

GW4



GW4 Diversity in Postgraduate Research

Thinking Beyond Admissions
Symposium Report



Abstract

In December 2022, GW4 and the Digital Health and Care CDT co-delivered the GW4 Diversity in Postgraduate Research – Thinking Beyond Admissions Symposium (hereafter the Symposium), which invited professional service and academic colleagues, alongside postgraduate researchers, to explore the Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) considerations for doctoral training. Discussions highlighted the importance of focusing specifically on postgraduate researchers, a group often overlooked or caught between activities centered around undergraduates and staff, and where the differences in age, domicile and non-standard study, among others, brought up unique considerations around isolation and quality assurance, but also offered opportunities for impact. Participants encouraged institutions and funders to adopt a holistic approach to EDI at doctoral research level, which was roughly divided into six themes: external drivers, recruitment, research degree policy, research experience and environment, research training and impact, and system and tools. This report represents the collective output of Symposium participants marking the beginning of a new area of work for GW4.

Introduction

Since 2013, the GW4 Alliance, which brings together the universities of Bath, Bristol, Cardiff and Exeter, has driven forward collaborative efforts to improve the research environment and culture at our institutions through its innovative researcher development programmes.

In 2022, in response to an international recognition that entrenched structural and cultural inequalities need immediate redress, which has manifested across HE, government and funder publications including the Department of Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy's (BEIS) *R&D People and Culture Strategy*, the GW4 Alliance has committed to addressing the challenges faced by marginalised and underrepresented groups within our institutions through a new programme of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion

(EDI) activity. Our initial programme of work is focused on driving forward best practice in inclusive recruitment for Doctoral Training Programmes and ensuring that inclusive support structures exist for the diversified postgraduate researcher population.

In parallel, Doctoral Training Entities, such as the MRC GW4 BioMed DTP, the NERC GW4+ DTP, and the EPSRC Centre for Doctoral Training for Digital Health and Care, have been placing EDI at their heart of their own strategy and are pioneering new mechanisms to progress the EDI agenda within their own communities and institutions.

Therefore to begin conversations across GW4 universities, in December 2022, GW4 and the Digital Health and Care CDT co-delivered the GW4 Diversity in Postgraduate Research

– Thinking Beyond Admissions Symposium (hereafter the Symposium).

This workshop report provides a summary of the day, as well as identifying the themes and recommendations that emerged throughout the discussions. It is not an end in itself, but a beginning, meant to set the focus for future work in this area, as well as share the knowledge and learning from the symposium beyond GW4. We welcome and encourage feedback to the report.

Summary of event

The Symposium was delivered on 7 December 2022 and brought together 39 participants—a cross-section of the professional services, academic and postgraduate researchers—from all four GW4 universities. The day was largely structured around three overarching questions all centered around improving diversity and inclusion in doctoral training:

1. What are the current challenges?
2. What future initiatives or activities might provide results?
3. What examples are there currently of best practice?

To systematically work through these questions the workshop followed a lifecycle journey tracing the postgraduate researcher's path through recruitment and admission to research training, development support and completion. The workshop did not focus on stages beyond the doctorate, as this was felt to be outside the scope of the day.

Why Postgraduate Research?

The workshop began by exploring why more attention was needed specifically on the challenges and opportunities of EDI around doctoral training. There has been significant

activity to diversify the UK student population for the last decade with the Department of Education producing annual *Widening Participation in Higher Education* statistical reports since 2013. The BEIS *R&D People and Culture Strategy* makes creating 'a positive, inclusive and respectful culture that attracts a diversity of people' one of its core outcomes.

Yet, what the discussions reinforced was the importance of focusing specifically on PGRs who are conspicuously absent from these type of sector documents. Workshop participants agreed that despite the importance of postgraduate researchers as future academics, industry or public sector leaders, they operate in a liminal position between undergraduate and staff often overlooked in activities that support either groups or caught between them.

Participants also raised several key unique characteristics of the postgraduate researcher, which set them apart from undergraduate or staff groups:

- **Age** – the median age of a full-time postgraduate researcher starting their degree in the UK is 24-25. That rises to 32-33 for part-time students. As mature students they start their degree with different expectations, needs and responsibilities, including family and caring responsibilities, than undergraduates.
- **Domicile** – Higher education is a significant global export for the UK and 30% of the UK postgraduate researcher population are from overseas, non-EU, countries. The total percentage rises to over 40% when EU students are included. In terms of total numbers, this is

nearly double the rates for the undergraduate student population.

- **Non-standardised study**

- Postgraduate degrees are highly-bespoke and far less structured or standardised than undergraduate degrees, with significant differences in both approaches and attitudes to PGR study between discipline areas. This provides the flexibility to innovate and generate new knowledge but can also mean key milestones and goals are unclear. Lack of clarity or frameworks for support can cause additional distress to those who are neurodiverse.

