Widening Access and Valuing Diversity in SGSSS

Hannah Gormley

Foreword

The Scottish Graduate School of Social Science (SGSSS) believes that all students that have the potential to progress to doctoral study should have equal opportunity to do so, and that all doctoral students should have equal opportunity to succeed in their studies. We aim to facilitate the widest possible applicant pool into doctoral study; and, value the diversity of our population by minimising any potential barriers to participation throughout the PhD experience.

In September 2020, we commissioned Hannah Gormley, a PhD intern, to undertake research with key stakeholders in the social science doctoral community in Scotland with the aim of contributing to an evidence base that would support SGSSS to develop effective policies and interventions to widen access to funding for under-represented groups and to minimise barriers to participation both into and during postgraduate research (PGR) study.

Hannah's research, key findings and recommendations are presented in this report, which SGSSS will consider as part of developing a widening access action plan. Many of the recommendations are applicable to supporting widening access generally, in particular for those working in Doctoral Training Partnerships (DTPs) or with doctoral students. We use the term widening access to refer to access both into PGR and to the opportunities available through the PGR journey.

We would like to take this opportunity to thank the many people who contributed to this report – prospective and current doctoral students, academic colleagues, widening participation professionals, fellow DTP colleagues and partners from SDS and SFC. Most of all we'd like to thank Hannah for her meticulous and thought provoking work, which will have a significant contribution to the widening access agenda within SGSSS and further afield.

Diane Gill, Head of Strategy and Operations, SGSSS, April 2021

Introduction

This report presents the culmination of a PhD internship undertaken at the Scottish Graduate School of Social Science (SGSSS), the UK's largest facilitator of funding, training and support for doctoral students in social science, working across 16 partner Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Scotland. At the heart of SGSSS is the Doctoral Training Partnership (DTP) that distributes PhD funding from the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) to accredited pathways at 12 of the 16 HEIs. The aim of the internship, and this report, is to support SGSSS in developing effective policies and interventions to widen access to this funding for under-represented groups. It was produced in the immediate aftermath of a letter from UKRI to DTPs across the UK reiterating the expected obligations to equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI), and tasking DTPs with guaranteeing 'open merit-based and transparent recruitment', 'collecting diversity monitoring data' and 'providing support and training to supervisors'. This report was also written in the context of changes to the eligibility criteria for research council funding, with 30% of awards now allocated for international students, but maintains focus on the UK context reflecting concerns that diversity is not being achieved amongst home students, and that the competition amongst these students may increase as a result of this change.

Original research undertaken for this report consisted of a survey aimed at undergraduate (UG) and post-graduate taught (PGT) students who had considered postgraduate research (PGR); a series of 3 discussion board based focus groups with current PGRs; and interviews with supervisors of ESRC funded students. This was supplemented with a working group organised by SGSSS bringing widening access professionals and key stakeholders in Scotland together to share best practice, as well as the sharing of best practice in individual meetings with individuals and organisations such as the East Bio and SeNSS DTPs, and the Race.Ed network[1] as well through a review of academic literature and policy briefings on widening access.

This report provides recommendations for both the SGSSS Directorate and staff at partner HEIs in Scotland.

---

[1] *a cross-university network concerned with race, racialization and decolonial studies from a multidisciplinary perspective* *https://www.race.ed.ac.uk/*

Contents

1. Executive Summary

1.1. Recommendations for the SGSSS Directorate

- Foster a greater presence amongst the undergraduate and PGT student bodies through events like webinars

- Develop mentoring schemes for under-represented groups between current PGRs and applicants

- Collect more detailed data on race, ethnicity and social class

- Make links with other DTPs to find common ground on data collection

- Continue to make links with public sector bodies or third sector organisations for collaborative awards, where equality, diversity and inclusion are both a research focus and a workplace practice

- Consider forms of Positive Action that are integrated with the whole person approach by flagging for broad characteristics such as British BAME, first generation, disabled, LGBTQI+ etc.

- Consider ring-fencing for British BAME first generation students, either in the open-competition or combined with the development of a co-developed award

- Make links with special interest groups like Race.Ed and Black.Ed when seeking clarification on the likely efficacy of proposed EDI measures

- Develop supervisor guidelines on EDI, and use pathway reps and convenors to communicate them clearly

- Monitor and aim to increase diversity on decision making panels

- Guide cohort building around EDI characteristics like First Gen, BAME, LGBTQI+ part-time and Disabled Students

1.2 Recommendations for the SGSSS partnership

- Make concrete steps towards a 'whole person' approach to application assessments, with an emphasis placed on potential

- Review institutional and departmental admissions pages for clear integration with SGSSS and between HEI and funding application processes

- Review timing and content of PGR open days in relation to basic PhD info, SGSSS requirements and deadlines

- Combine the dispersal of key information with a focus on representation of diverse backgrounds

- Develop subject level mentoring schemes between current PGRs and applicants

- Pathway reps and convenors encourage their departments to consider supervisor-led options, and support the clear communication of guidelines for all of the awards

- Consider other ways of measuring the quality of supervision for promotions, rather than basing it on number of students supervised

⊙ Make links with special interest groups like Race.Ed and Black.Ed when seeking clarification on the likely efficacy of proposed EDI measures

1.3 Lobbying and calls for change

⊙ Push for UKRI to formalise best practice for data collection on race & ethnicity and on social class

⊙ Further investigation of the issues faced by disabled students and whether current support is fit for purpose

⊙ Push for ESRC to reconsider their position on co-developed awards, with the suggestion that combining this award with ring-fencing would allay any fears that it is counterproductive for widening access
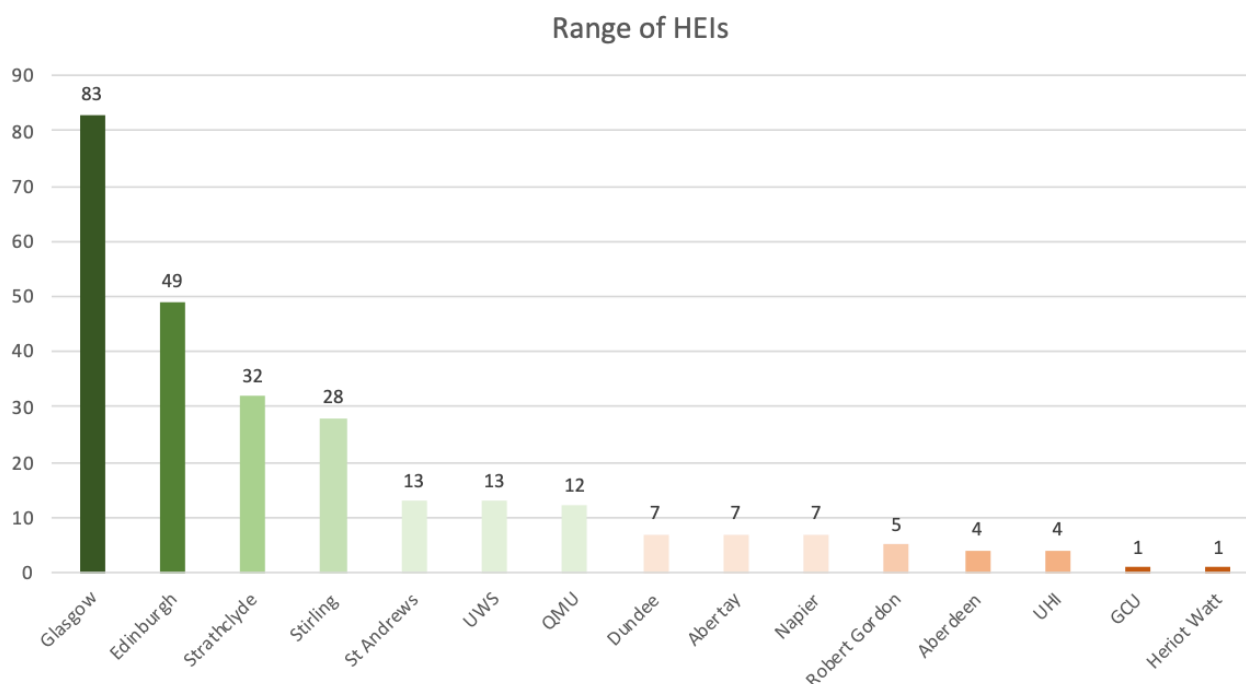
2. Summary of Data Collected

Three research projects were developed in the course of the internship: a widening access survey conducted with 285 undergraduate and postgraduate taught students, interviews conducted with 10 supervisors of ESRC funded students and a series of discussion board based focus groups conducted amongst 26 current PGR students with a diverse set of backgrounds and funding statuses.

2.1 Survey

The Survey attracted 285 responses from across all 16 HEIs, cutting across a wide range of key demographics, though missing some others where the pipeline issues are particularly acute. It was targeted at those who had, even if very tentatively, considered postgraduate research as an option for their future, and 48% said they were either likely or very likely to apply for a PGR position 'this academic year', which with the survey running through November 2020, for SGSSS competitions, would refer to the open competition deadline of January 2021, or the supervisor led awards advertised in spring 2021. A large proportion of the respondents were PGT students (64.2%).

