR	Postgraduate Researchers
RE	Research England
SHU	Sheffield Hallam University
UCAS	University and College Admissions Services
UG	Undergraduate
UK	United Kingdom
UKCGE	UK Council for Graduate Education
UKRI	UK Research and Innovation
WP	Widening Participation
YCEDE	Yorkshire Consortium for Equity in Doctoral Education

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Recent events have brought Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) to the forefront of higher education policy and practice, and the way universities in the UK carry out research and innovation. Doctoral education sits at the point of connection between work to drive equality of opportunity in access and success in undergraduate and postgraduate taught programmes, and efforts to create a fairer, more open and inclusive research culture and community which is more representative of wider UK society.

Whilst a national admissions system as well as data-sharing and policy development have enabled progress in access and inclusive participation at undergraduate level, attainment and retention of individuals from some racialised backgrounds continues to be a challenge. As degree classification is currently a key criterion for postgraduate researcher (PGR) admissions and degree-awarding institution is a significant differentiator between PGR applicants in many universities, it follows that under-representation of people from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds in the doctoral population persists.

Although there is some work currently underway to address this – including the Office for Students and Research England (OfS/RE) funded projects on Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic PGR participation – there remains a great deal that we do not know about current approaches and practices in PGR admissions.

This report presents a summary of the findings from a survey on PGR admissions practices in UK HEIs that was carried out as part of the Equity in Doctoral Education through Partnership and Innovation (EDEPI) programme.

The survey was developed in partnership with the UK Council for Graduate Education (UKCGE) and was carried out by Shift Learning. It aimed to:

- ▶ target staff involved in PGR admissions to understand better the practices which may have led to the existing admissions gap;
- ▶ find examples of practice that support and enable inclusion at doctoral level; and
- ▶ highlight priority areas for improvement.

The following report sets out recommendations for groundwork and practical action to address under-representation of people from racially-minoritised groups in the doctoral population.

This work has informed the development of a **competency-based recruitment and admissions framework** which is currently being piloted at Nottingham Trent, Liverpool John Moores and Sheffield Hallam Universities in 2023/24 as a key output of the EDEPI programme.

The survey was carried out online in June and July 2022. In total, 253 responses were received from across a wide variety of staff involved in PGR admissions. 46 universities were represented in the responses.

**CREATE A FAIRER, MORE  
OPEN AND INCLUSIVE  
RESEARCH CULTURE  
AND COMMUNITY**



The survey identified ten key barriers to inclusive PGR admissions. These are outlined below:

1. PGR admissions decisions place significant weight on the pre-application period, which is unstructured, informal, and often opaque when compared with the formal process.
2. Support for finding a supervisor and developing a research proposal is less often available than information on standard admissions processes but more valuable to applicants from under-represented groups.
3. Supervisors are most likely to be the first point of contact for potential applicants, and less likely than other staff groups to know what pre-application support is available.
4. The lack of diversity in the supervisor community is a potential barrier to pre-application discussions.
5. Decision-making is weighted significantly in favour of the supervisor, even where panels and local PGR directors or equivalent have a role in the process.
6. Some supervisors continue to use applicants' Master's degrees and the degree-awarding institution as the main assessment criteria even though this a potential barrier to access for some individuals from racially-minoritised groups, due to systemic inequalities earlier in the higher education system.
7. Data is not typically collected on doctoral enquirers (those who do not progress to formal application) and unsuccessful applicants, which means that the leaks in the admissions pipeline are difficult to locate.
8. Data capture in general is inconsistent which makes sector benchmarking difficult.
9. Staff involved in admissions are uncertain about what data are held and how data can be accessed, which makes it challenging for universities to identify areas of good practice and to target areas for improvement.
10. Application processes are not standardised even within the same universities.

Suggestions for practical action which can be taken at institutional and individual level to address each of these barriers are set out in detail in the recommendations section on pages 33 to 36.

Areas of focus for university-level action to ensure PGR admissions become more equitable and inclusive are summarised below:

1. Consider how the pre-application period for doctoral degrees can be made more structured, open, and transparent.
2. Review existing pre-application support strategies for fit with applicant needs and known inequalities related to social and cultural capital.
3. Explore training to support staff to engage fully with doctoral enquirers and to signpost confidently to all aspects of pre-application support.
4. Ensure faculty colleagues from racially-minoritised groups are visible and accessible to doctoral enquirers or potential applicants.
5. Ensure supervisor training on equality, diversity and inclusion includes practical examples related to PGR recruitment and admissions.
6. Explore mechanisms for all staff involved in PGR recruitment and admissions to engage critically with the process and challenge assumptions and prejudices, should they arise, in constructive conversations.
7. Review assessment criteria and their relative weighting, in the light of attainment and access gaps for some applicants from racially-minoritised groups.
8. Explore any disincentives for supervisors to recruit applicants who do not meet current standard criteria in terms of Master's qualifications.
9. Review gaps in current PGR admissions data collection, reporting and availability to staff.
10. Explore ways to standardise and streamline PGR admissions processes and how these can be clearly presented as part of the institutional pre-application support offer.



# INTRODUCTION

Recent social and political events have propelled EDI to the forefront of policy and practice in higher education and research and innovation. Campaigns such as 'Oxford Rhodes Must Fall', 'Decolonise Higher Education' and 'Why isn't my Professor Black?' have posed searching questions of the sector about systemic and structural barriers to inclusive participation.

Research funders have responded with initiatives such as the Anti-racist Principles, Guidance and Toolkit (Wellcome, 2021) and the Race Equality Framework (NIHR, 2022). Most recently UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) published their equality, diversity and inclusion strategy for researchers in March 2023. At the same time, the Office for Students regulates equality of opportunity with a focus on taught programmes through current access and participation plans. Other professional organisations, charities, networks, and advocacy groups continue to work to enhance equity and social justice in higher education and society.

## National Education Opportunities Network

Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education

National Network of Education for Care Leavers

Forum for Access and Continuing Education

Higher Education Race Action Group (jisc list)

Leading Routes

Black British Academics

Advance HE's Race Equality Charter has provided a framework through which institutions have been able to identify and reflect on institutional and cultural barriers to inclusion in higher education since 2016. At an institutional level many universities have published race equality toolkits in recent years.

Advance HE – Race Equality Charter

UCL Advancing Race Equality Toolkit

Queen Mary Race Equality Toolkit

University of Leeds Anti-Racism Toolkit

Rates of participation in higher education at an undergraduate level have been higher amongst British people from racially-

minoritised groups than their White counterparts since the 1990s (Broecke and Hamed, 2008). By 2021-22, 13% of UK-domiciled undergraduate entrants came from an Asian background, 8% were Black, 5% were from a mixed ethnic background, and 2% were from other Minority Ethnic groups (HESA, 2023). Combined, 28% of UK-domiciled undergraduate entrants in 2021-22 were from racially-minoritised groups.

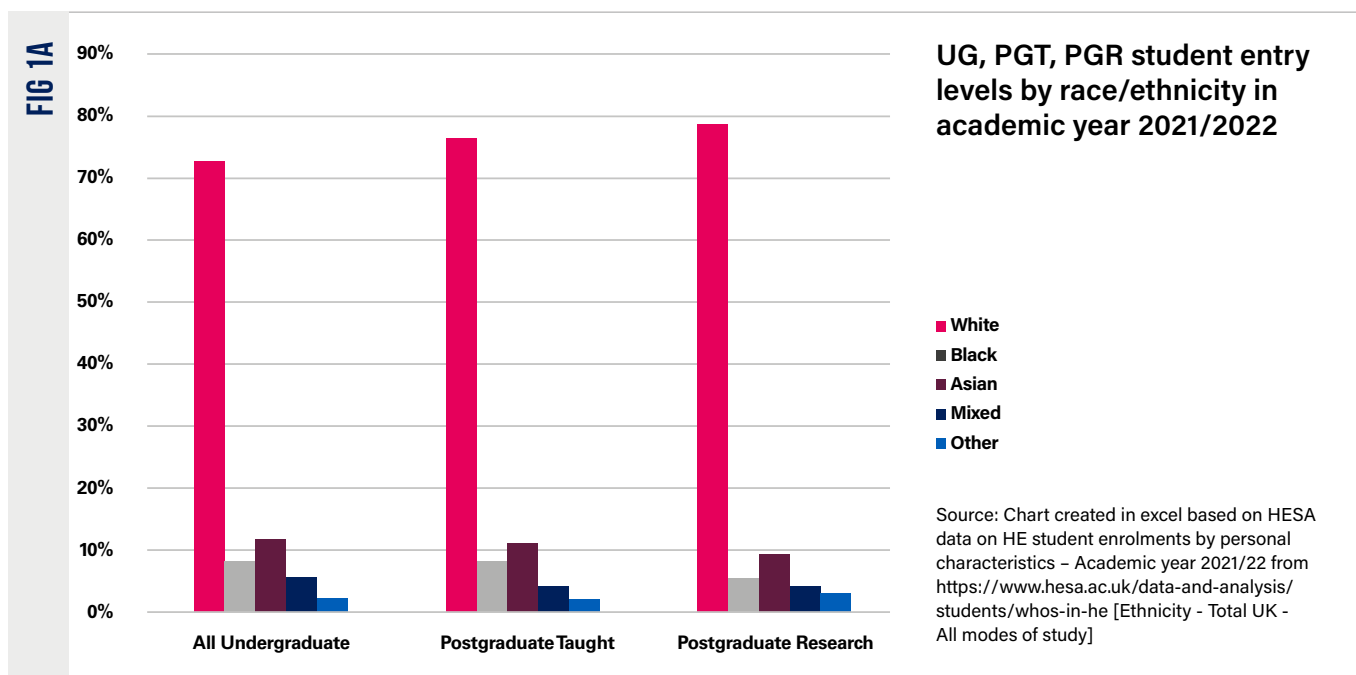
Annually from 2007 to 2021, White pupils had the lowest entry rate into higher education. Whilst applicants from racially-minoritised groups to higher-tariff, often research-intensive universities, have been historically less likely to be offered places than their comparably-qualified White British peers (Boliver, 2016; Noden, Shiner and Modood, 2014), this has also improved significantly because of data-sharing at national level and policy development. White British applicants were admitted to higher-tariff UK universities at 2.4 times the rate of Black British students in 2010, but only 1.1 to 1 in 2020 (UCAS, 2021).

Despite great progress in participation at undergraduate level, continuation and attainment for individuals from some racially-minoritised backgrounds continues to be a significant challenge.

The gap in degree outcome indicators between Black and White students has increased to 20.0 percentage points in 2021-22, after having reduced to 18.3% in the previous academic year. The attainment indicators dropped for both groups in 2021-22, but the larger decrease for Black students had the effect of increasing the gap (OfS, 2023). 39.4% of White graduates achieved a first-class degree, compared with 20.0% of Black graduates, which were the highest and lowest percentages out of all ethnic groups in 2020-21 (RDU, 2022).

In the Access and Participation Plans submitted to the Office for Students by England's 25 higher-tariff providers, almost all institutions reported large attainment gaps by ethnicity, often 10-12 percentage points (Boliver and Powell, 2021). The size of the gap in continuation and attainment is such that the OfS has required universities in the UK to take action to eliminate the unexplained gap in degree outcomes between White students and Black students by 2024-25, and to fix the absolute gap that is caused by both structural and unexplained factors by the end of the decade (OfS, 2022).

As degree classification is currently a major requirement for access to doctoral level study, and degree-awarding institution is a significant differentiator in many universities' doctoral admissions practice, it is not surprising that under-representation of PGRs from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds persists. New UK-domiciled entrants into postgraduate research in 21-22 comprised: 79% White, 9% Asian, 5% Black, 4% mixed and 3% from other ethnic backgrounds.



**Figure (1a)** above shows the difference in participation of racial or ethnic minority groups at undergraduate, postgraduate taught and postgraduate research levels in 2021-22

There have been recent investments in activity across the sector to address the PGR admissions gap. Initiatives have included a growing number of doctoral studentships that are ringfenced for applicants from under-represented groups, publication of good practice guides to inclusive PGR recruitment and admissions, and the 13 Office for Students and Research England-funded projects to support the work to widen participation and improve access for Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic groups into doctoral education.

The rest of this report comprises: definition of terms, an introduction to the EDEPI programme, context to the work, methodology and the profile of survey respondents. This is followed by the survey findings which are presented in four subsections: pre-application, formal application and selection, admission, and data collection and equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) policy implementation.

Informed by survey results and analysis, recommendations for institutional and individual action to make PGR admissions more equitable and inclusive comprise the final section.

#### **Birkbeck Diversity100 PhD Studentships**

**Leeds University, Faculty of Social Sciences - Doctoral scholarships for applicants from UK Black, Asian and underrepresented ethnic minority communities**

**The Equator Project three evidence-based interventions to increase racial and ethnic diversity in Geography and Environmental Sciences research**

**University of Nottingham, Research Academy EDI in PGR Recruitment Guide**

**Widening Access and Valuing Diversity in Scottish Graduate School in the Social Sciences**

**BARRIERS TO DOCTORAL EDUCATION Equality, Diversity and Inclusion for Postgraduate Research Students at UCL**

**Research England and Office for Students projects to improve Black, Asian and minority ethnic students' access to postgraduate research**



## 2.1 TERMINOLOGY

The authors of this report acknowledge the importance of honouring the unique experiences of those currently under-represented across research communities in the UK. This starts with the language and terminology we use.