- **Isolation** – Lacking the daily interactions of seminars and lecturers, postgraduate researchers face greater isolation than their undergraduate counterparts. The cohort-model used by UKRI and Wellcome funded Doctoral Training Partnerships has helped to alleviate some of the pressures, but only for the 20-30% of PGRs funded by these schemes. Such pressures increase when PGRs are part-time, distance learners, or have caring responsibilities.

- **Quality assurance** – Unlike undergraduate degrees which are regulated by the Office for Students, there is no official government body that regulates postgraduate research degrees. The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education provides guidance via the UK Quality Code, but there is diversity in the implementation of the recommendations and common practices, which are mandatory in Scotland, Northern Ireland and

Wales, but only suggested guidance for universities in England.

- **Opportunities for impact** –

- Unlike undergraduate degrees, PGR studies are often focused around and motivated by a need in society. Many of these topics offer considerable potential to address EDI issues in their own right to generate evidence for policy, support marginalised groups, or address existing inequalities. PGR study can engage in depth with communities most at need to produce real impacts.

For underrepresented and marginalised groups in higher education, the considerations above can create a barrier to entry into a postgraduate research degree, or a sense of lack of support once started. Workshop participants agreed that because of the unique characteristics of postgraduate education, more attention needed to be paid to supporting recruitment and supporting a successful research experience.

The benefits of improving diversity and inclusion in postgraduate research, which participants agreed needed to be broader than protected characteristics to capture of breadth of the postgraduate researcher community, were significant for workshop participants. Many pointed to the lack of diversity at senior levels of higher education arguing that improving PGR diversity and experience would lead to greater staff diversity. Some highlighted the intrinsic benefits to knowledge creation that could come from a broader range of backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives. Others argued that the PGR community should be a microcosm of the wider UK community, which is itself multiracial, socio-culturally and economically diverse.

Recommendations from the Symposium

Discussions on the day were wide ranging and participants agreed that a single solution did not exist – a holistic approach was needed to improve diversity and inclusion at doctoral research level. Broadly this whole-systems approach can be summarised into six themes:

1. External Drivers
2. Recruitment
3. Research Degree Policy
4. Research Experience and Environment
5. Research Training and Impact
6. Systems and Tools

1. External Drivers

Workshop attendees highlighted that any holistic approach needed to go beyond universities to include funders and government as well. Participants believed that funders, as sector leaders, could lead a movement away from a non-standardised model of postgraduate research and provide clarity on the core milestones in a postgraduate research career that are discipline agnostic. Lessons could be learned from UKRI's Doctoral Training Partnerships that are then disseminated across the entire of UK's postgraduate research community through mechanisms like the Postgraduate New Deal. The opening up of the cohort model to all PGRs could be part of this process.

Ring-fenced studentships for those from minoritised and underrepresented communities was another area where workshop participants felt funding bodies could lead. Part of this process would involve building pipelines of talent into postgraduate research and requires coordinated effort before PhD level to address structural barriers that are entrenched far earlier in the education process. Activities like fully-paid research internships for undergraduate students to gain experience of postgraduate research could make postgraduate research accessible for those who cannot afford to take the financial risk of an unpaid internship or even beginning the research degree.

While workshop participants acknowledged that issues such as ATAS certification, Tier 4 visas and NHS Immigration Surcharges may be beyond the control of funders, they strongly encouraged UKRI to further lobby the government for better terms and conditions for international postgraduate researchers. With such a significantly high proportion of UK postgraduate researchers coming from abroad, these were considerable barriers to creating a diverse and global research community.



2. Recruitment

Recruitment was an area of discussion where it became apparent there was significant existing good practice to share, although happening in isolated pockets across our four institutions. Unconscious bias training and ensuring that advertisements for students were unbiased were frequently mentioned.

So too was the acknowledgement that selection panels needed to have gender and racial diversity and that reasonable accommodations should be made for interviewees. Webinars that provided guidance on the recruitment process were frequently mentioned. Some participants argued for more encompassing provision to improve inclusivity in recruitment. Targeted interventions to support minoritised or underrepresented groups through the application, interview and registration process was one suggestion. Activities to support this could include 1:1 meetings, faculty or peer-to-peer mentoring, or financial support.

Although perhaps more limited in scope, one popular suggestion was to provide interview questions before the interview as participants questioned the merit of seeing an interviewee 'think of their feet'. Participants did debate if it was some questions or all questions, when those questions would be given to interviewees, and whether doing so would inadvertently privilege those who had existing networks of support to help them prepare, perhaps reinforcing the need for targeted support through the application process.