The following table shows the spread of respondents according to HEI (N.B this does not include 19 responses that did not indicate the institution or were from other universities outside of Scotland)

Range of HEIs

HEI	Responses
Glasgow	83
Edinburgh	49
Strathclyde	32
Stirling	28
St Andrews	13
UWS	13
QMU	12
Dundee	7
Abertay	7
Napier	7
Robert Gordon	5
Aberdeen	4
UHI	4
GCU	1
Heriot Watt	1

In addition to the full spread of HEIs, the data had good levels of participation from a number of under-represented groups. Almost half of respondents (46.4%) are first generation scholars[2] and 30% of have had some kind of caring experience : 11.8% have had experience as young carers; 14.6% are parents or guardians to children; 9.6% are currently caring for an adult. 14.7% consider themselves to have a disability.

There are however some issues with data, particularly around race and ethnicity. There was a very low number of black respondents (3.6%) and no black British respondents, likely reflecting the particular challenges faced by this group at earlier stages and throughout the education trajectory. There was also a fairly low number of respondents that identified themselves as mixed/multiple and other (7.5%).

Though there was a high number of Asian respondents at 21.4% over half of these (53%) were Chinese and 17 % identified as British. This translates to just 10 responses from British Asian students. Therefore, any conclusions drawn around 'BAME' would be strongly weighted to Chinese students, and specific data on the barriers faced due to race and ethnicity in amongst British cohorts were not present in big enough numbers to draw definitive conclusions. As already noted, 64.2% of the entire population of respondents are PGTs. However, any contrasts drawn between UG and PGT would also have this demographic contrast to take into account as 94.9% of the Chinese respondents are PGTs.

2.2 Interviews

The interviews were conducted with a total of ten supervisors of ESRC funded students. Four of these were from the University of Glasgow, three from the University of Edinburgh, one from Napier University, one from St Andrews University and one from Dundee University. They covered anthropology, education, economics, sociology, criminology, social informatics, social work and work & employment. The interviews followed a relatively structured format consisting of 21 questions and an invitation to feedback anything additional at the end.

2.3 Focus Groups

The focus groups were with current PhD students and were discussion board based with a series of themed questions that the 26 participants could write responses to. There was a wide range of widening access characteristics amongst the group chosen. All but 3 were first generation scholars. The groups included 11 BAME respondents, 2 disabled, 4 LGBT, 3 carers and 2 mature students, with some participants falling into more than one of these groups.

[2] Defined as *the first generation in your family to access any form of higher education.*

3. Key Findings

The findings below combine data from all the research undertaken and are grouped in four categories : difficulty in accessing information, supporting widening access in a competitive landscape, the central role of the HEI and the supervisor, and the impact of being first generation, BAME and/or disabled in HE.

3.1 Key Findings: Difficulty Accessing Information

Some of the starkest data to come out of the survey regard information seeking and familiarity with key institutions and processes surrounding applications for PGR funding from ESRC through SGSSS.

The following set of graphs illustrate clearly that the dispersal of key information could remain a significant barrier to applicants. Whilst assessing these numbers, it is key to keep in mind that over half of the respondents represented in these charts intended to apply for PGR funding within just a few months of completing the survey. These figures are largely consistent across all demographics, though it is fair to presume that a lack of clarity on the process will be a further deterrent amongst others for those with more disadvantaged backgrounds. Only those applying to the same HEI show a higher likelihood of familiarity with ESRC, SGSSS and the various routes and competitions available (the role that the HEI can play in mitigating hurdles regarding confidence and information seeking will be further explored in section 4.2).
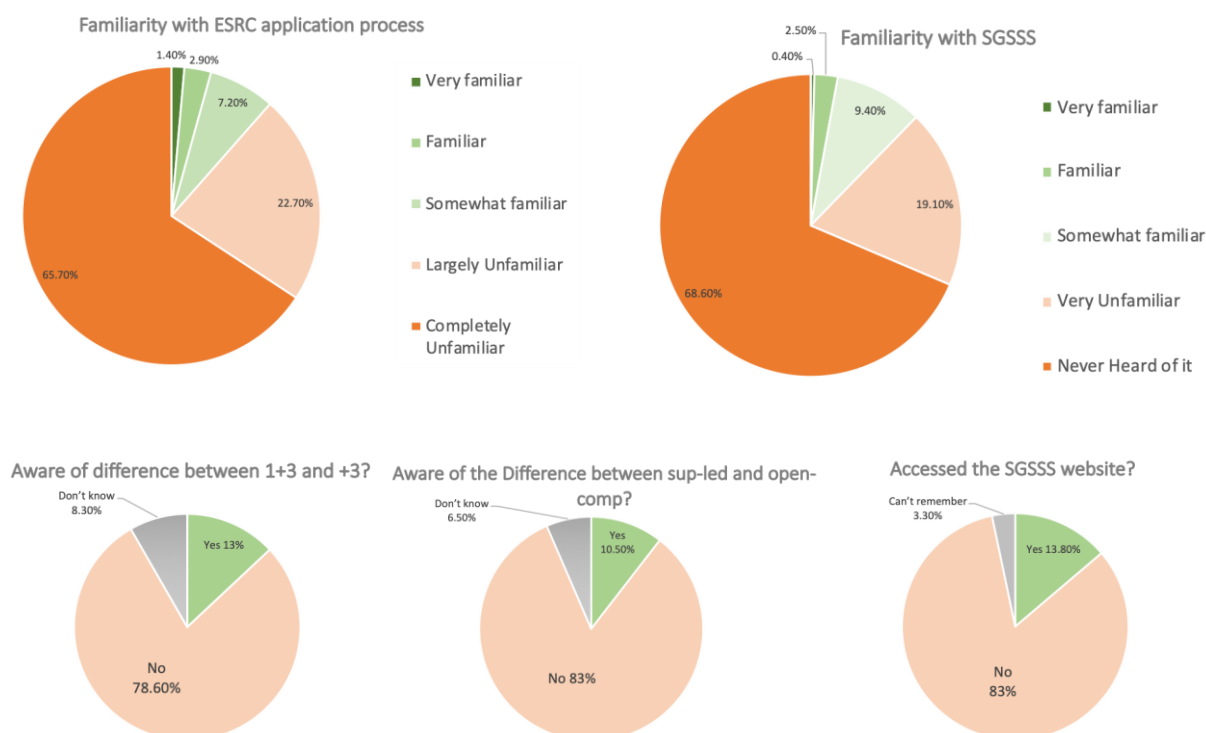
There is a general sense that the process is very complicated, and it seems that clarity is key to increasing the confidence with which the application can be approached. This is true for both applicants and supervisors. One supervisor suggested the various routes available were difficult for even her to navigate, and that she felt her department were probably under-informed and not making good use of the steers competition. There were concerns over the emphasis placed on 'doing your own research', and whether this assumes a certain level of cultural or social capital at the outset. In combination with a lack of representation throughout their HE experience, missing out on key information due a lack of social capital or information literacy can only make widening access students feel more 'out of place' as they navigate the process of acquiring funding.

The survey conducted for this research contained a link on completion to a webinar run by SGSSS, which attempted to address this emerging data. Information was shared with an emphasis on simplicity, accessibility and representation. Following an example of best practice from the SeNSS DTP, it was designed on the premise that the sort of information that a widening access student may be seeking is likely to be answers to questions such as: What is a PhD? Who is it for? What's the first step you should take to prepare? How do I approach a supervisor? How long will it take to acquire funding? In addition, four doctoral students from non-traditional routes shared their experiences of applying and undertaking a PhD as well as participating in a Q&A. By using these kinds of questions as a starting point, sharing key dates and timelines, and combining this with a focus on representation there appeared to be some progress in the tone that was struck. It also offered students an opportunity to ask questions specifically related to their own situation. One attendee commented: *this session has been truly wonderful. I attended another informational on PhDs a few weeks ago, and I left feeling overwhelmed, scared, and questioning my own skills and abilities. This has been so helpful and both affirming and reassuring.* The webinar format also presented an ideal opportunity for sharing this information widely with 106 potential applicants in attendance.

One of the key issues brought to light in all three pieces of research was the difficult timing of many of the application processes at SGSSS. This is an issue that was brought up on three levels: although the SGSSS deadline falls after those of other ESRC DTPs, the deadline is thought to be too early in the academic year; the advertising of the competition is considered too close to the deadline causing confusion for students who think they can begin the process when the competition is announced; the time taken to proceed through the competitions can lead to a frustrating level of long-term uncertainty. The supervisors interviewed suggested that students are generally not well informed of the process and significantly underestimate the time it will take them to complete the application and move through the competition and it is reasonable to presume that many of the respondents to the survey accessed key information too late and would have been unable to meet the deadline the year they were expecting to apply. These three issues intertwine to make the application process a real struggle to balance with life commitments, which are often more pronounced for widening access applicants.