Across the sector, a variety of different terms are used in policy circles, reporting and academic literature to refer collectively to individuals from different ethnic backgrounds. These terms include Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME), People of Colour (PoC) and Black and Minority Ethnic groups (BMEs). Through use of such terms, individuals from a variety of different ethnic backgrounds are homogenised, and their experiences and differential outcomes within the context of higher education and society can be overlooked.

We have chosen to use the term 'racially-minoritised' as a clearer articulation of the marginalisation and prejudice relating to existing racial hierarchy in the UK, following direct consultation with postgraduate researchers, and informed by the literature on race in academic spaces, and contemporary discourse within groups such as Black British Academics.

We also choose to capitalise both 'Black' and 'White' where we use these terms to refer to ethnicity. We believe that it is important to call attention to 'White' as a race to highlight how the social construction of 'Whiteness' functions in society.

Through the EDEPI project, we will continue to consult with our stakeholders who are postgraduate researchers from racially-minoritised groups to ensure our use of language is appropriate and captures the experiences of those on the periphery of doctoral education most accurately. As a project team, we also welcome further discussion on this area through our dedicated [LinkedIn page](#).

## 2.2 ABOUT THE EDEPI PROJECT

The Equity in Doctoral Education through Partnership and Innovation (EDEPI) project is one of 13 **Research England and Office for Students funded projects** created to tackle persistent inequalities that create barriers to access and participation in doctoral education for doctoral candidates from racially-minoritised groups.

The EDEPI project is divided into three distinct work packages targeting recruitment, admissions, and transition as critical points of systemic inequality, through sector-leading initiatives delivered at Nottingham Trent University (NTU), Sheffield Hallam University (SHU) and Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU).

### WORK PACKAGE ONE

This work package involves a work-based partnership approach to PGR recruitment, delivering a pre-doctoral outreach programme and a part-time doctoral programme, co-created with NHS partners across Nottingham, Sheffield, and Liverpool, to meet the needs of their highly-skilled staff from racially-minoritised groups.

The pre-doctoral outreach programme comprises a series of workshops designed to demystify PGR study through clear dissemination of information, networking opportunities with supervisors, and practical support for NHS staff throughout the proposal development and application process.

Fee waivers and ring-fenced paid time at work are available for NHS staff who are successful in their part-time PhD applications, as well as cross-Trust networking opportunities and access to personal development workshops throughout the duration of their studies.

### WORK PACKAGE TWO

This work package drives a step-change in inclusive doctoral admissions practice through the co-production and pilot of a novel competency-based admissions framework, in partnership with the UK Council for Graduate Education. **The framework** is designed to address inequality at scale by shifting the focus in admissions decisions from applicants' measurable academic track record and previous awarding institution to the competencies required to undertake postgraduate research study.

The results of the survey presented in this report have supported the development of EDEPI's competency-based admissions framework which is currently being piloted at NTU, SHU and LJMU.

### WORK PACKAGE THREE

This work package delivers a series of workshops to support the creation of a more inclusive research culture and positively impact on the retention, progression, and wellbeing of PGRs from racially-minoritised groups.

The workshops are designed to: create space for Doctoral School staff and supervisors to examine their current practice and their individual roles in perpetuating the inequalities that exist in doctoral education for PGR from racially-minoritised groups, and to help current PGR to connect, share their experiences and gain the knowledge, insights and language to support them in navigating the Academy and articulating their experiences.

# BACKGROUND

The representation of racially-minoritised groups at doctoral level lags behind population profiles at undergraduate and postgraduate taught levels. Within the postgraduate research community, there are significant differences between research-intensive universities and their business-facing, post-92 counterparts. Access to studentship funding is also unequal.

The ethnic profile of the entire UK-domiciled PGR population in 2021-22 was 17 % Black, Asian or mixed ethnic backgrounds; 3 % were recorded as 'other' (HESA, 2023). There has been a steady rise in the representation of racially-minoritised groups over the last five years of three percentage points (Smith McGloin and Wynne, 2022), but the rate remains significantly below taught postgraduate (21 %) and all undergraduate programmes (25 %). Just as was historically the case with undergraduate admission to higher tariff providers, Russell Group universities report the lowest ethnic diversity. University Alliance and Million Plus Mission Group member universities show 25% and 26% Black, Asian or mixed ethnic backgrounds respectively in 2021-22 (HESA, 2022). Studentship allocation favours White postgraduate researchers, although there is some variance between disciplines. UKRI data show that of all studentship awards made between 2014-15 and 2020-21, 9% were awarded to individuals from Black, Asian or mixed ethnic backgrounds (UKRI, 2021). Williams et al. (2019) highlighted the link between the 'BME' attainment gap at undergraduate level and the experiences of Black (African and Caribbean) British students seeking research council funded postgraduate places.

Key barriers beyond the structural inequality related to the attainment gap (Cramer, 2021) and unequal access to funding include: a lack of awareness of doctoral education amongst some Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic community groups (Lindner, 2020), and lack of access to appropriate information, advice and guidance on application and funding processes related to doctoral education (Williams et al., 2019).

Universities UK and the National Union of Students (UUK & NUS, 2019, UUK 2022) identified feelings of isolation and a reduced sense of belonging as key issues for Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic student engagement and attainment. The extent to which negative experiences at undergraduate level influence the decisions made by graduates from racially-minoritised groups not to apply for doctoral study has not been fully explored. However, Burt et al. (2020) identified

racial under-representation as a systemic inequality that is a potential causal factor for PGR imposter syndrome from some racialised groups. It follows that imposter syndrome could deter applications to doctoral study in the first place; particularly as lack of 'belongingness' appears to be a defining characteristic of the lived experiences of individuals from racially-minoritised backgrounds who begin a doctoral degree (Collet and Avelis, 2013; Osbourne, Amer, Blackwood and Barnett, 2023). Stentiford et al. (2021) highlighted additional challenges in the development of academic identities amongst under-represented or non-traditional researchers from minoritised backgrounds. The wider literature on doctoral education identifies difficulties for PGRs of all ethnicities related to imposter syndrome (Chakraverty, 2019; Sverdlik, Hall and McAlpine, 2020) and the development of a sense of worth, competence (Litalien and Guay, 2015) academic identity (Sverdlik et al., 2018) and socialisation into the research community (Handforth, 2022; Nerad, 2011).

Smith McGloin and Wynne (2022) report a widespread ambition amongst graduate schools or equivalent to increase the size and diversity of the doctoral population significantly. Work is already underway, some funded by the Office for Students and Research England, to develop more inclusive research cultures and to improve the learning and working environment for doctoral candidates from under-represented groups. The area of PGR admissions remains a key barrier to widening access that has historically been quite hidden and poorly understood (Mellors-Bourne et al., 2014). Anecdotally, wide variations in practice across and between institutions persist, despite some standardisation in recent years which has been driven by the shift to cohort-based doctoral training. In doctoral training partnerships, admissions are often now managed centrally in universities and/or frequently delivered in partnership with other collaborating institutions which has imposed some agreed, standard processes on application review, interviews and offer criteria. However, there still appears to be little standardisation of the kinds of data collected that would allow benchmarking or calibration across the sector (Smith McGloin and Wynne, 2022).

Based on the literature, it follows that to drive greater equity in PGR admissions, universities need to develop new ways to increase awareness and information about pathways into the doctorate that reach individuals from racially-minoritised groups effectively. Universities also need to break the cycle of under-representation and address related issues of lack of belonging and imposter syndrome in the same groups. To do this, everyone involved in PGR admissions requires a better, clearer understanding of the existing processes and practices that have produced and reproduced inequalities.

The next section sets out the approach to conducting the PGR admissions survey and the profile of respondents.

# METHODOLOGY

The survey comprised 30 questions, of which three were open. The questions explored institutional practices across four areas:

- (i) pre-application;
- (ii) formal application and selection;
- (iii) admission; and
- (iv) data collection and policy implementation related to equality, diversity, and inclusion.

The survey was piloted in advance of wider circulation and additions were made to some of the question options. It was published online and was available to complete from 13 June 2022 to 31 July 2022. 253 responses were received in total from across a wide variety of roles involved in PGR admissions. 46 higher education institutions were represented in the responses from Mission Groups including Russell Group, University Alliance, Guild HE, and Million Plus. 'Unaffiliated' and 'Other' institutions were also included. Respondents were recruited via UKCGE social media channels and via email. To encourage participation, respondents were incentivised to enter a £250 prize draw. The survey finally ended with (n=179) complete responses and (n=74) partial responses. Partial responses to Q1 to Q15 have been included to capture as many voices as possible. The study results were quantitatively analysed through descriptive statistics and qualitatively analysed by identifying both broad and narrow thematic areas in respondents' narratives.

## 4.1 SURVEY ETHICS AND CONFIDENTIALITY

A favourable ethics opinion for the survey was granted by the ethics committee at Liverpool John Moores University on the 26th of May 2022. Ethical considerations that ultimately led to the launching of the survey, inter alia, included the appropriateness of incentivising respondents, the legal requirement to maintain respondent's (individual's) confidentiality under the Data Protection Act (1998), and adherence to institutional research ethics, standard operating procedures, and data management regimes.

## 4.2 PROFILE OF RESPONDENTS

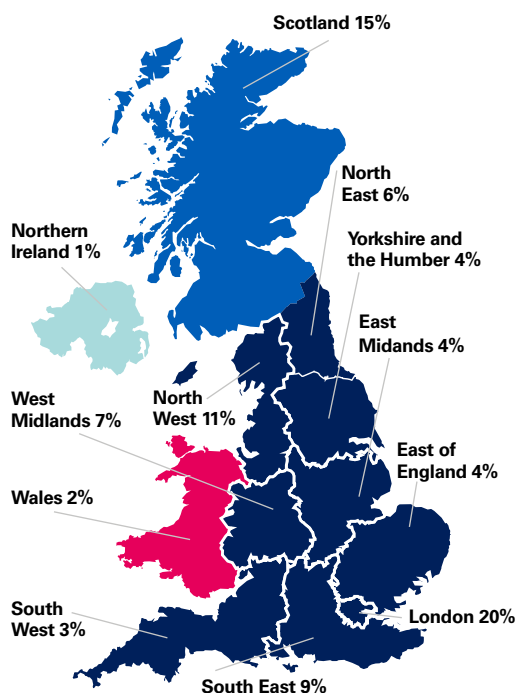
Figure 1b (overleaf) shows respondents' universities by geographical location and Mission Group, and the proportion of universities that took a devolved, centralised, or other approach to PGR recruitment. This figure also shows the profile of survey respondents by reported level of responsibility, department/discipline, and job role. More responses were received from research-intensive universities than any other group and most respondent institutions handled PGR admissions at departmental or faculty level.

**THE STUDY RESULTS WERE QUANTITATIVELY ANALYSED THROUGH DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS AND QUALITATIVELY ANALYSED BY IDENTIFYING BOTH BROAD AND NARROW THEMATIC AREAS IN RESPONDENTS' NARRATIVES.**

FIG 1B

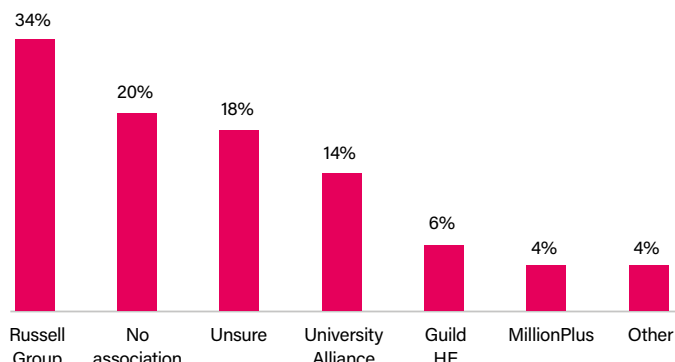
Profile of respondents

Q. Where are you currently working?

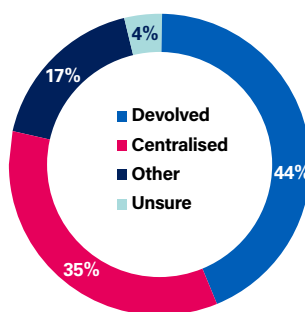


Region and university association base n = 181 Base n = 253

Q. Which of the following is your university associated with?



Q: At your institution, is recruitment and admissions ...



