POSTGRADUATE DIVERSITY STRATEGY BLUEPRINT
Introduction

The NEON Postgraduate Diversity Working Group supports a strategic approach to widening access and success in postgraduate study. It’s an area we have worked on collectively for several years.

We have seen the impact of sharing research, good practice and testing of interventions to shape approaches across institutions and the sector. Now, we require a culture shift to take the existing and important research, and good practice taking place, and share these across the sector – learning collectively as we go.

For this reason, we are launching this strategy blueprint (and accompanying pledge of intent) to work collaboratively to bring about positive change. We recognise organisations will be at different points in the journey and joining this pledge will provide a supportive environment in which to learn collectively.

Together we will:

- Foster a collaborative environment to share knowledge, research and best practice;
- Jointly develop and share outcomes of activities;
- Develop existing networks and relationships;
- Advocate and build awareness of the importance of addressing postgraduate diversity.

This blueprint document provides a framework for Higher Education (HE) institutions considering how to develop or enhance strategies to increase diversity at postgraduate level. It has been shaped by expertise from across the sector – including members of the NEON Postgraduate Diversity Working Group and UKGCE (UK Council for Graduate Education) – and also includes recommendations drawn from a literature review commissioned by the working group in summer 2021.

This literature review draws on national and international research and, importantly, was developed by an undergraduate student with lived experience of under-representation in higher education. For brevity, the blueprint provides a summary of key points. Numbers in brackets refer to the page numbers in the report if more detail is sought.

Alongside the blueprint, we will facilitate opportunities to join in the collective learning process through regular postgraduate diversity working groups, sub-group testing, collaborating to test, and trial models and events. The blueprint provides opportunity for many groups to deepen existing connections and drive change collectively.

It is unlikely that any single institution can implement the recommendations in isolation. However, we can make the change that is required by working together and across our institutions.

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Affiliation with the Postgraduate Diversity Strategy Blueprint pledge does not assume institutional / organisational endorsement.
Stakeholder Mapping

**Recommendation 1**

Establish a more granular understanding of the barriers to progression to postgraduate taught and research study and the intersection of under-representation.

(For sector leads, senior institutional sponsors and/or leads, colleagues responsible for EDI (equality, diversity and inclusion)).

- Parental socio-economic class, parental higher education, school type and financial means were all variables associated with postgraduate progression. We know from previous literature that particular groups are less likely to progress to postgraduate research and taught study, such as Black Caribbean and Bangladeshi (8). Black students were also found to be more concerned about higher education debt than their White peers (9).
- Consider a more granular approach to addressing ethnic diversity. Participation and experience of postgraduate study is likely to be different between ethnic groups. Higher education institutions should ensure there is internal discussion with staff and students on the use of the terms such as ‘BAME’ (black, asian and minority ethnic). This may include consideration of alternatives such as ‘PWER’ (people who experience racism).
- One of the crucial factors in undergraduate decision making to undertake postgraduate study is how it will increase job prospects – including higher salaries (30).
- UKRI (UK Research and Innovation)/OfS (Office for Students) funded projects (focused on increasing access to postgraduate research) present a crucial opportunity for share learning across the sector and connections with research on diversity at postgraduate taught level.
- Higher education institutions should formalise where postgraduate diversity fits within institutional structures and governance. This includes identification of a senior champion who is a sponsor for the agenda.

**Case Study**

**Defining, Measuring and Supporting Success for Postgraduate Researchers from Diverse Backgrounds** – University of Nottingham

Measures for success at the level of postgraduate research are not well-established, nor is there broad agreement of how success in postgraduate research should be defined beyond narrow measures such as thesis submission and completion rates, career destinations and publication metrics. This project is being delivered to bring together expertise in doctoral training and under-representation across a network of institutions and disciplines to work collaboratively with postgraduate researchers to establish:

1. An inclusive definition of success during PhD study, considering available data and how these could be used for meaningful monitoring of postgraduate research success
2. A co-created pilot activity designed to support postgraduate researchers from diverse backgrounds to be successful in their studies.
Recommendation 2

Establish and evaluate strategies to engage students from under-represented communities, including – but not limited to – sustained engagement to facilitate access/recruitment alongside financial support.

(For senior institutional sponsors and/or leads, Doctoral School colleagues, CDT/DTP (centre for doctoral training/doctoral training partnership) leads).