Supervisors appeared particularly frustrated with the timings when they came from (arguably) traditional academic subjects (e.g. anthropology or sociology as opposed to education or psychology), subjects that attract a high number of 'conversion' PGT's and/or subjects that primarily (or exclusively) use the open competition. One supervisor whose discipline fits all three of these categories described their concerns that the deadline is 'so incredibly early' claiming they regularly have to inform

'I feel completely lost when trying to find out how to apply for PGR from how to find a supervisor to how to apply for funding'
Mature, first-generation PGT student

students relatively new to the subject who have an interesting PhD proposal that it is near impossible to meet the deadline and progress directly from their masters degree. Those in disciplines with more traditional routes into practice careers - such as social work - did not express these frustrations to the same extent, as it is much more common for their students to want to develop practice-based career experience before considering a PhD. A current PGR reflected on the fact they could not have been ready to apply for the deadline whilst studying for their masters degree and faced additional challenges in the following year applying alongside work commitments and with 'limited access to academic resources'. In response to the survey a first-generation student, currently doing a postgraduate taught degree in psychology described in some detail the negative impact of delayed knowledge on the process on an application they were involved in for the supervisor-led competition, calling for a more timely sharing of key information:

I think it would be very beneficial for students considering PhD to be advised well in advance of the processes and deadlines for specific pathways. For example, I recently completed an application with my supervisor for the SGSSS supervisor led pathway and spent a vast amount of time consulting with and seeking potential collaborators to make our proposal more inviting. Despite beginning this process in late August, we failed to secure collaborative support before the deadline of 30th October and had to abandon our application. This was very frustrating and could potentially have been avoided if I had been better informed of the processes involved. (Potential PGR applicant).

A drawn out process, and the potential for multiple applications, is difficult to avoid with such competitive awards. However, if key dates and examples of the basic timelines of a typical application were readily available in advance of the application process being live it would allow those in precarious positions to plan appropriately and ensure they have the supports in place to manage those possibilities.

In general supervisors showed significant divergence in their knowledge of the different competitions and were not always literate in all the potential avenues of funding. There was also much divergence in how much this is the supervisor's responsibility, with some saying they take on the job of identifying funding routes for their students working over months and years to help them secure it, and others indicating that finding funding for a project is the student's responsibility. The quote above also suggests a practice of supervisor and student co-developing an award, even though successful proposals are required to be advertised to other candidates. This is a technique supervisors indicated they had used to allow their students to make their own project idea whilst avoiding the highly competitive open competition.

One key issue seems to be the way familiarity of the range of awards diverges across pathways and subjects, with some saying they don't use the open competition because it's too competitive and others only using the open competition due to norms in working practices for that discipline. As this is the most competitive award, and with first-generation and BAME students responding to the survey saying that they wouldn't use it for reasons such as 'lack of confidence', being restricted to it could

close off those pathways for certain types of student. A supervisor in social anthropology, a discipline that rarely uses supervisor-led routes, was keen to shift those norms if it would have a positive impact on widening access. As already noted, supervisors trying to use steers and collaborative routes often reported finding it complicated or difficult to navigate and so encouragement and clear guidance from SGSSS, via pathway reps and convenors, will be key to facilitating this. An indication that this is an opportunity for widening access may encourage academics in those disciplines who would not otherwise consider it the norm.

> **'Supervisors are the ones to identify somebody who's got promise, and to say here's what the funding options are'**
> Supervisor in Sociology

> **Promoting those other career options, and the transferrable skills from a PhD, is not a strong point for most academics.**
> Supervisor in Social Work

Another supervisor in social anthropology responded to my query as to why supervisor-led is not commonly used with reasons specific to the subject (such as highly personal field-notes) but said that if it was a widening access issue they would work on organising some supervisor-led projects for next year. It would therefore be useful to have data on this to show if there is a correlation between the type of competition and the number of widening access applications and awards to make that argument clear.

The most popular platforms that supervisors direct students toward to research the process further are university websites and the SGSSS website, a key site for evaluating the clarity of information. However, for students who are often approaching potential supervisors too late to meet the deadline, and with a majority (83% in the survey) not accessing the SGSSS website beforehand, more familiar channels for sharing information in a timely manner, such as HEI e-mails, may have the most significant impact. The SGSSS and ESRC funding routes are not always clearly navigable through HEI websites which is potentially where applicants are looking first. They are not even clear through the UKRI website. This therefore may be an area where cross-institutional organising is required. Additionally if SGSSS are able to foster a greater presence amongst UG and PGT students (for example through workshops or webinars) they may be more likely to access the SGSSS website independently.

The concerns regarding information accessibility laid out so far speak mostly to the challenges faced by students from under-represented backgrounds who are already committed to the idea of a PhD. However, many students who could go on to be successful researchers may not make the leap to see themselves as a potential PhD student. There are two more interrelated 'communication gaps' that may contribute to this. First, a lack of awareness surrounding the variety of immediate opportunities that a PhD may lead to including the number of training and internship opportunities that are readily available to PhD researchers. Second, a lack of certainty over what types of careers it can lead to outside of academia and how it might positively impact a career trajectory. Making training, transferrable skills and careers more widely advertised at the application stage may help some to see a PhD as a choice for them. This is a further area that can be built in to the creation of more targeted content on the SGSSS website, HEI websites and through webinars.

3.2 Key Findings: Central Role of the HEI and the supervisor

The survey presents a picture of the whole population of potential applicants, no matter what their background, facing a lack of confidence with information seeking and approaching a supervisor. The only demographic factors that appeared to positively impact on these barriers were being a PGT student and being very likely to apply to the same HEI. In addition, the only noticeable difference between those 'very likely to apply this year' and the rest of the population was a much higher likelihood of applying to the same HEI. Supporting statistics with qualitative data paints a picture of HEIs and particularly supervisors being the main support that can encourage a widening access student to consider a PhD and carry them through to a successful award.

Likelihood of Applying to current HEI for…
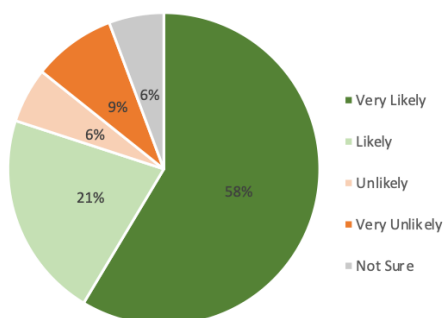
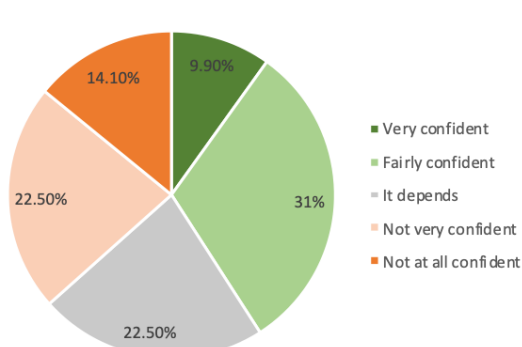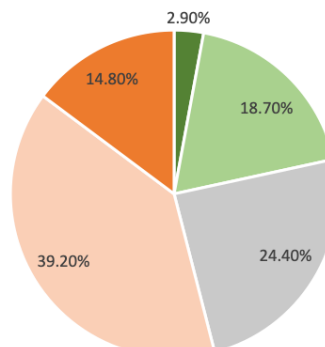**…those very likely to apply this year**
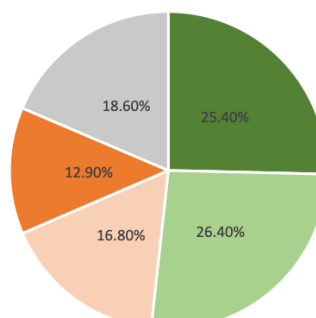
…those likely to apply this year

Confidence in Approaching a Supervisor for…

… those very likely to apply to current HEI

… the rest of the population

'Everything I know about applying for a phd has come from my prospective supervisor and the university website'
PGT student

It is difficult to say exactly what these data point to alone, however the contextualising qualitative data suggest that supervisors are often the main, or only, source of information and support for PGR applicants. As one first-generation postgraduate taught student put it '*I can discuss how to apply for PGR and how the funding works with the tutors who taught me during my MSc, however having looked online myself I find the information dense and confusing'.* This points to two possible findings, both that supervisors are doing a very good job of supporting their students, and that there is potential barrier if preparation for PGR is based on the luck of finding your 'home' in your current HEI, and attracting the attention and support of a good potential supervisor.

This may prove a particular problem in attracting more applications to elite universities from students at post-92 universities. A supervisor in economics at the University of Glasgow reflected on their own background and how this impacted on their choice of university - choosing Strathclyde over University of Glasgow due to a shorter commute. This kind of decision making she argued is still present amongst less privileged communities, and in particular where they feel they will 'fit in' better at a post-92 institution. Though this is anecdotal evidence it is clearly evidenced by the National Education Opportunities Network that post-92s attract more students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds (NEON: February 2019). As the majority of funded awards go to elite and/or Russell group universities it seems imperative that post-92 students are able to consider these awards.

On my current Masters course it feels a lot more homogenous, most students seem to be similar ages and backgrounds, with only a few nationalities in the mix as well…The [post-92] really put inclusivity into practice

A First Generation PGR on moving from a Post-92 to a Russell Group university

The supervisors interviewed were keen for support and advice on facilitating widening access. The impression of the EDI training they had received at their universities diverged somewhat, with perhaps the most representative answer being '*some of it was useful. some of it was dire'.* That which was useful was often identified as related to issues like harassment and bullying with '*really good hands-on examples, good robust research and data'.* Overall, the thing that was lacking for supervisors was specific, context-heavy training with real world examples of both discrimination and best practice in

I think the more we do to support supervisors, the more that has a knock on consequence
Supervisor in Sociology

supporting widening access. SGSSS may not necessarily be in a position to provide this level of expertise and training, however, there may be other ways that SGSSS can support supervisors within the current relationship, including making a more transparent 'whole person' approach that would feed out through pathway reps and academics and promote an EDI agenda.