Centralised = within a graduate school or equivalent

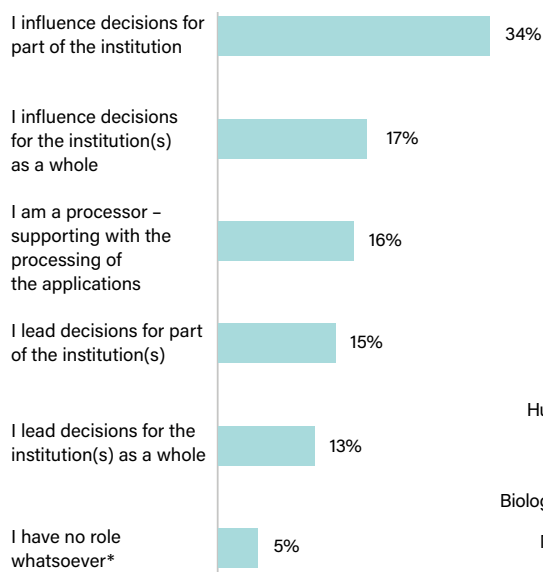
Devolved = handled locally by department/faculty

Respondents who selected 'other' specified that it was a combination – different parts of the process were devolved and others handled centrally

FIG 1C

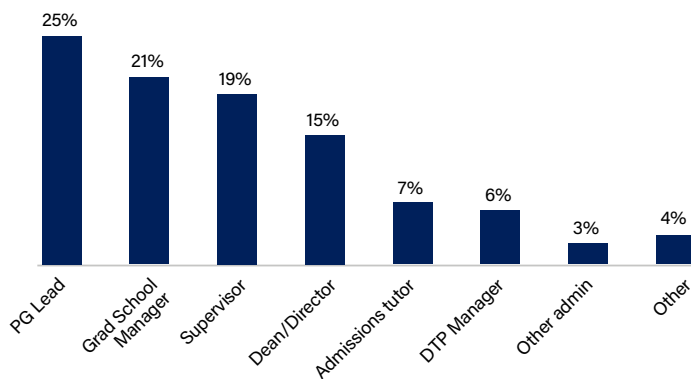
Role of respondents

Q: What level of responsibility do you have in admitting doctoral candidates at your university?

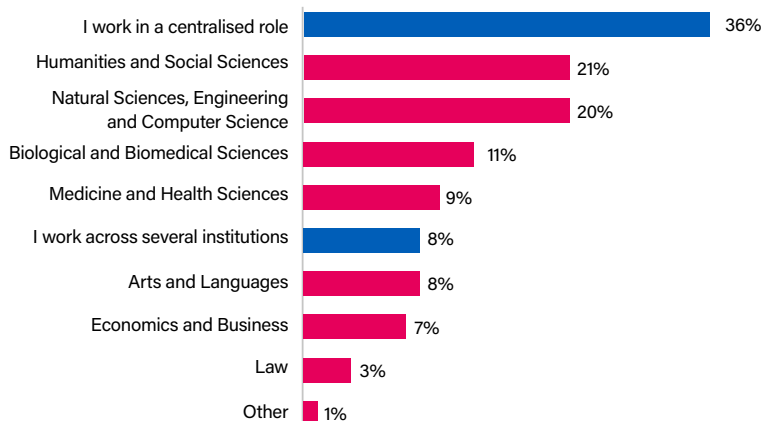


Base n = 253

Q: Which of the following best describes your job role?



Q: Which discipline/faculty are you based in?



# SUMMARY OF SURVEY RESPONSES AND THEMES

This section begins with a summary of survey responses in four principal areas: pre-application, formal application and selection, admission, and data collection and implementation of EDI policies. This is followed by a representation of themes arising from an analysis of the free-text responses.

## 5.1 PRE-APPLICATION

A lack of awareness about what a doctorate is and difficulties finding information, advice, and guidance on the application processes for admission and for funding have previously been identified as barriers for potential applicants from racially-minoritised groups.

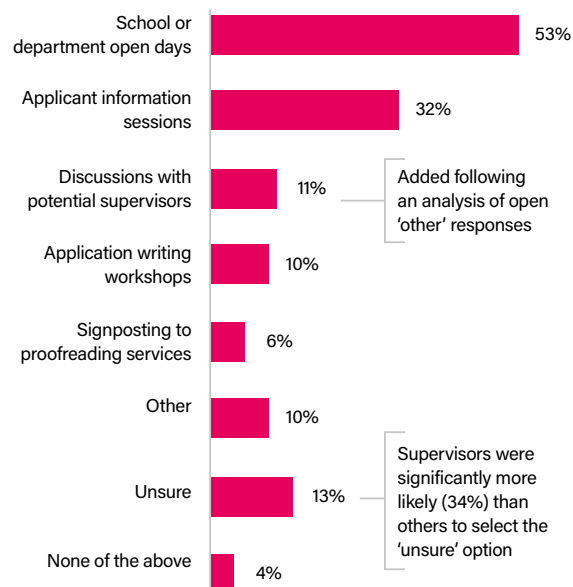
The survey explored ways in which universities give advice or guidance on how to access PGR opportunities. It sought to understand how future candidates are supported in identifying potential supervisors prior to application.

**Figure 2** shows the range of pre-application support strategies available. More than half of respondents indicated that their institution used open days at school or department level, whereas more focused or tailored support through applicant information sessions or writing workshops was much less common. Supervisors are likely to be a first point of contact with potential applicants through open days, discussions, and application writing workshops. However, the survey responses suggested that supervisors were much less likely than other staff groups to be sure of the pre-application support strategies their university delivered.

The survey findings also showed a range of inclusive practices designed to reach under-represented groups in advertising and information-sharing about doctoral study (**Fig. 2b, below**). The most common was including diverse role models in promotional materials.

FIG 2

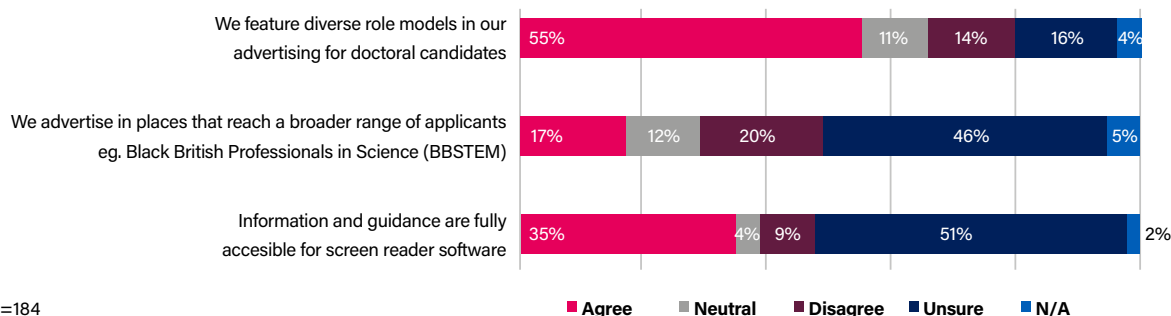
Q: Which of the following elements of pre-application support do you offer at your institution?



Base n = 253

FIG 2B

### Inclusive practices in PGR advertising and information-sharing

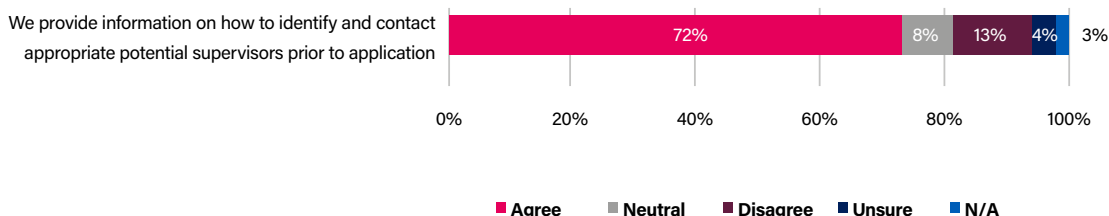


Base n = 184

Whilst the majority of respondents indicated that their university provided information to applicants on how to contact potential supervisors, still more than a quarter reported that their institution did not provide this type of support (Fig. 3, below).

FIG 3

### Contacting potential supervisors



Base n = 187 \* Base n = 170, question added after pilot

At the same time, 93% of respondents overall reported that discussions with supervisors always or sometimes took place prior to application. This could suggest a support gap for some applicants who need help navigating the internal structures of universities to find a suitable supervisor and to engage supervisors effectively in preliminary discussions about their research interests. It also raises questions about the sector's understanding of 'doctoral enquirers' who may make preliminary enquiries that go unanswered, or who may not be successful in finding a supervisor willing to support their formal application. The role played by supervisors as gatekeepers to the formal application process for doctoral study requires further exploration beyond the scope of this report.

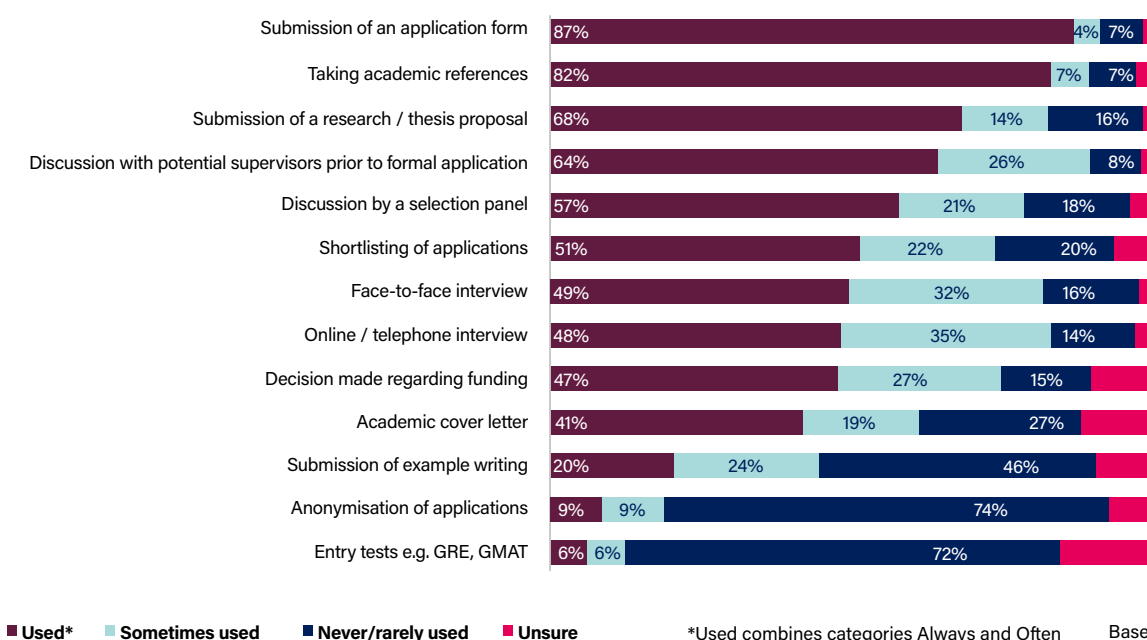
## 5.2 FORMAL APPLICATION AND SELECTION

The formal application process is a significant part of doctoral recruitment and admissions. Figure 4 below describes the variety of steps in the application journey as reported by the survey respondents and the lack of standardisation around core elements beyond an application form and academic references.

FIG 4

### Steps in the application journey

Q: How often are the following steps included in the application journey for UK-domiciled doctoral candidates that you are most involved with at your institution?