- Barriers to postgraduate include funding, academic disinterest and seeking employment; in fact, an estimated 50% of undergraduate students were dissuaded from further postgraduate study due to lack of funding (8).
- Barriers at undergraduate level persist at postgraduate level, but students studying at a selective university were more likely to progress to postgraduate study (7).
- Belonging in higher education should become a key part of student support programmes. Students who feel more acceptance and feel that they can engage with life in higher education, and their peers, are more likely to stay into postgraduate study and beyond.
- Schemes aimed at under-represented groups of students should be as clear and simple as possible, making it easy for undergraduate students (and those mature graduates returning to postgraduate study) to know that they are eligible.

- Many universities provide essential means-tested support for masters study. E.g. Sheffield provided £10,000 for 570 under-represented students (2016 to 2021) to pursue postgraduate study which, when combined with a student finance tuition loan, is a generous amount which should not just allow students financial security, but to also integrate into university life. A sense of belonging and participation at university has already been demonstrated to increase postgraduate engagement and may convince students to stay onto doctoral study and pursue professorship in that institution (30).

Case Study

The University of Cape Town in South Africa managed to reduce the drop-out rate of black students by over half through postgraduate support (45).

The academic development programme offers both academic and psychosocial support and access to mentorship. It has many similarities with the Plus Programme at the University of Leeds.

Within the academic development programme is the winter school of the National Astrophysics and Space Science Programme. This recruits third year physical science students who are from historically black universities, or disadvantaged backgrounds, into an honours bridging programme allowing them access to a career in astronomy or space sciences.
Auditing, Consultation and Co-Creation

Recommendation 3

Involve students in any decisions which affect a particular protected group and sufficiently compensate for this involvement (e.g. pay students from minoritised groups for their time assisting in programmes to widen access).

(For all staff involved in postgraduate recruitment).

- Universities should establish a diverse student task force group who are consulted in any new policy decisions.
- Students commented on how working alongside their studies impacted their grades and academic career, stating “I just wasn't going to reach my potential” (15). A common theme emerged, where minoritised students had to pick between fitting-in or standing-out.
- Universities must understand the unique challenges that minoritised students face not only academically, but how their previous identity can merge with the higher education community (10).
- Paid internships allow students to save money over the summer for potential postgraduate study and build skills ready to compete for highly skilled jobs. Industry involvement can also allow students to experience the company environment and network with mentors (30).

Setting Priorities and Success Measures

Recommendation 4

Prioritise further research into diversity in postgraduate education. Evaluation of impact of changes or interventions will ensure we build the evidence base of what works and doesn’t work.

(For senior sponsors, institutional diversity, widening access or/and Doctoral College leads)

- The rate of change in accessing and succeeding in postgraduate study has stagnated and there is an opportunity to undertake significantly more research to understand and act (31).
- In June 2021 the Sutton Trust released a comprehensive report about the failings of UK widening access to postgraduate education (3). So, what are the potential solutions?
Setting Priorities and Success Measures

Recommendation 5

Consider establishing remote learning and increased flexibility within higher education courses (i.e. part-time learning) which may benefit students from diverse communities.

Establish meaningful links with industry to make postgraduate study more attractive to minoritised students (e.g. links with more black British businesses may appeal to black students).

(For senior sector leaders, senior sponsors, leads for Student Education, Doctoral College and/or online education).

- Many features of online learning remain for the next academic year, and this has been a positive experience for some groups – including disabled students (37).
- A ‘return to learning support’ (for applicants who might have been out of formal education for a period) will be of benefit.
- Identify and target local community organisations to reach potential students with information about postgraduate opportunities.
- Flexible postgraduate programmes such as one delivered in Greece have had a positive impact.
- Parental socio-economic class, parental higher education, school type and financial means were all variables associated with postgraduate progression – we know from previous literature that particular groups within PWER (people who experience racism) are less likely to progress to postgraduate taught and research study such as Black Caribbean and Bangladeshi (8). Black students were also found to be more concerned about university debt than their white peers (9).
- One of the crucial factors in undergraduate decision making to undertake postgraduate study is how it will increase job prospects including higher salaries (30).

Case Study

Access to postgraduate education across Europe varies greatly, although, there are some strategies which appear to be having a positive influence.

A European university in Greece trialled a post-graduate learning course with 40 female mature postgraduate students which allowed them to work flexibly from home (42).

The study highlighted the many responsibilities these women balance – including marriage and childcare. Mentorship was found to be key and allowed more of the women into the higher professions – who otherwise would not have had access. This suggests the benefits of universities changing their courses to fit their students and incorporating flexibility with face-to-face activities (35).
Setting Priorities and Success Measures

Recommendation 6

Priorities to address under-representation in postgraduate study should be cautious of the creation of silos and acknowledge intersections of disadvantage.

(For all colleagues involved in increasing diversity in postgraduate study).