3. Research Degree Policy

Considering the average age of postgraduate researchers and their associated expectations and responsibilities, it is not surprising one of the most popular discussions concerned thinking through research degree structures themselves. Diversifying modes of study was a suggestion that returned repeatedly.

Participants argued for more options for part-time and remote study, which could support PGRs with parental responsibilities or other work commitments. Participants also suggested recognising alternative educational pathways that would allow PGRs to gain their degree via professional experience. Workshop participants also encouraged institutions to examine regulations around postgraduate research degrees to combat a culture of overwork, as well as improve provisions around maternity, sick leave and disability provision. Some suggested that important lessons could be learned by looking at best practices from the Human Resources sector. Others pointed to existing policies within UKRI-funded doctoral training programmes and encourage institutions to open these up to all PGRs.

4. Research Experience & Environment

Workshop participants felt it was not sufficient to recruit a diverse postgraduate research community, institutions also needed to ensure they felt included and had a positive experience throughout their degree. One recurring suggestion was for institutions to create and maintain support networks for minoritised and underrepresented groups so that they had a safe space to express and validate their experience while also sharing strategies for navigating the research environment. This could be in the form of properly resourced mentoring programmes or student networks. Some participants highlighted listening circles as a powerful tool for creating inclusive environments that require majority groups to listen to the experiences of others and accept that they have things to learn and change. Supervision and the role of the supervision team to shape a postgraduate researcher's experience was also a reoccurring area of discussion. Some participants felt supervisors needed greater institutional

support to fulfill their roles as advisors and mentors and to recognise the diversity of experience amongst their students. Others felt that the traditional ‘apprenticeship model’ could create significant isolation if the supervisory relationship failed and wanted to mitigate this risk by widening the PGR’s research networks beyond supervisory teams. Here again lessons can be learned from the cohort-model of UKRI-funded DTPs and applied to the broader PGR community but faces challenges in some discipline areas especially in a post-COVID era of increased home working/remote study in some fields.

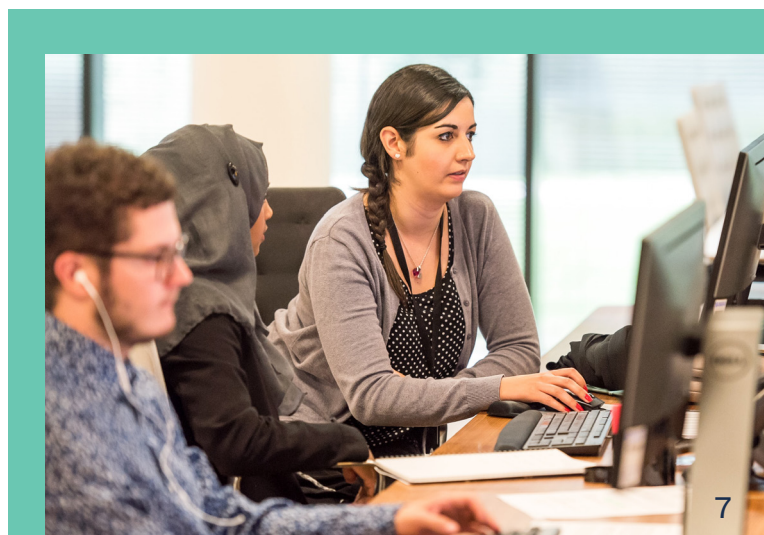
5. Research Training and Impact

Workshop participants encouraged institutions and funders to consider how EDI training could be embedded within the research degree itself. Although debates over ‘decolonising’ the curriculum are prevalent at undergraduate level, this is not an approach that has become widespread at postgraduate level. Rigorous, embedded training in EDI, however, can help postgraduate researchers create sensitive methodologies that improve the lives of less-advantageous populations by carefully thinking through how they engage with groups or how they interrogate the scholarship and received academic knowledge. The combined results of these, whether as evidence for policy, new commercial applications, or new approaches to public engagement, can help demonstrate the powerful and valuable impact that research can have for society and further the civic mission of universities.