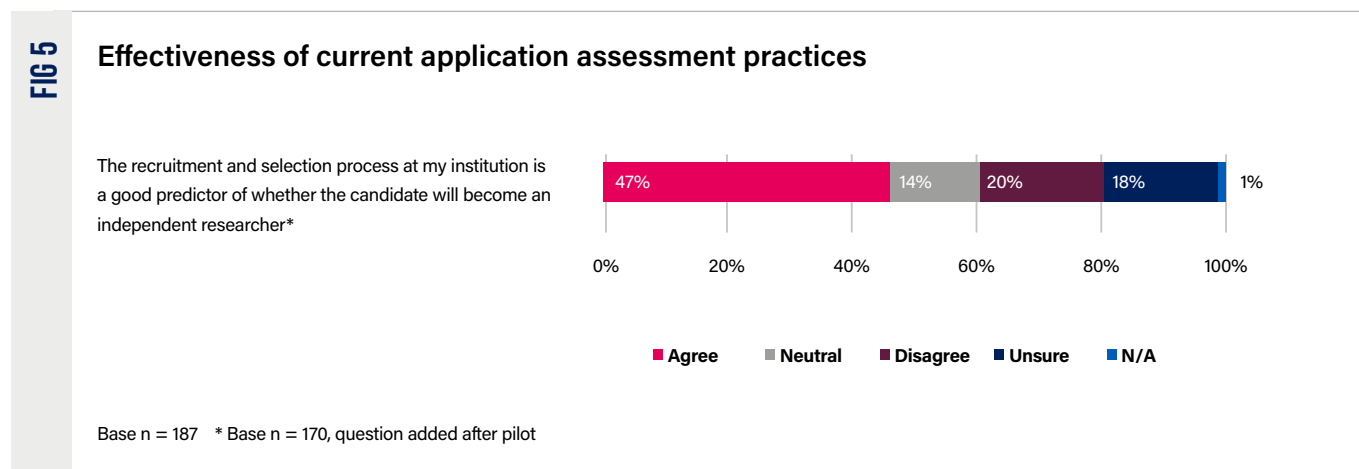


\*Used combines categories Always and Often

Base n = 250-253



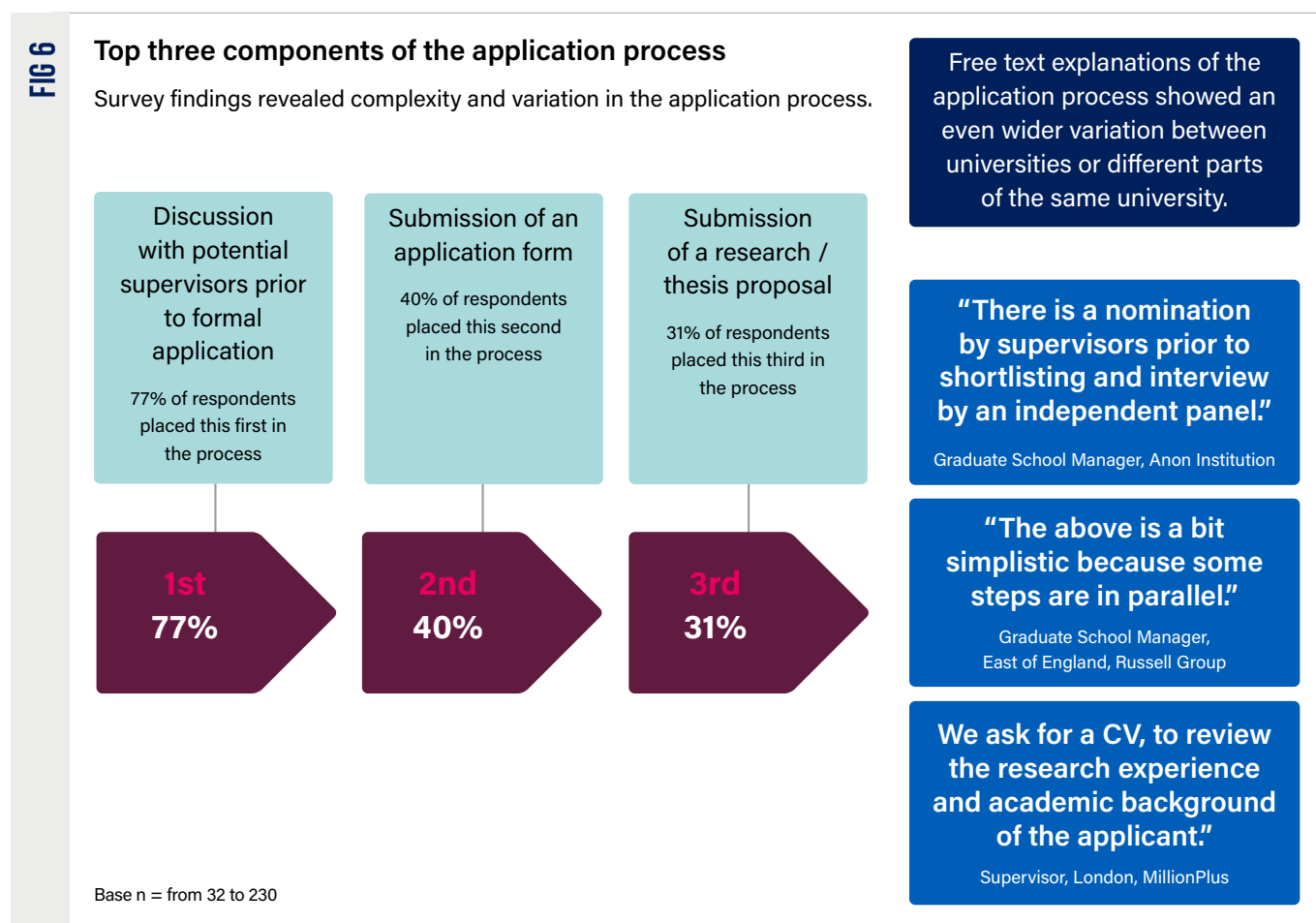
Despite the wide variety of tools reported to be used in the assessment of applications, less than half (47%) of respondents considered that the recruitment and selection process at their institution was a good predictor of whether the applicant/candidate would become a competent independent researcher (Fig. 5, below).



Whilst formal processes vary between institutions, the starting point is often the submission of an application form which provides information about the applicant's personal details, educational attainment, motivations – sometimes in a covering letter, programme of study, references (or details of referees) and a research proposal. Assessment of the application form and research proposal usually leads to a decision to invite the applicant to interview or not. 81% of respondents reported that a face-to-face interview is used or sometimes used as part of the application journey.

References still play a significant role in the application process although the point at which they are taken up and the guidance on who might be eligible to act as a referee varies.

Figure 6 below summarises usage of the common component parts of the application process according to the survey respondents.



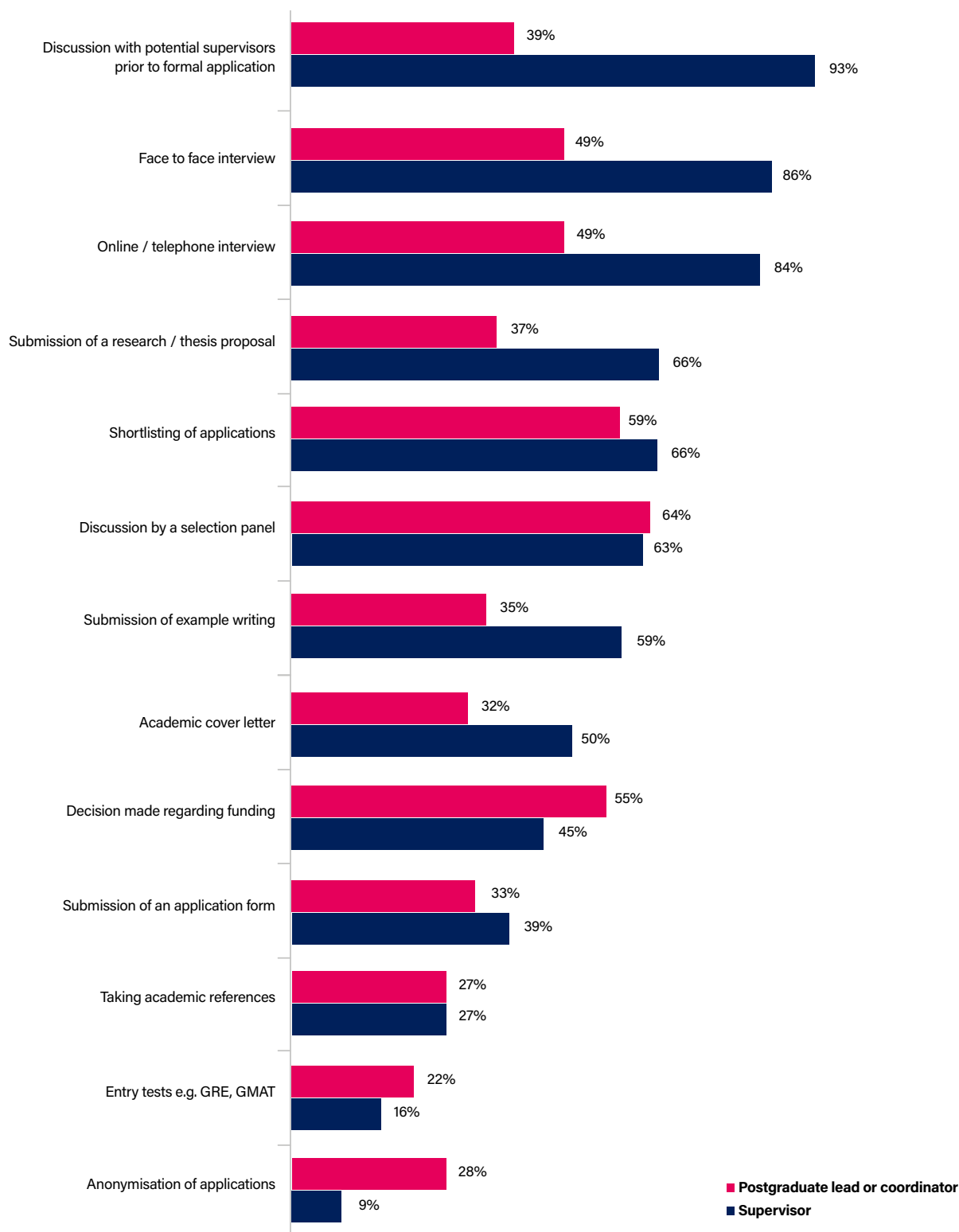


The figure below shows the differing roles played by the Postgraduate Research Lead or Coordinator and Supervisors across aspects of the application journey. It demonstrates the significant influence of supervisors in the majority of assessment processes.

FIG 7

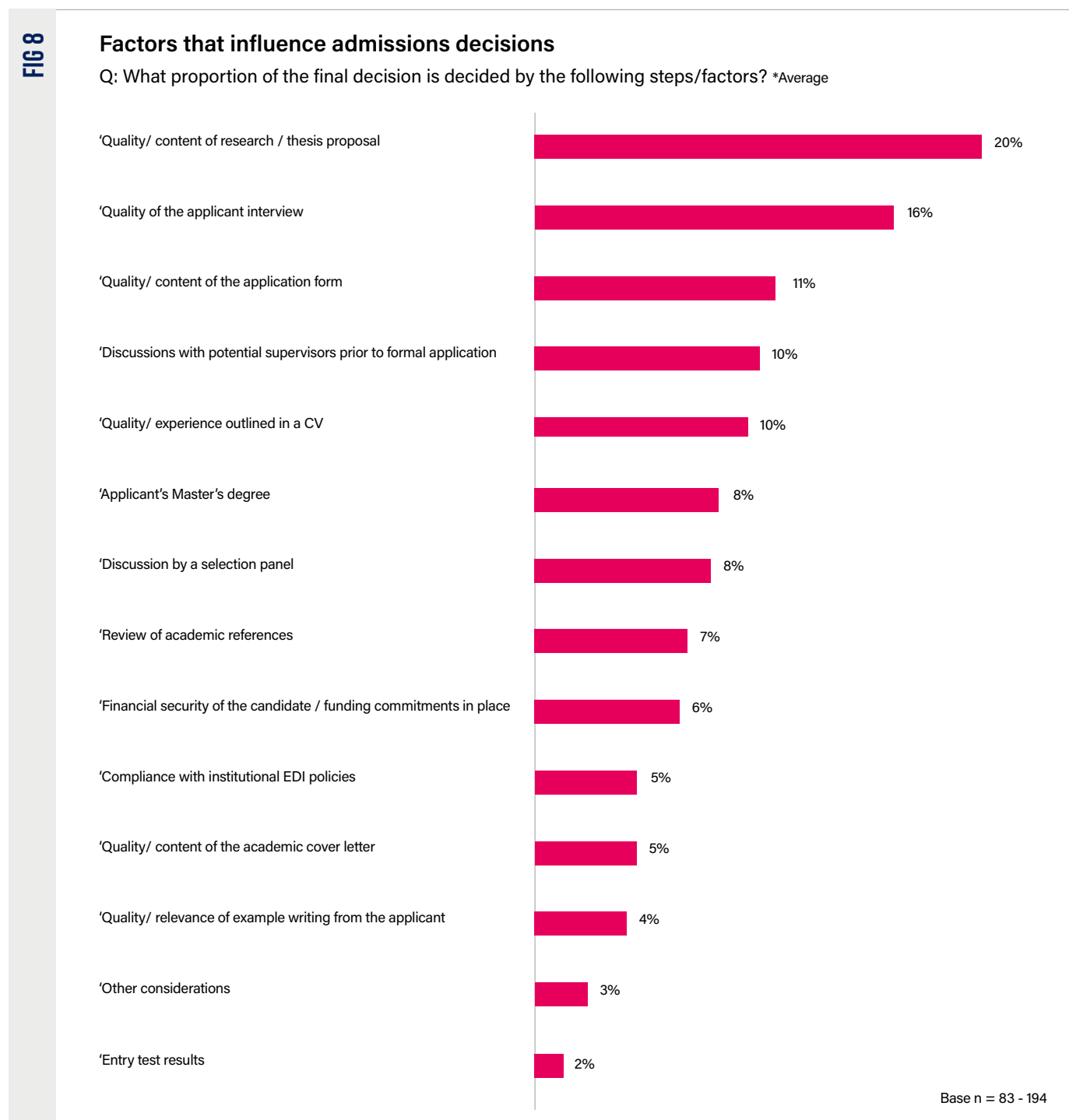
### Roles played by Postgraduate Research Lead/Coordinator and Supervisors

Q: Who is involved at each of these stages in the application journey for the UK-domiciled doctoral candidates that you are most involved with at your institution?



Base n = 5 - 230

The figure below describes the relative weighting of the component parts of PGR admissions processes, according to respondents.



The significance given to the Master's qualification highlights a potential inequality in some admissions processes. The funding system at postgraduate level continues to create financial barriers to postgraduate study which have not been entirely resolved by recent reforms to postgraduate loans. Whilst the introduction of Master's loans was found to have significantly widened access to postgraduate education, these gains are potentially short-lived. The loan value was insufficient to cover living costs when it was first introduced, and a combination of tuition fee inflation and the significant rise in the cost of living, post-pandemic, is eroding the ability of the loans to make postgraduate study viable (Mateos-González and Wakeling, 2021). In addition, given that some racially-minoritised individuals come from Islamic backgrounds, the lack of Alternative Student Finance for Muslim students continues to disadvantage those who do not take interest-bearing loans (Pollard et al., 2019).