In one interview the anecdotal observation was made that '*widening access supervisors attract widening access students*'. What may be more measurable is if supervisor-led proposals with EDI themes and collaborative awards with third sector organisations, are coming from 'widening access supervisors' who then go on to choose widening access students. If so then the continued support of these awards could be vital for both bringing more diversity into

the awards and also the continuation of quality research on EDI in its broadest societal scope. Nevertheless, such a recommendation will remain problematic if non-EDI topics and the open competition are not also prioritised as routes to widening access, leading to what one supervisor termed 'the ghettoisation of topics'. In addition where the survey data points to a higher likelihood of first-generation students applying for the supervisor-led route, there were comments left that put this choice down to a lack of confidence. Given that there is some anecdotal evidence that academics are already approaching the supervisor-led awards with a student in mind, a co-developed strand may help to soften this binary.

Which competition would you be more likely to apply for?
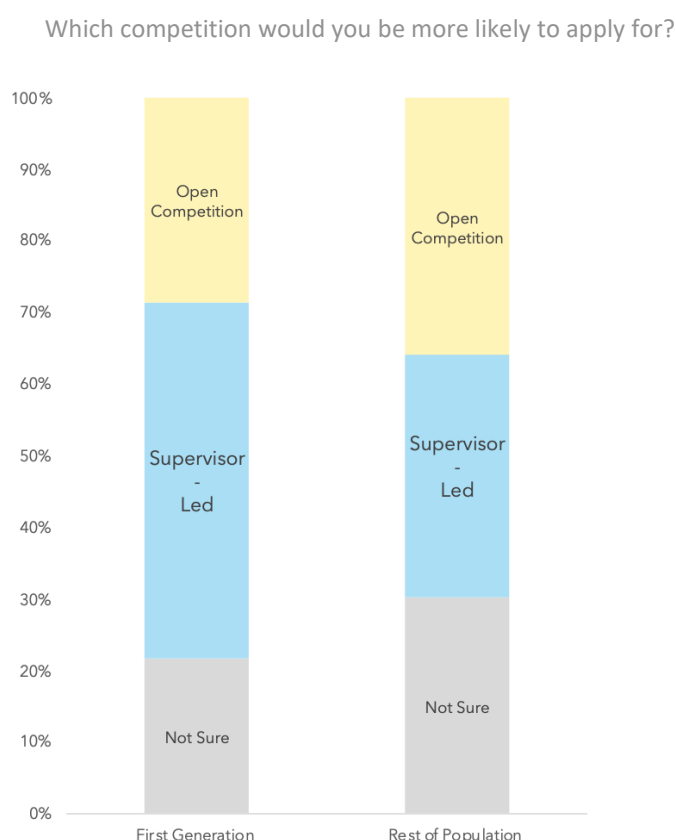
One thing to note here is that academics and supervisors are also the reviewers for the awards, and thus it may seem that an overly positive picture of their commitment to EDI is presented, if they are still not giving awards to BAME, first generation and other under-represented groups on a proportional level to the applications received. It must be recognised that the supervisors interviewed for this research were small in number, and were the few who agreed to be interviewed about EDI during a period of considerable stress for academic staff working from home due to Covid-19. It is unlikely that they are a representative sample. They, and other supervisors with a good grasp of widening access issues, may well end up on a panel with colleagues less concerned with those considerations. A report from HEPI on the UK PhD experience shows that supervisors are also the most common perpetrators of bullying, and recommends that 'institutions should ensure that supervisory duties are only given to academics who are proven and effective mentors' (Bethan 2020:77). As academics often see opportunities for promotion tied to the quantity of supervisory roles taken on, there is clearly room for improvement in HEI policy. For SGSSS and PGR

applications, a simple recommendation from this is a defined, accessible route for individual markers to flag up when they think the awards process has been unfair, such as discarding all the 2.1s without looking at the applications properly.

As we will continue to see in the remaining two thematic sections, a welcoming university, a sense of representation and an understanding supervisor cognisant of EDI are some of the best assets a widening access applicant can utilise. Supporting these supervisors and students to find one another is key to many of the recommendations in this report, from clear information dispersal, co-developed awards and the possibility of positive action. Finding ways to make further links to HEIs on further training and support for supervisors and pathway reps offers a longer-term challenge nevertheless offering high dividends.

> ## I believe it is extremely competitive and I do not feel confident using a lot of time in the application only then to not be granted a scholarship.
> **First-Generation PGT student**

3.3 Key Findings: Supporting Widening Access within a Competitive Landscape

One of the most significant ways in which widening access to PGR differs fundamentally from the majority of widening access work focused on undergraduate degrees, is that it is embedded in highly competitive funding routes. 62% of the survey respondents feel that acquiring PhD funding is very competitive, with the 23.9% considering it 'quite competitive' more likely to show characteristics of a more privileged background. This response reflects a well known truth that is unlikely to change. As such widening access at this level is a case of mitigating an exacting filtering process that prioritises academic excellence. In this section I will present data showing how the reality and wider perception of competitiveness works against widening access policies, arguing for a 'whole person approach' that is both holistic and measurable. This is not to suggest that academic achievements should be ignored, but that they should always be contextualised.

All of the supervisors interviewed indicated that they make it a priority to communicate to potential applicants that securing funding is extremely competitive, and that completing a PhD is a laborious and difficult task. One supervisor went as far as to suggest that the process of acquiring funding was in fact *more difficult* than completing a PhD itself, referring to a student who applied 13 times. They give this warning with good reason, allowing the student to prepare for all eventualities and avoid too much disappointment.

Simultaneously, supervisors only saw something like a 2.1 as a barrier to a successful PhD in the context of the application process, and appeared to consistently value other experiences (as well as the co-developed proposal mentioned earlier) as much as or more than really excellent grades. Some examples of viewpoints on a 'less than stellar' academic record included:

I'd like to know more about … what they learned from the past about the support that they require … rather than necessarily feeling that if their grades and things aren't fantastic that that in itself may be indicative of their lack of ability to study a doctoral level (Social Work)

that wouldn't bother me at all and we've got some really good examples of that at Napier (Informatics)

That doesn't matter to me if it's a good application if it's a strong student and it's a good application I wouldn't think twice (Sociology/Criminology)

I wouldn't have any hesitancy at all (Anthropology)

In fact, many supervisors indicated the ways they try to bolster their efforts to support students from non-conventional routes or under-privileged backgrounds in through the competitions, with a supervisor talking about one of her students who is British-Asian, female and wears a headscarf thus:

One of the reasons I probably went above and beyond in helping her with that proposal is because I felt she needed access to the [university] space and I wanted her to have access to the space, because she represents one of those people that doesn't have privilege.

Only one supervisor interviewed said they would have any hesitancy to supervise a student with a 'less than stellar academic record', but they indicated later in the interview that they were imagining a much lower level of attainment than a 2.1 when they made this statement. Another noted that they suspect the quality of research in their department would be much improved with both racial and class-based diversity.

This data reflects Sørensen's (2016) research into PhD outcomes that argues 'grades are not necessarily valuable in predicting which students will become successful in conducting research' indicating a 'range of competencies' required for research, and the more significant impact of qualities like 'initiative' and 'integrity' (298, 300). The 'difficulty' of a PhD was seen by supervisors as a similar challenge of persistence and resilience in the face of volume of work, uncertainty or unexpected events. This combination of responses in the supervisor interviews appears to show that a marking process without an explicit route for life experience to add extra points is not particularly reflexive of what supervisors value in a PhD student, or the characteristics

I am a PGR student rep for my institution and we have discussions about this with the committee. They claim their process works to select "the best student" (no matter their background), but if you look at where often most weight is put on, is experience in academia

shown to be linked to positive outcomes in academic research. We have already seen the significant role that HEI has in helping students to successfully tackle the most common hurdles to PGR. However, in the balance of marks towards academic achievement it appears that the funding system is working against, rather than with these efforts.

The idea that the selection process is too focused on academic achievement is widespread in the data collected in both the survey and the focus groups. It is therefore worth analysing this claim. In the current set up applications are awarded a mark out of 25, with 10 points available from personal attributes, 10 from the quality of the proposal and 5 from the supervisory and institutional fit. The personal attributes include but are not limited to academic achievements and can take any contextual circumstance into account, and the score is more or less qualitatively judged from the information provided. In this way the system is flexible towards incorporating a 'whole person' approach.
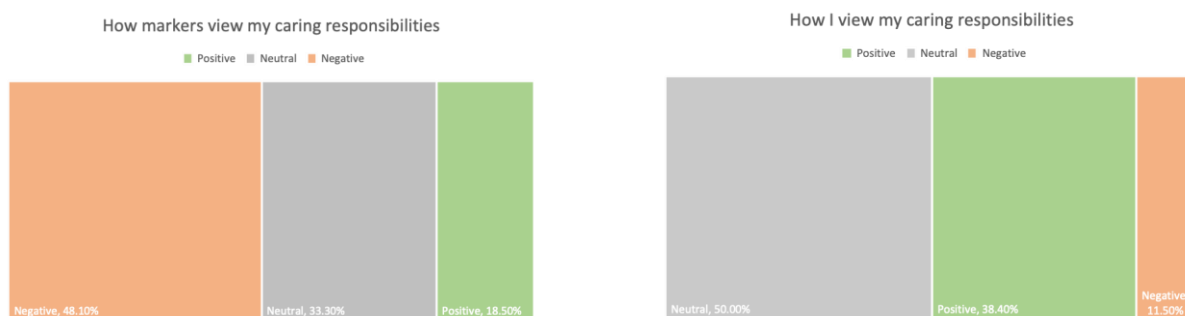
However, even if flexibility in the system is there, it is still significant that applicants do not recognise that, and may not realise that their 2.1 could be enough for PhD funding because of the circumstances in which they achieved it. In order to take life circumstance into account when contextualising academic achievement there will need to be consistently a good indication of the applicant's background. Currently inclusion of this kind of information is something that supervisors generally encourage but often with caveats. Most typically supervisors report that they would encourage the inclusion of this information where it was relevant to the project, such as a person with a disability doing research involving aspects of disability. Some supervisors were unsure where that information would go on the form though the question on 'preparedness' for PhD has been designed to this end (though it is worth noting that it has recently been revised to attempt to address a lack of clarity around its purpose). This research therefore makes the key recommendation that this flexibility in the scoring system is pushed further towards a 'whole person' approach that is more explicit and transparent.