6. Systems and Tools

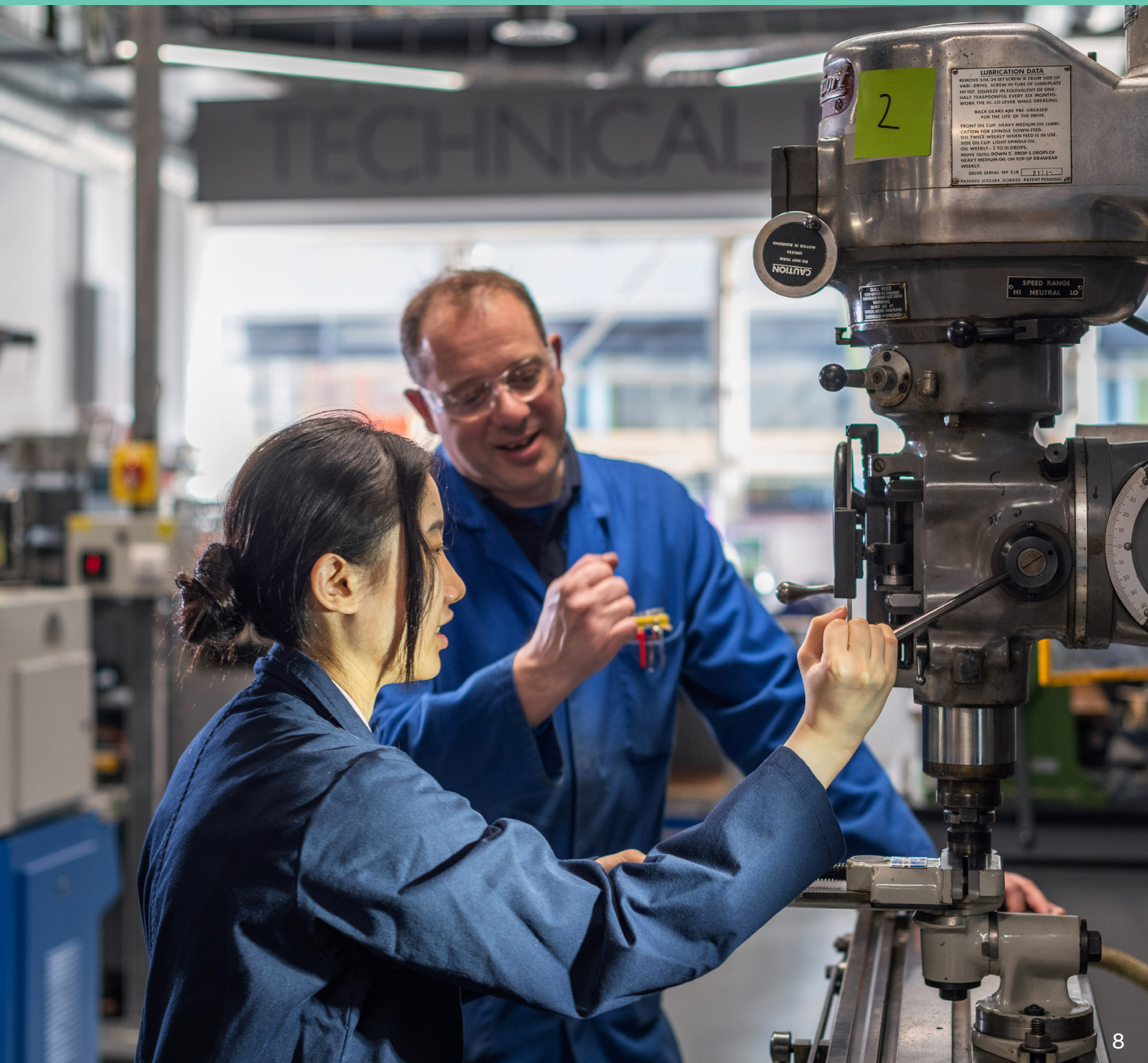
Systems and the data held was a cross-cutting theme across all discussions. There was a palatable sense that the recruitment systems currently in operation had been designed with either undergraduate or staff requirements in mind and were inadequate for capturing and monitoring the data necessary to improve diversity and inclusion in postgraduate research. Participants believed it would be difficult to enact change without significant investment into systems and workflows that were specifically calibrated to support postgraduate research.

Workshop participants also highlighted that the types of data required and collected by institutions and funders were often inadequate to support improving diversity and inclusion, especially when it came to forms of diversity that fell outside of protected characteristics. Sex, disability, age and race are often collected in applications, but socio-economic status and sexuality are either not collected or the markers are difficult to interpret. Participants welcomed further discussions with institutional legal teams, as well as UKRI and HESA, to explain why collecting this data was necessary to evidence the interventions that successfully support increased diversity and how it could be clarified to enable better, more comprehensive analysis.



Conclusion

This workshop report represents the beginning of a new area of work rather than an end in itself. We strongly advocate for greater attention and resource to be directed towards improving equity, diversity and inclusion for postgraduate researchers as a community distinct, and often overlooked, from undergraduates and staff. There are strong pockets of existing best practice that can be excavated and disseminated across postgraduate research to improve not only the diversity of the community, but also ensure their inclusion and support within the research environment. We encourage our institutions, UKRI and the government to work with us to ensure that we see change happen now.





GW4

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