**Figure 8** above also underlines the importance that is afforded to discussions with potential supervisors prior to the formal application and in the decision-making process and therefore the role that many supervisors play as gatekeepers to application.

Figure 9 (below) highlights which other roles make or influence decisions as part of the formal application process. Deans or Directors of Graduate Schools appeared in responses to this question as relatively significant decision-makers, alongside supervisors and postgraduate leads.

FIG 9

### Admissions decision-making power by role

Q: In terms of evaluating which UK-domiciled doctoral candidates are accepted, which of the following best describes the decision-making power of the roles below?

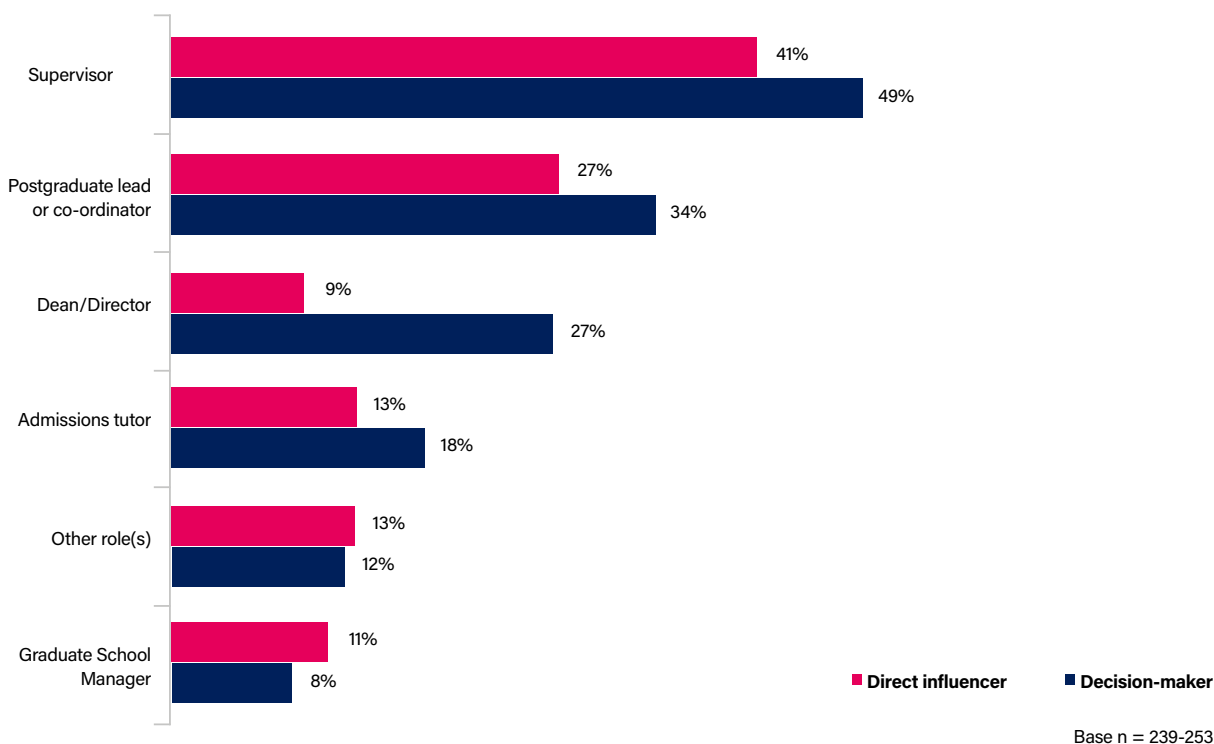


Figure 10 shows that in some instances an industrial, charitable, or public sector organisation can be directly involved in application assessment, although in most cases the process remains the same.

Where application process or assessment is changed to meet the needs of partner organisations, it is important that changes are reviewed for their impact on university objectives related to diversity and inclusion.

The survey findings also give an overview of the variations between universities regarding the number of application rounds for doctoral opportunities and the length of the application window.

FIG 10

### Admissions with partner organisations

Q: Do you alter your admissions processes when an industrial/charitable/public sector organisation is involved?

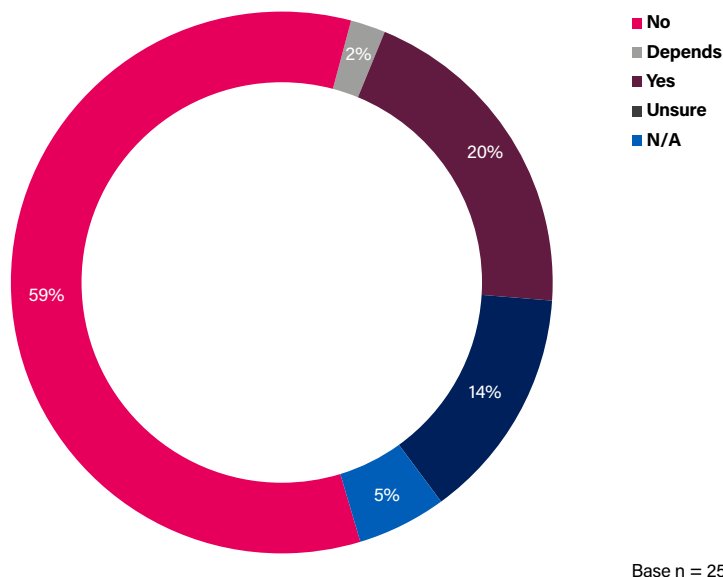
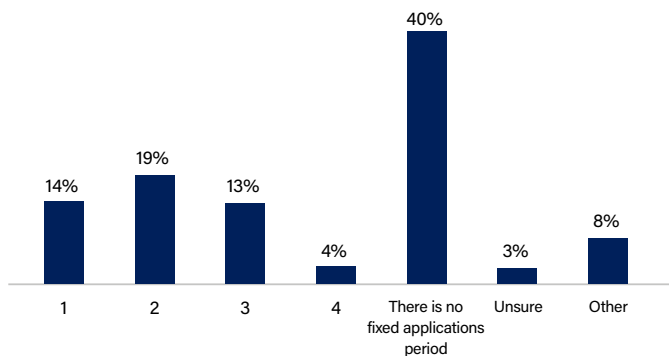


FIG 11

### Number of application rounds to doctoral study per academic year

Q: How many applications rounds do you have for the doctoral admissions process?



Base n = 253

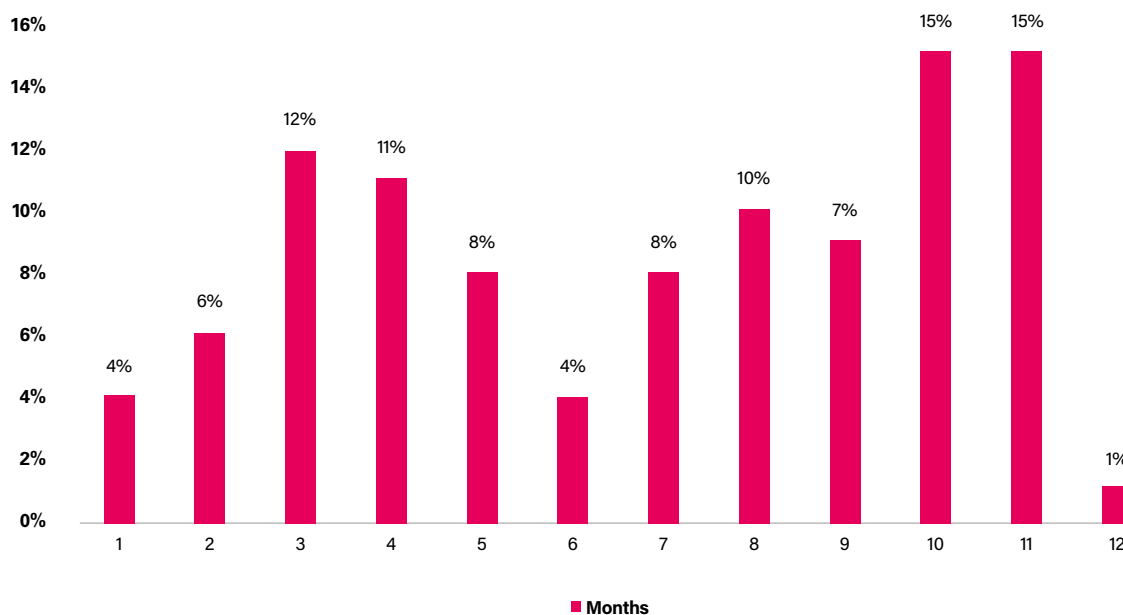
Figure 11 below shows that most institutions run between one and four rounds of applications. 40% of respondents reported that there was no fixed application period.

Using an October 2022 start date as a fixed point, respondents were asked to report when the application period had begun in their university for this entry point. Responses were highly variable, as indicated in Figure 12, below.

The variation between institutions on the number of application rounds and the duration of application windows creates complexity and makes advice and guidance on application and funding processes related to doctoral education difficult to provide at sector level. Further, it creates challenges for potential applicants to navigate across different universities.

FIG 12

### Application periods



Base n = 101

## 5.3 ADMISSIONS

Once the informal and formal application process for a doctoral degree is complete, a formal conditional or unconditional offer is made. Additional requirements usually include completion of a prior degree at an agreed classification or fulfilment of English Language or visa requirements.

Reported admissions success rates vary significantly across survey respondents.

**Q: To the best of your knowledge, how many of the applicants which apply are successful?\***

32% of respondents were unsure how many applicants were successful

15% of respondents said that 11-20% of applicants were successful

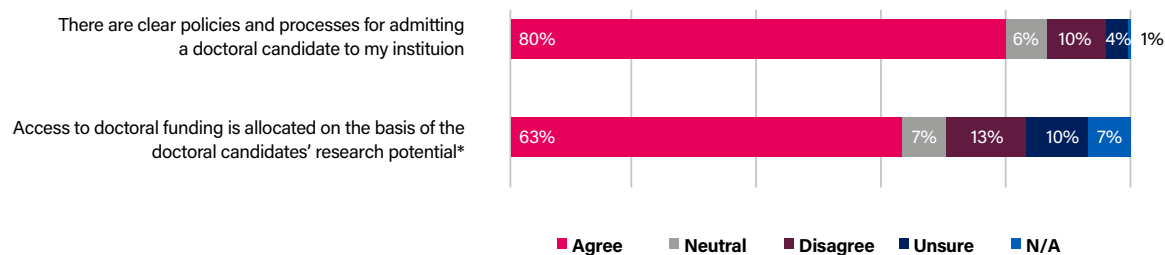
2% of respondents said that less than 5% of applicants were successful

Base n = 206

Only 63% of survey respondents reported that the process of admission was transparent for applicants, even though 80% felt that the admissions policies and processes were clear within their university (**Fig.13, below**). This gap might suggest a recognition amongst respondents that processes at the point of admission were not always communicated effectively.

FIG 13

### Clarity and transparency of admissions policies



Base n = 187 \* Base n = 170, question added after pilot

Statements 2 is taken from the UKRSS survey 2021

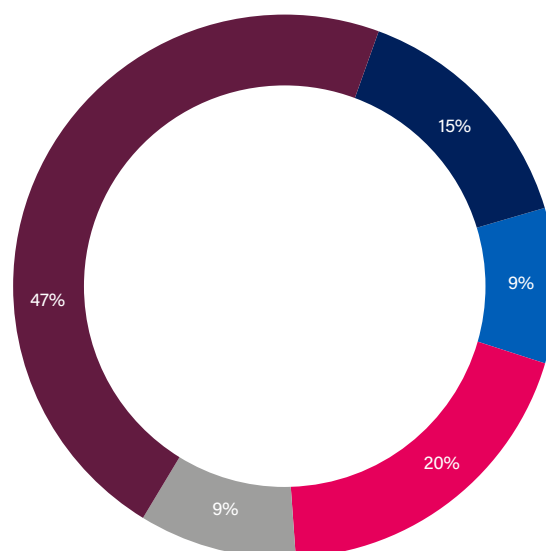
Almost half of respondents agreed that in some cases admissions paperwork is done retrospectively after a decision has already been made to admit a candidate outside of the formal process.