> **Until I got the advice to include [personal barriers and challenges] I assumed it would count against me**
> **Current first-gen mature-student PGR**

Potential applicants responding to the survey were far more unsure or anxious about including background information. In the responses to the survey, most of the population thought that non-academic achievements and personal circumstances that were not related to their research would be viewed neutrally or negatively by the markers. Most worryingly this was divided along certain demographic. The charts below show the 27 responses from potential applicants who are currently caring for another adult. They were much more likely to think that caring responsibilities would be seen negatively by the markers (48.1%) than the rest of the population (21.8%). Nevertheless over a third (38.4%) thought their caring responsibilities had positively impacted their preparedness for PhD.

How markers view my caring responsibilities — Positive, Neutral, Negative — Negative, 48.10% | Neutral, 33.30% | Positive, 18.50%

How I view my caring responsibilities — Positive, Neutral, Negative — Neutral, 50.00% | Positive, 38.40% | Negative, 11.50%

Many supervisors pointed out that they may not know that someone is from a widening access background, and would feel uncomfortable pressing the applicant for more information on their circumstances if it was not freely given. This may not pose too much of an issue to a 'whole person' approach if a clearly worded question on the form provided the necessary encouragement and may even be responded to without the full knowledge of the supervisor. Nevertheless some applicants may feel an additional burden in recounting difficult personal circumstances. It is clearly essential that the inclusion of this information is only encouraged if it really will be taken seriously, making it very conceivable that, for example, where an equally impressive proposal from an applicant with a 2.1 is going up against another applicant with a first and a dissertation award, the former can be successful in light of contextualising circumstances.

> **In some ways [ring-fencing] is not ideal, but it seems to me the clearest and the most transparent way of ensuring it happens because it's actually very hard to score in the scholarship application process.**
> **- Supervisor in anthropology**

Most of the supervisors interviewed showed some level of support for positive action or ring-fencing with many of them showing enthusiasm for it and indicating that this is the only thing that they think could possibly work. Others were supportive but wary, indicating the difficulties of defining these groups, the potential for bad press and other pit-falls including examples they had seen elsewhere where ring-fenced awards appeared to be handed to individuals who did not fit the criteria of the group it was reserved for. Nevertheless given the scale and the persistence of structural inequalities across an entire lifecycle, such a competitive award is unlikely to be representative without strong measures to mitigate a wider reality. This societal scale is something that almost all the supervisors referred to when asked what barriers under-represented groups face, with many pointing to these things starting at 'nursery' or the 'comprehensive school'. One supervisor described themselves as 'torn' on the issue, concluding that

I think with the current funding resource situation, I would say no and instead I would like to see a more contextualised approach to admissions for everybody.

Ring-fencing not being contextualised was a criticism I came across quite regularly both in the research undertaken, and in meetings with the working group, and other DTPs. However, this was not always a reason to rule it out. Ring-fencing is not a fully holistic, individualised measure, but such measures often require long-term systematic changes, high-quality training and massive culture change. Ring-fencing, or any form of positive action, offers the opportunity for immediate impact. In the most recent meeting of the working group where this survey data were presented the consensus seemed to be that ring-fencing is both imperfect and necessary, as one working group member, who works in HE widening participation, commented:

I don't think ring-fencing is the only way to go but I think it may be necessary for a period of time to make any significant change

3.4 Key Findings: Impact of being First Generation, Disabled and/or BAME in Higher Education (HE)

In this section, some of the findings of three key under-represented groups are delineated - first generation, BAME and disabled students. These are highly intersectional categories, and so it is reasonable to assume that many applicants are facing overlapping and compounded challenges across all of these findings. There are many additional possibilities for widening access characteristics with further overlap, such as part-time students, carers, care-experienced, LGBTQI+ and mature students. In particular, the section on 'first generation' students should be considered as largely representative of the broad issues faced from all under-represented groups. Research from the Office for Students shows for undergraduate participation 'entrants from the most advantaged half of areas so dominate the student population that the majority of entrants with almost any characteristic…are from those advantaged areas'. This is an indication that diversity amongst those student cohorts does not reach this intersectional level, and that those with multiple characteristics are likely excluded. As such, many of the measures

and recommendations from the findings in this section are intended to have positive impacts across characteristics like social class, race, gender etc.

> **Since embarking on my Masters and PhD at Edinburgh I feel I have opened up my world to ways of being that were not available to me before I was a graduate.**
> A First Generation ESRC funded PhD student

However, it is clear that there are specific barriers faced by various groups, and this report details additional findings and resources and promotes a policy focus on first generation British BAME students as a particularly under-represented group. The section on disabled students highlights a key distinction in findings with this group and the need for further research as well as an immediate focus on increased cohort building and representation.

3.4.1 Data Challenges

Although the findings articulate issues faced by these groups, there are significant challenges in the markers most-commonly used for identifying particular groups and how the data are used. For example, there are debates amongst widening participation professionals on how social class can be measured more accurately, using a combination of markers like postcode from childhood residence, free school meals (FSM), or even parental occupation. Whilst postcode data is a great tool for measuring participation in a timely and detailed way across cohorts, or at aggregate level, it is less useful for identifying individuals as widening participation students without being supplemented with additional qualitative information or other markers such as FSM. This debate is more difficult to settle at the PGR level where some of the markers may not carry the same relevance and the high level of intersectionality means that focusing on any single level of equality as a marker for positive action runs the risk of including some who aren't in need and excluding some who are. This has become even more significant with the inclusion of international students in UKRI awards, which might further mask the under-representation of certain groups (e.g. Black British students).

The majority view amongst the widening access professionals and supervisors consulted is that barriers to participation begin early in life and follow an individual's progression through the education system. The proven impact of childhood disadvantage on undergraduate participation thus is likely to point towards some of the broad and persistent barriers like a lack of social capital and confidence so far discussed. In the focus groups current PGRs reflected on postgraduate education as the key driver of their own social mobility, and this process was often talked of as beginning before the application to PGR with PGT study.

Postcode data is assigned a score based on the area in which the individual resides (not necessarily reflecting personal circumstances, rather the aggregated circumstances of people living in the neighbourhood). The most common proxy in a university context for social class via postcode in Scotland is the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation *SiMD*[3], which looks at the extent to which an area is deprived across seven domains (income, employment, education, health, access to services, crime and

---

[3] https://simd.scot/#/simd2016/BTTTFTT/9/-4.0000/55.9000/

housing). In other parts of the UK *POLAR4[4]* is most commonly used, which looks at how likely young people are to participate in higher education based on the proportion of young people in the defined area who enter HE aged 18 or 19. SiMD is restricted to Scotland and therefore not suitable for a comparison with UK-wide eligibility, whereas POLAR4 covers all UK postcodes. An alternative/additional option offered by a member of the working group is ACORN[5]. Whilst POLAR is based on participation rates in HE for young people, ACORN is a geodemographic profiler based on consumer data. The SeNSS DTP in their report on EDI suggest the use of POLAR4 but most importantly point to the need for standardisation across DTPs. This is an area where UKRI would be best placed to intervene and facilitate that standardisation. Rather than suggesting a particular model for postcode data collection, this report recommends that childhood postcode data is used to monitor the socioeconomc profile of cohorts, and that there is a co-ordinated effort from DTPs, led by UKRI, to standardise this process.

<div align="right">

It is an alien environment and a difficult adjustment

First generation PGT students

</div>

3.4.2 First Generation

In the survey almost half of the responses were from first generation students defined as 'those who are the first generation of their family to access any kind of higher education'. There were marked differences in the answers for this group against the rest of the population. However, there was no obvious difference of the spread of gender or HEI between these two groups. The first generation respondents were less racially diverse, which supports most supervisors' impressions that diversity of their departments was down to their international cohorts and that the most severely under-represented group is first generation, British, BAME. First generation respondents were approximately:

Many of us count ourselves out for things like our background, accents, caring responsibilities etc.

First generation PGT student

⊙ three times more likely to have been young carers,

⊙ twice as likely to be parents

⊙ twice as likely to be currently caring for an adult

They were also slightly more likely to think that applying to a PhD program is 'very competitive' (70% against 56% of the rest of the population).