FIG 14

### Informal agreements

Q. In some cases, admissions teams process the application paperwork of an already agreed candidate

■ Disagree  
■ Neutral  
■ Agree  
■ Unsure  
■ N/A

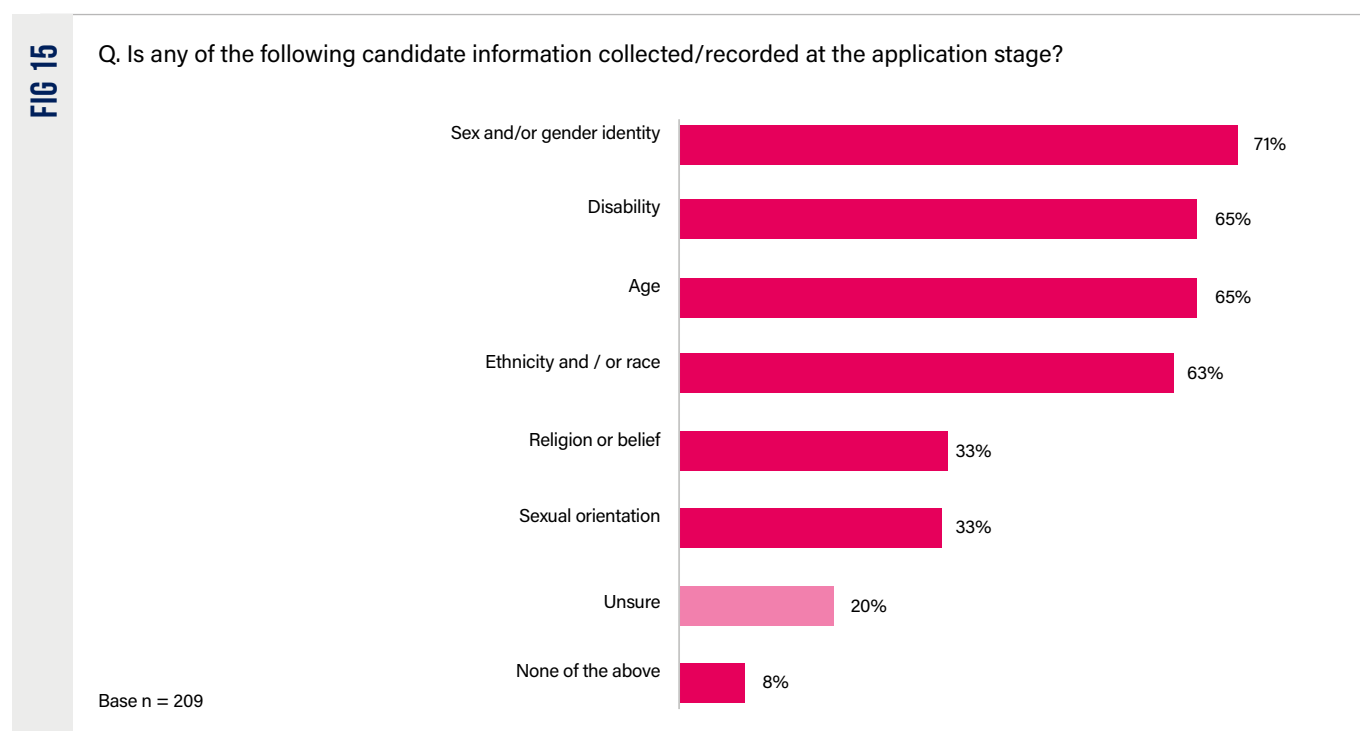


Base n = 170, question added after pilot

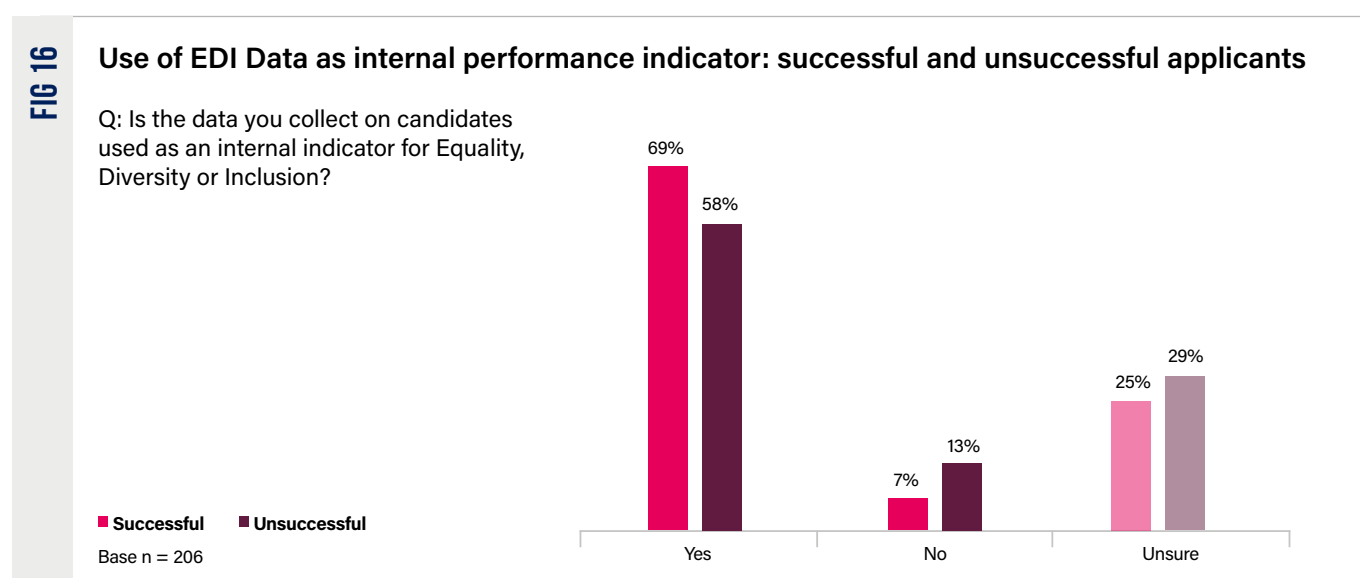
## 5.4 DATA COLLECTION AND POLICY IMPLEMENTATION – EQUALITY, DIVERSITY, AND INCLUSION

The final part of the survey explored data collection and policy implementation related to equality, diversity, and inclusion. Around two thirds of respondents reported that their institution collected and recorded data on all 'key protected characteristics' during the application stage, which the figure below suggests are: gender, disability, age, and ethnicity. Ethnicity was reported as the least commonly collected in the top four characteristics. Information on religion and sexual orientation was least frequently recorded overall. 20% of respondents suggested that they were unsure whether EDI data were collected and 8% reported that their university did not collect EDI data. Nevertheless, this shows an advancement from the findings of the UKCGE 2021 survey (Smith McGloin and Wynne, 2022) which showed 65% of respondent institutions in UK and Ireland did not record application data on gender and 68% did not record it on ethnicity.

Figure 15 below shows the common types and frequency of applicant data that are collected.



Respondents reported use of EDI application data as internal performance indicators, although this was more likely to focus on the demographic characteristics of successful rather than unsuccessful candidates, as in figure 16 below.



There was much greater uncertainty amongst respondents regarding retention of EDI data relating to unsuccessful candidates in general (Fig. 17, below).

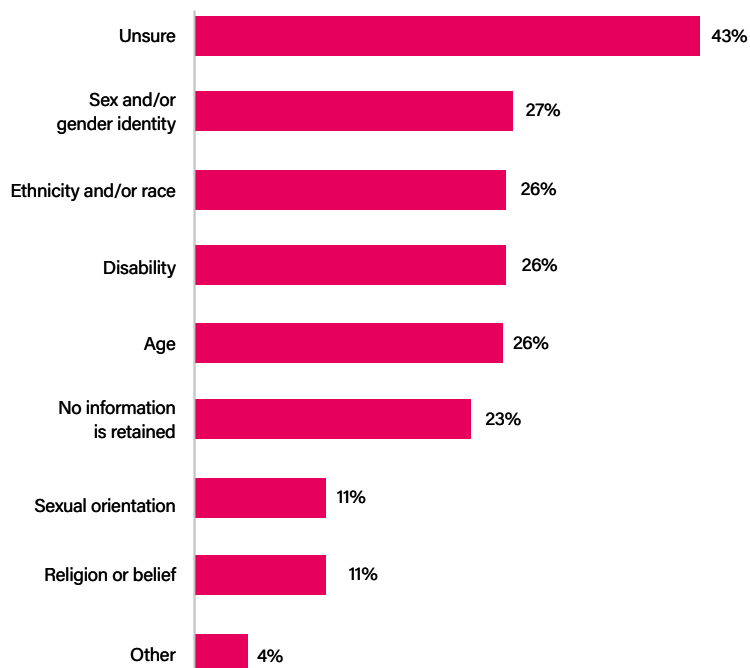
Overall, the findings highlighted uncertainty on the types of data that were collected and retained, and they showed significant differences in data collection between universities. This makes it difficult for universities to benchmark against the sector, to identify areas of good practice and to target areas for improvement.

The survey findings highlighted several areas where EDI policy had led to good practice in doctoral admissions and enabled those involved in admissions processes or practices to see persistent barriers that needed to be addressed. The figure below illustrates the main barriers to fair access that respondents perceived. Access to funding, the application process, and previous institution bias ranked highest.

FIG 17

### Retention of EDI data on unsuccessful applicants

Q: Is any of the following information retained for unsuccessful candidates?

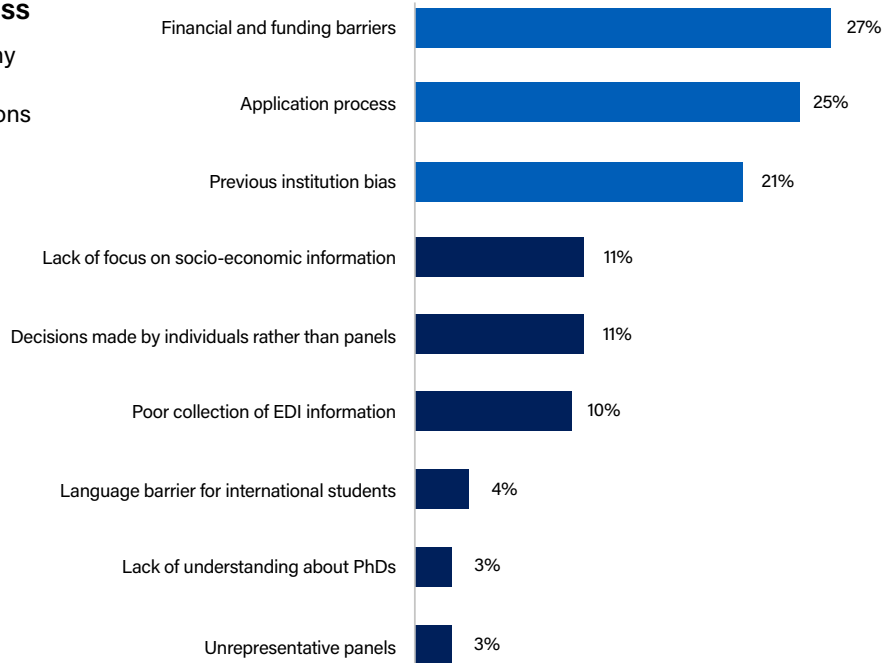


Base n = 209

FIG 18

### Barriers to fair access

Q. Please tell us about any ways in which you feel current doctoral admissions practices might create barriers to fair access?



Base n = 109

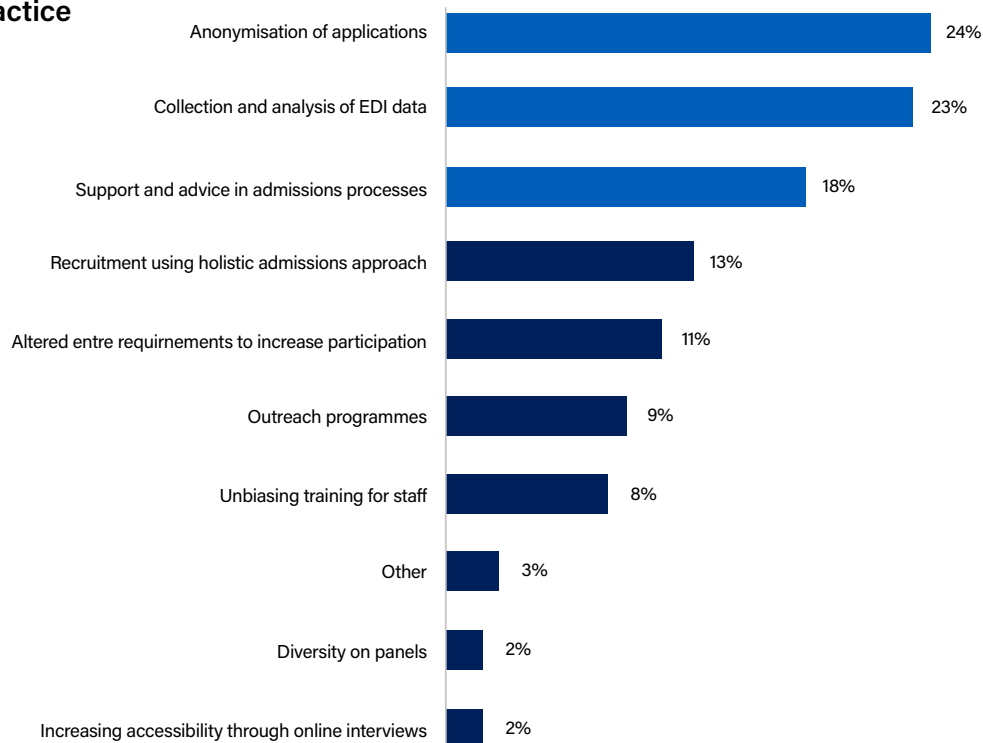
The final two figures in this section show examples of good practice, designed to remove these barriers. Anonymisation of applications was most frequently reported as an example of good practice, although just under three quarters (74%) of survey respondents reported that their organisation did not do this. Collection and analysis of EDI data was also commonly reported as good practice, as was support and advice on admissions processes. Both areas have been highlighted across other survey questions as areas which require further work.



FIG 19

### Examples of good practice

Q: Please tell us about any examples of good practice for doctoral admissions, either at your institution or other you know of.

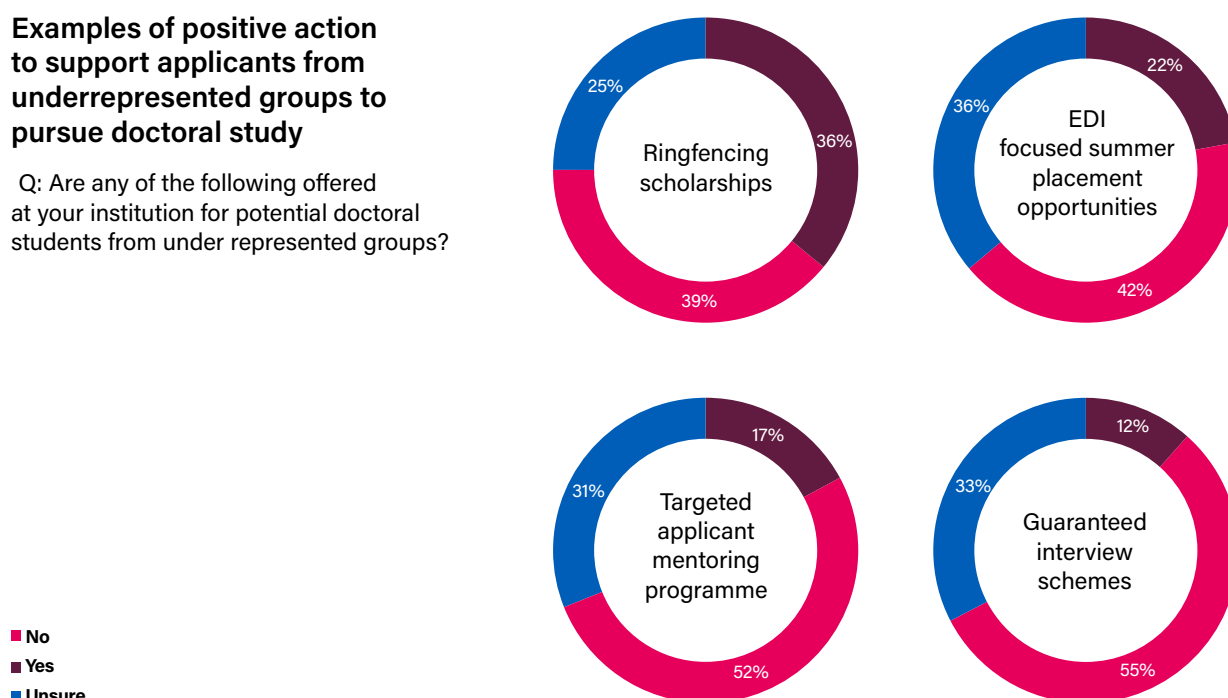


Base n = 112

FIG 20

### Examples of positive action to support applicants from underrepresented groups to pursue doctoral study

Q: Are any of the following offered at your institution for potential doctoral students from under represented groups?



Base n = 184

Positive action in the form of ringfenced scholarships, and additional support for under-represented groups through mentoring, summer placements, and guaranteed interviews were also reported as part of the institutional offer by some respondents. Summer placement opportunities were most frequently offered (36% respondents).

These questions attracted high levels of uncertainty in respondents, which raises questions about how applicants are signposted from the pre-application period to schemes designed to support them.

The following section summarises the themes arising from an analysis of the free-text responses.

## 5.5 THEMES ARISING FROM FREE-TEXT RESPONSES

The survey included three free-text boxes which elicited 438 responses, excluding phrases such as “none”, “see above” etc. These responses were read and re-read multiple times to locate meaning in the data. Broad themes were then extracted, peer-reviewed for validity and are represented in this section.

The three main themes arising from the free-text data were: (1) the impact of supervisors on candidate selection; (2) the lack of standardisation in admissions (approaches varied within and between universities); and (3) process barriers.

These three areas are presented overleaf with direct quotations from survey respondents as illustrations of the types of responses in each theme

In addition, survey respondents gave a variety of examples of current good practice in doctoral recruitment and admissions although these were typically early-stage or pilots. Respondents did not reference any evaluation having been completed at this stage. The practice coalesced around a few distinct areas: training, anonymisation, holistic review and positive action.

### a) Training

Some respondents reported unconscious bias, fair recruitment and equality, diversity, and inclusion training for those involved in doctoral recruitment and admissions. One institution was reported to be piloting training on implicit bias and cultural sensitivity. Another highlighted the value of buy-in from senior management, confirming the importance of engagement with the training provided.

### b) Anonymisation

There were differing levels of anonymisation of doctoral applications that were reported across universities. These ranged from ‘name-blind’ applications to those redacting details of age, sex, gender, ethnicity, and previous degree-awarding institution. Several respondents suggested they were aware of anonymisation at other universities but that their own institution had not yet implemented or were piloting this approach.

### c) Holistic review

Several respondents reported their efforts to encourage applicants to share any information on experiences that may have had a negative impact on their progress or might have disadvantaged them as part of their application. Panels were then encouraged to take this information into account in the decision-making process.

One university reported having recently re-worded admissions criteria to ‘weight students as having achieved the best in their own cohort’ in order not to disadvantage applicants from smaller or lower-ranked universities.

Another described how one faculty was piloting an expression of interest process which structured initial discussions with potential applicants and supported them to present their ideas without the details of a full application.

Two universities referenced practice from doctoral training partnerships. The first was piloting a competency-based admissions process within a DTP and the second had rolled out a ‘whole person approach’ to recruitment, using ESRC guidance, to all internal competitive scholarship opportunities.

### d) Positive action

36% of respondents stated their institutions ringfenced scholarships and five reported ringfencing in the free text responses. Respondents highlighted their universities’ use of targeted mentoring, placements, and guaranteed interviews for under-represented groups.

**36% OF RESPONDENTS STATED THEIR INSTITUTIONS RINGFENCED SCHOLARSHIPS AND FIVE REPORTED RINGFENCING IN THE FREE TEXT RESPONSES.**

“Bias amongst supervisors exist. Many supervisors look for mirrors of themselves in candidates and are cautious or even suspicious around non-UK applicants.”

PG Lead/Co-Ordinator, Wales, Russell Group

## IMPACT OF SUPERVISORS ON CANDIDATE SELECTION

“There is undeniably bias around the previous institution of study in the assessment of applications – and this seems to carry through even when it is anonymised in terms of the proportions of candidates selected from ‘types of institution.’”

Graduate School Manager,  
Midlands, Russell Group

“The decision is largely dependent on supervisor’s evaluation of the application/interview. Even though the interview panel consists of one or two more academics it is still largely based on the judgement of this limited group of people.”

Administrative Tutor,  
North East, Russell Group

"Steps vary depending on discipline / Dept / College and mode of funding. There are no hard and fast processes around doctoral recruitment outside of the DTPs."

Dean/Director, University and Mission Group not stated

## LACK OF STANDARDISATION IN ADMISSIONS

"Across the university, there is huge variaton[sic] as to when the DTPs etc make decisions regarding[sic] funding - sometimes this is before the formal admissions process, sometimes it is simultaneous and sometimes afterwards."

Dean/Director, Yorkshire and the Humber, Russell Group

"It depends on each DTP - 1 partnership that I manage has just started providing a pre-interview information session which went well. This isn't a standard approach."

PG Lead/Co-Ordinator, North East England, Russell Group

"Our DTPs have their own programme-specific selection processes."

Other, London, No Association

"Applications to DTPs [are] anonymised. [But] applications to stand-alone programmes are not anonymised."

Graduate School Manager, West Midlands, Russell Group

"The main problem we face is funding; since there are extremely limited amounts of it, the inability to self-fund a PhD creates a barrier to fair access for excellent candidates[...]"

PG Lead/Co-Ordinator, London, No Association

## PROCESS BARRIERS

"Anonymization [sic] happens with ESRC funding applications only. [...] It does not generally work very well, since we will have had conversations with the applicant beforehand."

PG Lead/Co-Ordinator,  
University and Mission Group not stated

"Not all data characteristics are collected [and] available for EDI reporting and reviews for improvement. [...]"

Postgraduate Lead/Co-Ordinator,  
North East, Russell Group

" [...] applications are anonymised, and data is not available to shortlisting supervisors – we use a wildcard process to invite candidates from under-represented backgrounds to interview, if they aren't shortlisted."

Graduate School Manager, London, No Association

## EXAMPLES OF GOOD PRACTICE

"Regular training sessions are held throughout the academic cycle for anyone who is involved in the recruitment and admissions process, all candidates are interviewed for fair and transparent shortlisting, regardless of funding source. The decision to offer a place should be made with all interview panel members in agreement and only once admissions have completed checks."

Supervisor, London,  
University Alliance

"We ask that all members of staff involved in the admissions process have completed unconscious bias training. We try to ensure that all shortlisted candidates and that there is gender balance in interview panels."

Graduate School Manager,  
Scotland, Russell Group

"Piloting training for supervisors to increase their awareness of implicit bias and cultural sensitivities."

Director/Dean, Yorkshire and  
Humber, Russell Group

"Through the Scottish Graduate School of Social Science, we participate in recruitment processes that use a holistic admissions approach. We have a new scholarship programme for Black and Mixed Black British students."

Graduate School Manager, Scotland, Russell Group

"We are piloting a competency-based admissions process within a DTP at the university to increase WP."

Graduate School Manager, Yorkshire and the Humber, Russell Group

## EXAMPLES OF GOOD PRACTICE

"One of our 4 annual studentships is ringfenced for a BAME Candidate. We also have a Commonwealth scholarship."

PG Lead/Co-Ordinator, Yorkshire and the Humber, Guild HE

"We interact a lot with a student-led initiative called Piscopia\* which aims to encourage people from underrepresented groups to promote doctoral education."

Graduate School Manager, Scotland, Russell Group

"We zoom on minority and female applicants and consider them with particular attention."

Graduate School Manager, South West England, Russell Group

\*Piscopia Initiative is a UK-wide network of women and non-binary undergraduate/MSc, PhD students and researchers in Mathematic and related disciplines.



# DISCUSSION

The survey demonstrated a general commitment to diversifying the postgraduate researcher community across a wide range of jobs, roles and functions involved in PGR admissions in 46 UK higher education institutions.

This aligns with two other, recent surveys relevant to doctoral education in the UK which targeted supervisors and Deans and Directors of graduate schools, respectively. The findings of the UKRSS supervisor survey (2021) reported 75% of those who responded agreed that increased diversity at doctoral level would improve research culture. The UKCGE Structures and Strategy report (2021) reported diversity of the doctoral population as one of the top-five common measures of success for graduate schools which would shape activity and investment over the coming years. At the same time, 36% of respondents to the PGR admissions survey stated that sufficient steps were not currently being taken to improve diversity, and more than half stated that admissions teams are not adequately prepared and up to date with current EDI training.

The findings highlight in broad terms a gap between aspiration and implementation in relation to diversity and inclusion in PGR recruitment and admissions, and in particular a mismatch between where innovative practice is focused and the parts of the admissions process where systemic inequality might persist.

The following section discusses the findings of the survey in four areas: the significance of the pre-application period, supervisors as gatekeepers, data gaps and consistency issues and fair process.

**36% OF RESPONDENTS TO THE PGR ADMISSIONS SURVEY STATED THAT SUFFICIENT STEPS WERE NOT CURRENTLY BEING TAKEN TO IMPROVE DIVERSITY**

## 6.1 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PRE-APPLICATION PERIOD

*Current 'process' advantages those who know how to access supervisors and effectively network. Most applicants at my institution who have identified a supervisor prior to applying will be offered a place (only limitation will be funding, though this is still significant), while the vast majority of non-targeted approaches will be rejected. We're currently exploring how to overcome this through, e.g.: provision of accessible information (web-based, open days, webinars, student ambassadors, a MOOC, etc), and establishing a shortlisting and supervisor matching process for the latter type of application, amongst other ideas.*

Anon, London, No Association

Unlike undergraduate application processes, at doctoral level informal discussion with the future supervisory team is common practice in the pre-application stage, as reported by 93% of the survey respondents. These informal discussions were given more weighting than many other elements of the formal application, including the Master's degree, interview, application form and academic references, by survey respondents.

General information on the formal process of applying for doctoral study was widely available, according to survey respondents, but focused or tailored support for how to work with a potential supervisor or how to develop a research proposal was much less common. A quarter of respondents reported that their university did not provide help to potential applicants for the first step of locating a suitable supervisor.

Milkman, Akinola and Chugh (2015) show that bias against under-represented groups can occur at the pre-application stage and that staff identity influences recruitment.