The comments left by first generation students on the survey were largely split into two areas: practical barriers, broadly time and finances; and, cultural barriers or lack of social capital. The supervisor interviews also highlighted that social class is still a visible marker in the UK as many supervisors claimed they would often 'just know' if someone was not from a middle class background. Comments left on the survey made it clear that one can feel 'out of place' in the university for something like a regional accent, whilst the focus group participants pointed to the homogeneity of class within their cohorts. The cultural context of class in the UK makes it more difficult to press for further

---

[4] https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/young-participation-by-area/about-polar-and-adult-he/
[5] https://acorn.caci.co.uk/

information, help and support. One first generation student reported that '*a part of me feels intimidated*' whilst another was very direct in saying that '*I have felt quite inappropriate demanding more information from my current university*'. Social class can therefore be reasonably included alongside other EDI characteristics in any recommendations for increased representation.

The often presumed route for a student from a disadvantaged background is from undergraduate straight to a 1+3 award. A

A good financial position appears to be essential, rather than an academic ability
**First-Generation PGT student**

taught masters degree is an expensive undertaking and funding is generally not available. However, according to research done in England by José Luis Mateos-González and Paul Wakeling (2020), the introduction of a postgraduate loan from the UK and Scottish governments is likely to have resulted in more socio-economically diverse PGT cohorts within the British context. Mateos-González and Wakeling consider the introduction of these loans (in 2016 in England and 2017 in Scotland) to have been a markedly successful measure for widening access claiming that 'it is unusual to find such clear evidence of narrowing inequalities following a policy intervention' (ibid:713). Their figures show that 'graduates from the lower participation neighbourhoods (POLAR quintile 1) were more likely than those from the highest participation neighbourhoods (quintile 5) to progress to a master's degree following the introduction of loans' (ibid:703). This research supports some findings from the survey that showed first generation students both more anxious about finances and more likely to take on loans.

How likely are you to be deterred from further study due to financial concerns?

Not First Gen   First Gen
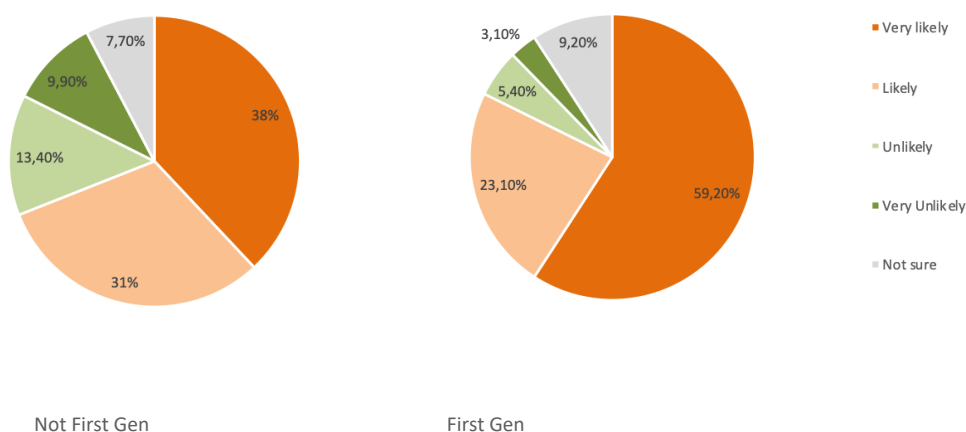
Have you considered applying for a postgraduate loan from the UK or Scottish government?

Not First Gen — Yes 49,30% No 50,70%

First Gen — Yes 57,70% No 42,30%
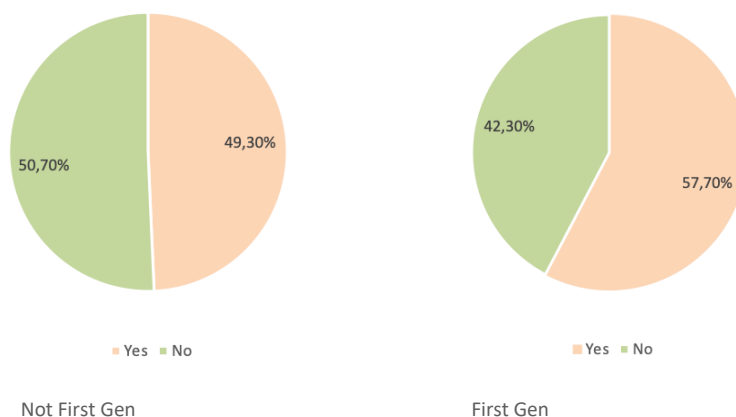
There are a number of potential consequences that this change has on widening access to PGR funding. PGT cohorts are more likely to include the demographics that a widening access agenda targets, and those from under-represented groups that are using these loans are likely demonstrating a level of determination and commitment to further study that would serve them well in a PhD. It is also likely that these students are balancing their taught masters degrees with other wage earning work as the loan is insufficient to cover the cost of living. The outcomes for these students at PGT level may therefore be at a disadvantage. Further, as Mateos-González and Wakeling show, 'in absolute rather than relative terms more students from advantaged backgrounds have benefitted from loans' (ibid:714). Therefore increased accessibility of PGTs across the board could make the vying for funded PGR positions even more competitive.

I have to work almost full time to support myself through my conversion Msc
First Generation PGT student

It had previously been discussed within SGSSS that reserving 1+3 awards for students who don't have masters could be a widening access policy that addresses social class, with only the privileged able to access PGT degrees. The introduction of the loan changes the basis of that suggestion significantly, and it could ultimately bar students from more disadvantaged backgrounds who have taken on significant levels of debt from following their ambitions in academia further.

3.4.3 Race and ethnicity

There is considerable crossover in findings and recommendations between first generation and BAME applicants, with intersectionality a given between these two groups. Mateos-González and Wakeling show that their findings on increased progression rates to PGT degrees applies particularly to 'Black African, Other, Mixed and Black Caribbean groups' although those identifying as 'Indian' showed the least impact in progression rates (2020:703). Both the British Asian students and Black and Asian students who did not identify as British gave similar answers and comments to those from first generation students, calling for clearer information, highlighting the central role that their supervisors played, opting for the supervisor-led competition due to lack of confidence, and showing concern over the 'elite' cultures of higher education. However, it is still key

to measure and address the under-representation of racial and ethnic groups in specific and targeted ways. As a spokesperson from Race.Ed, advised, though there is intersectionality with social class, the issues that class presents are experienced differently in different contexts.

> **I feel the university is embarrassed helping me as a refugee and as a foreigner, so I need to be more pressing when trying to retrieve any information regarding postgraduate research application.**
> **Undergraduate student with refugee status**

It is key to note that there were no black British respondents to the survey and very few Asian or minority ethnic respondents who identified as British. This represents an acute pipeline issue for these groups. Most supervisors interviewed had a sense of this in their departments where there was a level of diversity reported from international students, but very little amongst British students. As one supervisor suggested disadvantage 'compounds' when it is intersectional, and it is likely that British BAME students who are also first generation or from low participation neighbourhoods face more profound barriers to accessing PGR than their white counterparts. The EDI data from SGSSS is limited in numbers and difficult to draw conclusions from, but it does point towards BAME applications not succeeding at the same level as those from white students. It is reasonable to assume, using data and research from UKGCE this is the case.[6] Their data shows that 12.7% of British BAME PGRs in 2018/19 had research council funding, compared to 22.1% of white PGRs (though the white category was not split along British/international lines which makes it more difficult to compare). British BAME and in particular British black students are very acutely under-represented throughout the pipeline and ring-fencing awards may be a necessary first step to addressing this.

Data from UKGCE can also provide further insight into the characteristics of British BAME PGRs. This data includes all PGRs in the UK for the period of 2018/19, although it is worth noting that a large number (43.1%) leave their ethnicity undisclosed, with 10.3% of the remaining identifying as BAME and 46.6% as white. In this data British BAME PGRs are more likely to be part-time students (40.2% compared with 24.2% for the whole population) and the 'Black or Black British - Caribbean' category has the highest proportion of part-time students at 56.5%. Those identifying as BAME and British are also more likely to be older, with 61.8% over 30 years of age compared with 42.9% overall, and more likely to be from a low participation neighbourhood (POLAR quintiles 1 & 2) at 24.2% compared to 11.8% for the whole population. These differences do not persist where the data is spilt between BAME and white but is inclusive of international students or students who do not identify as British.

The categorisation of race and ethnicity using 'BAME' was adopted in this research following its use by UKRI and popular use in data sets like that used by UKGCE. However it did present problems in the survey research, glossing key differences in background, immigration status etc that could be gleaned from the comments. There is much debate on terminology for race and ethnicity. BAME may well be useful when a broad category is required - such as ring fencing awards for British BAME applicants. However, certain groups are clearly facing different or more acute challenges than others, and so data collection and interventions ought to be as specific and targeted as possible to account for this. It will be particularly important that when the

---

[6] https://data.ukcge.ac.uk/

impact of the SGSSS widening access policy is measured it can be made clear if that impact is unequally distributed according to race and ethnicity. The lack of data that disaggregates for the outcomes and experiences of black students is also an issue highlighted by Leading Routes in their Broken Pipeline Report (2019).

It is also key to follow research and advice from BAME-led organisations, academics and professionals. Race.Ed are well placed to bring expertise within the Scottish and UK contexts and provided insights for this research. This included the provocation that a key challenge is to plug the 'easy pipeline' from the current undergraduate and PGT student body with a Race.Ed spokesperson highlighting that academic colleagues routinely report that very bright BAME students who want to do PGR are not the ones getting funding. There is certainly a basis for seeing this reflected in the data and literature. UKGCE data shows that 48.9% of BAME PGRs received no financial backing, compared to 32.66% of their white counterparts, whilst Mateos-González and Wakeling show that postgraduate loans benefitted participation levels amongst British BAME students in particular. A large part of the 'broken pipeline' appears to be, as Mateos-González and Wakeling suggest, a lack of access to resources rather than, for example, a lack of representation, family precedent or knowledge of the HE sector. Like all the supervisors interviewed, a spokesperson from Race.Ed was in favour of ring-fencing arguing that:

Wider culture change is necessary but takes years. DTPs/HEIs are microcosm of society at large and disadvantage is therefore built in. Ring-fencing awards can mitigate that fact and also kick start the broader cultural change required to draw and retain BAME candidates from undergraduate programs.

UKCGE note that 'between 2016/17 – 2018/19 there was an average growth of 0.13% in the proportion of BAME PGRS' such that it would take 51.8 years for BAME participation in postgraduate research to reach equivalent levels as undergraduate. All the research undertaken for this project follows this view in supporting ring-fencing as an imperfect but necessary measure. Another point reiterated by supervisors and Race.Ed is that BAME students should be free to explore the scholarship that interests them and not be restricted to topics that specifically speak to race, or are situated in their community. In this sense, supervisor-led and collaborative awards that propose research around race and ethnicity can only form part of the picture, and the open competition must be also be accessible for BAME students.
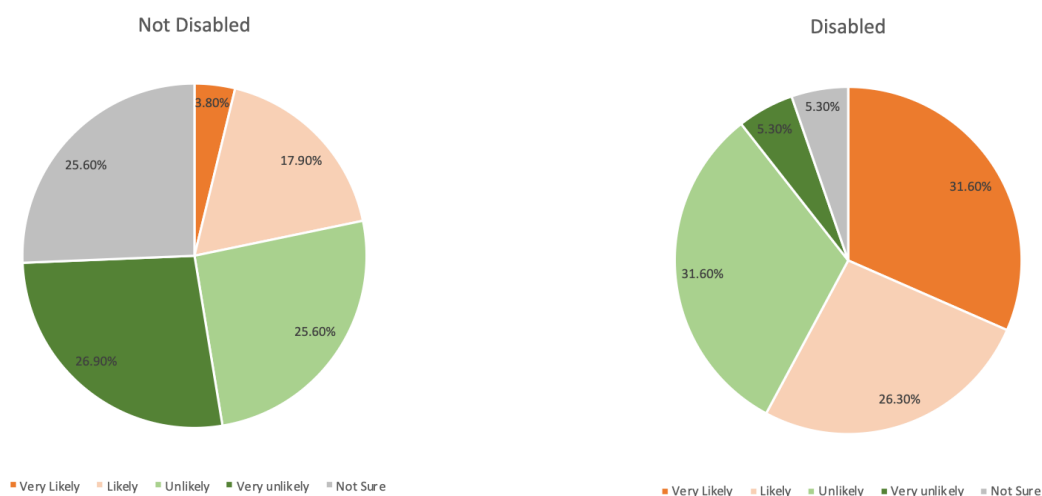
Leading Routes are another a key source of expertise on race and ethnicity in HE. Their 2019 report 'The Broken Pipeline' is essential reading on the issues facing black students seeking PhD funding in the UK. They highlight the attainment gap that black students face at undergraduate level - potentially a key piece of evidence that supports a 'whole person' approach. They argue that emphasis on past attainment 'immediately disadvantages Black students who are the least likely to achieve a 'good undergraduate degree '(upper second class or first class honours)'. The broken pipeline report points to key causes of this attainment gap (such as a euro-centric curriculum) but also to the existence of an 'unexplained' gap. The whole person approach may well fall short where contextual circumstance cannot be clearly identified on an individual level but are symptomatic of structural racism at institutional levels. In addition the questions about 'resilience in the face of diversity' were seen as inappropriate by some applicants that spoke to Leading Routes (though others appreciated them). Leading Routes suggest adopting 'a more open approach to assessing academic ability and defining 'excellence 'possibly considering applicants on the

basis of a diagnostic essay, or using a competency based approach'. The potential problem here, highlighted in the supervisor interviews, is that the awards are so competitive that extremely good proposals often still fail to secure funding. Within this difficult nexus of imperfect approaches, ring-fencing awards ensures an impactful move towards widening access whilst further research is undertaken and wider culture shifts championed. Other key recommendations that this report makes follow Leading Routes, including diverse panels, improving data collection and making information clear and transparent.

3.4.4 Disability

There was a particularly striking finding regarding disability. Those who answered 'yes' to feeling under-represented on the survey, were asked how likely they were to be deterred from further study due to this under-representation. There was a marked difference in the likelihood of deterrence between the answered from disabled vs able bodied applicants. There was no such difference when the results were filtered along other markers like nationality, race, ethnicity or first generation.

How likely is it that this under-representation would deter you from further study?

Not Disabled

Very Likely 3.80%, Likely 17.90%, Unlikely 25.60%, Very unlikely 26.90%, Not Sure 25.60%

Disabled

Very Likely 31.60%, Likely 26.30%, Unlikely 31.60%, Very unlikely 5.30%, Not Sure 5.30%

■ Very Likely ■ Likely ■ Unlikely ■ Very unlikely ■ Not Sure

It is very concerning that almost a third of the respondents to the survey that identified themselves as having a disability reported that it is very likely that they will be deterred from further study due to under-representation, and that over half say it would be likely or very likely. There may be a particular stigma around disability in academia, or there may be a history of physical access issues that are overlooked and leave disabled students feeling unwelcome. The way in which some social science methods are presented with an able bodied researcher as standard may also be having an impact. This is speculative and further research would be needed to find specific issues, however the Office for Students note the disparities in access, success and progression for disabled students and suggest accessibility be maximised in buildings and in the provision of alternative course materials (OfS: October 2019). Cohort building through [7] would be a great avenue for more detailed student feedback for SGSSS. It is key that every effort is made towards inclusion and representation for disabled students. This could be a particular priority

---

[7] Social is an online community platform from SGSSS that enables the broad SGSSS network to register, connect, attend training, and take advantage of many of their opportunities

in promotional material, in future webinars, and key information dispersal - for example making it clear how PhD funding effects disability benefits and highlighting the availability of Disabled Students Allowance with ESRC funding. Ensuring access is of course necessary for all the recommendations made in this report on developing events, webinars and cohort building.

4. Recommendations

4.1 Accessible Information

Reviewing and promoting all of the platforms through which applicants find information on PGR funding is a practical and attainable start to improving access. In particular a shift of emphasis away from individual responsibility for researching funding and towards a general dissemination of information is encouraged with the recommendations that:

⊙ SGSSS Directorate make information more easily accessible and digestible through:

- Targeted awareness raising from 3rd year UG onwards, inclusive of PGT, through webinars and/or information sessions that encourage traffic to the SGSSS website.

- Bite-sized videos outlining the basics of a PhD and the SGSSS application process.

- Clear explanations of PhD basics (length of award, what's provided etc).

- Sharing information in a timely manner, with the scheduling of webinars and other content considered within the recommended timeline for developing a proposal or application.[8]

- Developing best practice for HEIs to consider when developing their institutional webpages.

⊙ Staff at SGSSS partner HEIs make information more easily accessible and digestible through:

- Reviewing institutional and departmental admissions pages for clear integration with SGSSS and between HEI and funding application processes, obvious links to DTPs and explanation of what they are and where they fit in.

- Reviewing the timing and content of PGR open days in relation to basic PhD info (including funding routes), SGSSS requirements and deadlines.

- Better integrating the HEI application with a funding application.

⊙ Both integrate this focus on the accessibility of information with increased representation.

- Increase the visibility of part-time study options perhaps through online case studies.

- Emphasise opportunities for training development and the benefit of PhDs for a range of career trajectories.

- Ensure that information on how welfare and benefits are affected by PhD funding is readily available.

- Use webinars and events as opportunities to share insights from current PGRs who are from under-represented groups or had non-traditional paths to study.

---

[8] Although sharing information in a timely manner is a key recommendation of this report, the timing will likely remain a significant frustration for those academic subjects with one-year 'conversion' PGT students who are unable to progress straight to a PGR position.

- Pathway-reps and convenors review the clarity and accessibility of guidance on the supervisor-led and collaborative awards.

  - Identify pathways, subjects or departments that are exclusively or largely using the open competition, and support them in accessing the full range of funding opportunities available to their PGR applicants.

4.2 Whole Person Approach

A whole person approach suggests that academic grades are considered as one indication of potential amongst many when assessing PhD applications, and that they are not considered as the most reliable indication in all circumstances. Simultaneously the benefits to research quality that come from being from a certain community or having a certain background should be considered key as well as the resilience and ambition shown in overcoming structural and personal barriers to educational success.

There is room within the current system to make choices on this basis. However, flexibility, in the face of tough competition, is unlikely to be enough without further measures to *ensure* a whole person approach. As the current system involves qualitative judgements attached to quantitative scoring, a twin approach to addressing both aspects is recommended.