Inconsistent and informal practice in pre-application, combined with a lack of diversity in the current supervisory community has the potential to undermine the impact of many initiatives which focus on the formal application process, such as anonymisation of applications, holistic application review and training for interview panel members.

Work is underway at University of Warwick to explore pre-application doctoral communications and gatekeeping in the academic profession:

<https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/ces/research/current/padc/>

## 6.2 SUPERVISORS AS GATEKEEPERS

*I do feel that candidates [from under-represented groups] may not be inclined to contact the supervisor in advance, not knowing the currency of the HEI recruitment landscape, and this can be a disadvantage, even though we do not state applicants need to do so.*

Other, Scotland, No Association

*Bias amongst supervisors exist. Many supervisors look for mirrors of themselves in candidates and are cautious or even suspicious [...]*

PG Lead or Co-ordinator, Wales, Russell Group

*[There is a] reliance on contact with supervisor, supervisor's influence in decision-making where supervisors may be risk-averse and will therefore go with known/safe choices, no use of contextual flags (unlike what is happening at UG).*

Other, South-East England, Other

The survey findings highlight the role that supervisors continue to play as the main gatekeepers to doctoral admissions. This is both within the informal pre-application period and as principal decision-makers at interview. Of those who had influence over making the final decision, supervisors ranked most highly as 'direct influencers' (41%) and 'decision-makers' (49%). This directly contradicts the loss of agency in PGR recruitment that some supervisor respondents to UKRSS in 2021 (UKCGE, 2021) reported.

At the same time, UKRSS supervisor survey (2021) highlights that many supervisors consider themselves to be time poor. 48% of UKRSS respondents suggested that supervision and associated tasks were not factored into workload planning models and time pressure was discussed as a common constraint on performance.

It is widely accepted that when under time pressure or other stress, hidden biases come into play and compromise judgments. Information-processing short cuts (heuristics) are used by time-poor individuals to sort people into groups (Tajfel and Turner, 1979) and these mental categories are then used to make decisions. This social categorisation is open to unconscious and conscious biases which may not only relate to protected characteristics but can also connect to other factors such as assumptions about intentions to stay in research or develop a career outside of academia (UKCGE, 2021).

In the admissions survey findings, supervisors were highlighted as being most likely to be a first point of contact for potential applicants and less likely than other staff groups to be able to signpost to pre-application support. As such this group has the potential to play a significant role in removing some of the known barriers to participation for Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic applicants.

## 6.3 DATA GAPS AND INCONSISTENCY ISSUES

There has been a significant increase in the number of universities who are collecting and retaining admissions data by protected characteristics between the 2021 Structures and Strategy and the 2022 Admissions surveys. However, the admissions findings suggest that there is still a lack of standardisation in what information is collected, retained and shared at sector level, as well as a lack of clarity over what data are available within an institution. There are also significant gaps in the data related to: pre-application 'doctoral enquirers' and unsuccessful applicants.

As a result, it is difficult to identify the parts of the PGR admissions process where barriers to participation persist and it is challenging to track progress in access and participation in doctoral study at the level of individual intervention, institutional initiative, or sector. Better data quality and accessibility would enable rapid identification and roll-out of 'what works' and focused investment in areas that are identified in the data as priorities for improvement or beacons of effective practice.

**OF THOSE WHO HAD INFLUENCE OVER MAKING THE FINAL DECISION, SUPERVISORS RANKED MOST HIGHLY AS 'DIRECT INFLUENCERS' (41%) AND 'DECISION-MAKERS' (49%).**

## 6.4 FAIR PROCESS

*(There is a) need for a review of the access and participation criteria that might more accurately determine potential suitability for a research degree (rather than previous institution and academic "excellence").*

Other, London, Russell Group.

*We have no formal regulated process and different CDT / DTP schemes have different systems.*

Postgraduate lead/coordinator, Yorkshire and the Humber, Russell Group

*Steps vary depending on discipline / Dept / College and mode of funding. There are no hard and fast processes around doctoral recruitment outside of the DTPs.*

*Dean/Director, University and Mission Group not stated*

Generally, there are high levels of confidence that formal policies and processes for PGR admissions are clear, but the survey responses confirmed a number of areas of systemic inequality and some workaround practices. Six respondents highlighted the current lack of diversity in supervisory teams as a barrier to fair process:

Although many understood the importance of diverse representation on selection panels, respondents highlighted the difficulties in achieving this. The significance given to the Master's qualification and previous awarding institution highlights a potential inequality in some admissions processes. Universities continue to admit some doctoral candidates outside of the standard, formal process. Almost a quarter of respondents reported that application processes or assessment can sometimes be changed to meet the needs of partner organisations. Almost half of survey respondents confirmed that, in some cases, admissions paperwork was completed retrospectively, after a decision had already been made to admit an applicant. Moreover, there is significant variation between universities regarding the standard doctoral admissions process. The number of application rounds and the duration of application windows for doctoral study varies widely and many universities have no fixed application periods. Whilst some standardisation has taken place as a result of the shift towards funding doctoral training consortia, it is clear from the survey responses that the doctoral admissions landscape remains complex and opaque. The current situation makes advice and guidance on application and funding processes difficult to provide at sector level.

**THOSE FROM UNDER-REPRESENTED GROUPS OFTEN ARE NOT ABLE TO RECOGNIZE OTHERS FROM THEIR GROUP IN ACADEMIA AND THIS DETERS THEM FROM APPLYING.**



# RECOMMENDATIONS

This section presents a series of recommendations, based on the findings of survey and informed, to some extent by relevant literature. The recommendations are clustered around ten barriers to inclusive PGR admissions that the survey identified. They are written as a call to further enquiry and action for anyone (and everyone) involved in the PGR recruitment and admissions process, including supervisors, research leaders and professional services staff.

This approach acknowledges:

- (1) the level of commitment to diversifying the postgraduate researcher community demonstrated in the survey responses from all staff roles;
- (2) the importance of personal agency and responsibility in making change; and
- (3) the magnitude of work to be done to bring about a level of representation of racialised groups in doctoral education similar to what has been achieved at taught postgraduate and undergraduate levels.

## PRE-APPLICATION

### IDENTIFIED BARRIER TO INCLUSIVE ADMISSIONS

1

PGR admissions decisions place significant weight on the pre-application period, which is unstructured, informal, and often opaque when compared with the formal process.

2

Support for finding a supervisor and developing a research proposal is less frequently available than information on standard admissions processes but more valuable to applicants from under-represented groups.

### GROUNDWORK

Consider how the pre-application period can be made more structured, open, and transparent.

Review existing pre-application support for fit with applicant needs and known inequalities related to social and cultural capital.

### PRACTICAL ACTION

Explore the use of 'One-Stop Shops' for PGR admissions enquiries, located at an institutional level, perhaps in Graduate Schools or equivalent units.

Carry out/advocate for an equality impact assessment on access to standardised advice and support, and act on the findings.

Implement a formalised triage system for matching enquirers to funding, doctoral programmes where relevant, and to potential supervisors.

Provide accessible workshops to enable all applicants to benefit from the same level of support, in disciplines which require research proposals as part of the application.

Challenge colleagues to consider alternative assessments to research proposals, including structured application questions and holistic file review.

## SUPERVISORS AS GATEKEEPERS

**IDENTIFIED BARRIER TO INCLUSIVE ADMISSIONS**

3 Supervisors are most likely to be a first point of contact for potential applicants and less likely than other staff groups to be able to know what pre-application support is available.

4 The lack of diversity in the supervisory community is a potential barrier to pre-application discussions.

5 Decision-making is weighted significantly in favour of the supervisor, even where panels and local PGR directors or equivalent have a role in the process.

6 Some supervisors continue to use applicants' Master's degrees and the degree-awarding institution as the main assessment criteria. This is a potential barrier to access for some individuals from racially-minoritised groups because of systemic inequalities in access to higher-tariff universities and attainment gaps at undergraduate level, and unequal access to loans for postgraduate study.

**GROUNDWORK**

Explore what training and information you and/or other supervisors in your university need, to enable them to engage fully with doctoral enquirers and applicants, and to signpost them on confidently to other components of pre-application support.

Review the demographic profile of your university's supervisory community and explore ways to ensure colleagues from racially- minoritised groups are visible and accessible to potential applicants.

Consider whether current supervisor training and equality, diversity, and inclusion training cover issues of inequality and implicit bias, specifically in the context of PGR recruitment.

Ensure the voices and perspectives of supervisors and PGR from racially-minoritised groups feature prominently in recruitment, specifically marketing materials, and in pre-application support.

Explore how all staff involved in PGR recruitment and admissions are supported and enabled to engage critically with the process and to challenge assumptions and prejudices, should they arise, in constructive conversations.

Review assessment criteria, where used, and their relative weighting, bearing in mind that systemic inequalities at undergraduate and postgraduate taught levels have created attainment and access gaps for some applicants from racially minoritised groups.

Explore what the current disincentives are in your university for supervisors to recruit applicants who do not meet current standard criteria in terms of Master's qualifications.

**PRACTICAL ACTION**

Develop/contribute to the development of workshops, seminars or webinars focused on the role supervisors can play in ensuring equitable outcomes for enquirers and future applicants at the pre-application stage.

Ensure up-to-date information on pre-application support is easily accessible to all supervisors.

Where additional focus would help, develop/contribute to the development of an Equity in PGR Recruitment Toolkit for supervisors.

Support colleagues to make time to meet with all doctoral enquirers and to help enquirers cultivate a sense of belonging and confidence early in the applicant journey.

Challenge yourself and colleagues to take a pro-active, anti-racist approach in discussions about recruitment and admissions decisions.

Implement/advocate for a 'whistle blower' process to support staff to raise concerns regarding inequality in processes or behaviours in PGR recruitment and admissions.

Implement/advocate for an alternative admissions framework which focuses on the common competencies required for doctoral study.

Enable and, where possible, incentivise recruitment of candidates who demonstrate their suitability for doctoral study through alternative/ additional means.

Provide/advocate for additional pre-doctoral training, extended induction or flexible progression milestones in the first year of the doctorate to support transition into doctoral education for candidates who bring a wider variety of experiences but may not have followed a 'traditional' and direct academic route.

## DATA GAPS AND CONSISTENCY ISSUES

**IDENTIFIED BARRIER TO INCLUSIVE ADMISSIONS**

7

Data are not commonly captured on doctoral enquirers and unsuccessful applicants. It therefore remains unclear where the main leaks in the admissions pipeline are located.

8

Data-capture is inconsistent, with different universities collecting different types of information at different stages in the application and admissions processes. This makes sector benchmarking difficult.

9

Where PGR admissions data are collected, there is some uncertainty amongst staff about what data are held and how it can be accessed. This is making it difficult for universities to identify areas of good practice and to target areas for improvement.

**GROUNDWORK**

Explore what PGR admissions data are currently collected at your university.

Identify the processes which currently enable end-to-end data capture.

Explore whether your university PGR admissions data are accessible to all staff involved in PGR recruitment and admissions and at the right level of granularity for their role.

Review how information on how to access these data is disseminated.

Check on how these data are reported and monitored through your governance structures.

**PRACTICAL ACTION**

Implement/advocate for process change to enable the collection of an annual dataset that spans initial enquiry to enrolment and captures all protected characteristics.

Prioritise work to identify doctoral enquirers who do not progress to formal application and applicants who are unsuccessful and ensure their experiences are captured through survey or interview. Findings should inform the delivery of the pre-application support offer.

Advocate through the professional organisations, charities, networks, and advocacy groups highlighted in Section Two for sector-level agreement on the types of data and the data points that universities are required to capture, to share and to publish in PGR admissions.

Make PGR recruitment and admissions data visible in your part of the university through delivering or requesting regular reports or dashboard updates.

Ensure your area of the university and others can access the right level of reporting data to inform practice and investment.

Challenge yourself and/or university leaders to set metrics related to diversity and inclusion in PGR recruitment and admissions and to be accountable for progress.

## FAIR PROCESS

**IDENTIFIED BARRIER TO INCLUSIVE ADMISSIONS**

10

Application processes are not standardised even within universities. Processes frequently differ between departments, schemes, and funded/unfunded programmes.

Admissions paperwork is completed retrospectively, at least sometimes, in many universities.

Application processes and timing varies significantly across the sector which makes navigating between different universities difficult and time-consuming for applicants.

Where a standardised process exists, this can be modified to meet the requirements of other partner organisations.

**GROUNDWORK**

Explore/map the recruitment and admissions processes used at your university and consider how to reduce some of the bespoke approaches in your own area to increase and diversify applications.

Review current practice in UKRI-funded doctoral training partnership and centres for doctoral training in your university and in the examples of good practice on pages 24 – 26.

Whilst it might be unrealistic to expect the kind of alignment on application cycles that exist at undergraduate level, investigate to what extent your institutional timelines could be streamlined and presented clearly as part of your institutional pre-application support offer.

**PRACTICAL ACTION**

Reduce/advocate for the standardisation of admissions processes and simplified timelines, as much as is practicable.

Implement/advocate for anonymisation, holistic review and positive action as part of standard, university-wide processes.

Minimise modifications to the standard process and ensure that equality impact assessments are completed for any changes.



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