The valorisation of decontextualised academic achievement is a historically embedded value in academia. Although the current guidance is clear in some aspects (such as not automatically dismissing 2.1s) the way in which personal circumstances are taken into account is still a qualitative measure taken by academics who could be more or less socialised into that culture. As such, in addition to efforts to support a widening access focus in how these judgements are made, a supplementary quantitative marker will encourage a greater challenge to the accepted norm of decontextualised academic grades. Uncoupling academic or professional achievements and personal background/circumstances/barriers in the scoring process is likely to be a key step here. Thus this research recommends:

- SGSSS further develop the 'whole person 'approach to assessing applications.

  - Keep testing/revising the clarity and use of the preparedness question and adjust it if required

  - Provide guidance to supervisors on what kinds of contextual information might support their student's open competition applications

  - Provide widening access guidance for supervisors applying for and selecting students for supervisor-led awards

  - Award specific marks for potential and challenging circumstances over/separate to achievement so they are guaranteed to make an impact

  - Training for markers with this framework of quantitative and qualitative approaches to scoring

  - A defined, accessible route for individual markers to flag up when they think the awards process has been unfairly based on academic achievement (such as discarding all the 2.1s without looking at the applications properly)

  - Encourage a consideration of potential over past achievement

4.3 Positive Action

Following from the above recommendation, it is clear that even within a 'whole person approach' the cultural shifts necessary are significant and will likely take time. Positive action provides an effective boost to this process. As this research found the

criticisms of positive action to be based in its lack of holistic change, combining it with a whole person approach is recommended. The recommendations below aim to integrate ring-fencing with the whole-person decision making, suggesting that:

⊙ SGSSS consider forms of Positive Action by flagging for broad characteristics such as British BAME, first generation, disabled, LGBTQI+ etc. Action could include :

- Flags for widening access being a deciding factor in a borderline decision. Use broad categories like BAME and First Gen so that this policy has the widest impact possible.

- Different flags used in different pathways depending on subject differences (e.g. Where gender is under-represented is usually very subject/topic specific and data analysis on this could help decide if positive action was necessary in some subject areas.)

- Moderating awards for EDI levels before finalising ranking

- Pathways permitted an extra nomination for a widening access application

- Ring-fencing awards for BAME applicants.

- Investigate opportunities for partnerships in relation to ring-fencing, as demonstrated by the White Rose DTP partnership with the Stuart Hall foundation.

4.4 Standardised Data

Collecting detailed data on race, ethnicity and social class will provide measurable insights into the pipeline issues and differences between applications and awards that can both measure the success of a widening access policy and point to specific areas of under-representation for further work. This Report recommends:

⊙ SGSSS Work with other DTPs, HEIs and UKRI to establish common ground on data collection of EDI characteristics and :
- Push for detailed data on social class (e.g using POLAR)

- Push for detailed data on race and ethnicity, going beyond the 'BAME' categorisation

- In the absence of national benchmarks, define a number of key characteristics with clear definitions e.g. BAME, 1st Generation, contextual indicators of social class etc.

- Develop an evaluation framework for monitoring the numbers of widening access students at all stages of the application process and the effect of individual interventions on success rate at pathway level.

- Push for UKRI to formalise best practice for data collection on race & ethnicity, and social class.

4.5 Supporting Under-represented groups

Whilst most of the recommendations made are aimed at impacting an intersectional range of groups, targeted support for specific under-represented groups is also recommended. SGSSS are in a great position to conduct the following

recommendations due to their cross-institutional ties, and platforms like Social show particular potential for representation and cohort building. It is recommended that

- ⊙ SGSSS Directorate and partnership combine the recommendations on accessible information with an increased focus on representation.

  - Directorate develop mentoring schemes for underrepresented groups between current PGRs and applicants in identified areas of under-representation or local students applying to a different university than their UG/PGT degree.

  - Pathways develop subject-level mentoring schemes within HEIs

  - Targeted content (e.g. for a ring-fenced award, videos of current students as role models for certain groups)

- ⊙ SGSSS Directorate guide cohort building based around EDI characteristics like First Gen, BAME, LGBTQI+, part-time, mature and Disabled Students.

  - Use Social to bring together these cohorts across Scotland's HEIs.

  - Use cohorts as sounding boards for policy and seek opportunities for listening on the part of SGSSS and HEIs to student viewpoints

  - Continue best practice of initiatives that ensure opportunities such as training and internships are accessible to all (e.g. part-time internships, allowance for carer's to support event attendance)

- ⊙ SGSSS Directorate and partnership make links with special interest groups like RACE.Ed and BLACK.Ed when seeking clarification on the likely efficacy of proposed EDI measures.

  - Continue to make links with public sector bodies or third sector organisations for collaborative awards, where equality, diversity and inclusion are both a research focus and a workplace practice

  - Lobby for further investigation of the issues faced by disabled students

4.6 Supporting Supervisors with the Widening Access agenda

Supervisors already play a key role in supporting students from under-represented groups, but it is clear that their efforts are not always in line with SGSSS. Yet supervisors and SGSSS are largely very committed to widening access and there is potential for collaboration and support to materialise these good intentions in real progress. A key recommendation here is a formalised 'co-developed award', on the basis that it is more appealing to subjects that are used to the open competition and less daunting for students that lack confidence or the social capital necessary to navigate a solo proposal.

There has previously been a co-developed strand of the awards at SGSSS which the ESRC ruled out for widening access reasons. However, this research argues that allowing for a co-developed approach on an informal basis risks widening access students missing out on both sides. It could result in applications and form-filling for widening access students who have no reasonable chance of getting the award because they do not have those ties to the project and supervisor. It could also result in widening access students developing a project with a supervisor and then having that work taken away from them if another applicant is

seen to be more accomplished. Supervisor-led and co-developed approaches both promise to attract widening access applicants, but without a clear distinction may not reach their full potential to do so.

One way to re-open the possibility of a co-developed award with ESRC could be to combine it with the ring-fencing recommendation. This would allay concerns that widening access students are not the ones with access to supervisors, whilst giving a clear basis for supervisors to seek out, support and develop a proposal with a widening access student.
It is recommended that:

- ⊙ SGSSS Directorate and partnership develop supervisor guidelines on EDI with HEIs, and communicate them clearly

    - Including guidance on what widening access information is useful on supervisor statements of support

    - Guidelines for widening access as part of the supervisor-led competition

    - Aim to increase diversity on decision making panels

- ⊙ SGSSS Directorate lobby ESRC to reconsider a 'co-developed 'strand of the supervisor led competition, with ring-fencing a possible route to ensure that this is a basis for supervisors to invest time co-developing topics with widening access students

- ⊙ Reward staff for supporting WA students

    - Consider other ways of measuring the quality of supervision for promotions, rather basing it on number of students supervised

    - Local recognition schemes such as best supervisor awards

6. Bibliography

Policy Briefings and Reports:

Commissioner for Fair Access *Discussion Paper : Access to postgraduate study: representation and destinations*
https://www.gov.scot/publications/commissioner-fair-access-discussion-paper-access-postgraduate-study-representation-destinations/

June 2020 Cornell, Bethan for HEPI *PhD Life: The UK student experience*
https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2020/06/25/phd-life-the-uk-student-experience/

September 2019 Leading Routes *The Broken Pipeline Report*
https://leadingroutes.org/mdocs-posts/the-broken-pipeline-barriers-to-black-students-accessing-research-council-funding

February 2019 NEON *Working Class Heroes - Understanding access to higher education for white students from lower socio-economic backgrounds.*
https://www.educationopportunities.co.uk/news/new-report-shows-differences-in-white-working-class-students-going-to-university-by-higher-education-provider/

January 2021 Boliver & Powell for the Nuffield Foundation *Fair Admissions to Universities in England: Improving Policy and Practice*
 https://www.dur.ac.uk/resources/sass/research/briefings/fairadmissionreport.pdf

May 2019 Office for Students *Contextual Admissions : Promoting Fairness and Rethinking merit*
https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/bf84aeda-21c6-4b55-b9f8-3386b21b7b3b/insight-3-contextual-admissions.pdf

October 2019 Office for Students *Beyond the Bare Minimum: A*re universities and colleges doing enough for disabled students?
https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/beyond-the-bare-minimum-are-universities-and-colleges-doing-enough-for-disabled-students/

June 2019 Yannitell Reinhardt, Gina Reader/Associate Professor (University of Essex) for SeNSS *ARISE: Widening Participation in the South East Network of Social Sciences Doctoral Training Partnership*
https://static1.squarespace.com/static/57b6c63d3e00be2170fc88f4/t/5de7cdb791057c05bf60a880/1575472576191/Evaluation+Report+SeNSS+Final+for+public.pdf

UKGCE *Access and Participation of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnicities in UK postgraduate research*
http://www.ukcge.ac.uk/article/bame-pgr-access-participation-459.aspx

Data Sets:

UKGCE Online Postgraduate Data Resource
https://data.ukcge.ac.uk/

Academic Literature:

Mateos-González, José Luis & Wakeling, Paul, 2020. Student loans and participation in postgraduate education: the case of English master's loans. *Oxford review of education*, 46(6), pp.698–716.

Sørensen, Henrik Toft, 2016. I-determinants for a successful PhD or postdoctoral outcome. *Clinical epidemiology*, 8, pp.297–303.

Wakeling, Paul & Laurison, Daniel, 2017. Are postgraduate qualifications the 'new frontier of social mobility'? *The British journal of sociology*, 68(3), pp.533–555.

Wakeling, Paul, 2009. Are ethnic minorities under-represented in UK postgraduate study? *Higher education quarterly*, 63(1), pp.86–111.