- It is important for universities to keep the individual in mind, where diverse communities of students may face multiple challenges to pursuing postgraduate education such as (but not limited to); caring responsibilities, socioeconomic status, disability, neurodiversity, LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer +) discrimination or minority ethnic group.

- Data on how these disadvantages interact and result in student admission and engagement at postgraduate level should be evaluated. Barriers that postgraduate students face may be of stark contrast to those at undergraduate level. E.g. postgraduate students may have further complexity with funding at postgraduate research and taught level.
Setting Priorities and Success Measures

Recommendation 7

Address barriers to recruiting a more diverse postgraduate community as a priority. This includes (but is not limited to) changes to the admissions processes, financial opportunities and transition into study.

(For sector leads, institutional sponsors/leads including Directors of Admissions and Doctoral Colleges or CDT/DTPs).

- Four background measures were associated with disadvantage in transition to postgraduate study for consortium alumni: parental socio-economic class, parental higher education, school type and financial means (7).
- Further research is limited by the infrequent data collection in these groups and GDPR regulations, where a centralised system, such as UCAS (Universities and Colleges Admissions Service) for undergraduates, does not exist (7).

- Universities should refine (or enhance) the collection of admissions and acceptance data on postgraduate taught and research students, including (but not limited to): intersectionality, parental occupation, sibling participation at university, PWER (people who experience racism) and all relevant groups, socio-economic background (postcode, deprivation, household income), disability & neurodiversity, and autism, dyslexia, ADHD etc.
- Collecting data at postgraduate research level relies on the students being comfortable disclosing sensitive information, reasons for which include: information for ethnicity is not mandatory; categories do not match with UKRI (UK Research and Innovation); limited gender options available for students; and disability information is optional (15).
Case Study

The NEON Postgraduate Diversity Working Group established a series of working groups from 2021. One working group focused on the development of a model to apply a consistent set of admissions criteria for postgraduate taught and research applicants.

Following agreement on additional criteria to collect, nine institutions will be participating in a pilot on the usage of this from September 2022. The anonymised data collected will allow analysis to understand the diversity of the collective admissions pool in more detail and inform strategies to address barriers.

Case Study

Positive action scholarships – University of Leeds

In 2020, the University of Leeds identified the need for positive action scholarships as part of a wider strand of activity linked to improving access and success at postgraduate level. Using positive action enables scholarships to be created which target under-represented groups, specifically those with protected characteristics as identified by the Equality Act 2010.

To allow for the creation of these scholarships, a robust process was put in place with collaboration between the Widening Participation team, Legal department, Equality Impact team, Doctoral College, Marketing and Finance colleagues.

Key learnings were around the need for a robust evidence base including access to applicant data and the ability to identify gaps and patterns in this data. Once created, evaluation of studentships and ongoing data analysis will also be imperative to identify and support future need. Finally, collaboration between university teams is essential to identify the most suitable approach. To date, 18 positive action studentships have been created to support PGT (postgraduate taught) and PGR (postgraduate research) students at Leeds.
Setting Priorities and Success Measures

Recommendation 8

Focus higher education interventions on the student experience and engagement which spans both prospective and current postgraduate students

(For sector leads, senior institutional leads, Recruitment and Widening Access teams).

- Targeted undergraduate involvement in activities is evidenced to help postgraduate progression from diverse communities.
- Students with relevant lived experience should be involved to shape and co-create opportunities and we must value and celebrate the diversity whilst avoiding a deficit model.
- Universities should develop an evaluation framework, including baseline and benchmarking. This should include targets/KPIs and outline how to measure impact and success.

Case Study

Paid internships allow students to save money over the summer for potential postgraduate study and build skills ready to compete for highly skilled jobs.

Industry involvement can also allow students to experience the company environment and network with mentors.

At the University of Oxford, under-represented students were invited to do an internship paid at £2,500 for six weeks. The university also started collecting detailed demographic data on postgraduate admissions to help them make more informed interventions (27).

The University of Leeds also offers many paid internships across all subjects, including internships aimed at under-represented students which contribute to the University’s Access and Student Success Strategy 2025 (28,29). These internships were signposted to under-represented students through the Plus Programme, highlighting the importance of communication with the under-represented student body. One of the crucial factors in undergraduate decision making to undertake postgraduate study is how it will increase job prospects including higher salaries (30).
Communication and Dissemination

Recommendation 9

Universities should demonstrate an understanding of their diversity and publish these figures to prospective students and staff.

(For sector leads, institutional leads including across EDI (equality, diversity and inclusion), widening access and HR (human resources)).

- With reference to the Widening Access to Postgraduate and the Professions 2015 summary, over half of undergraduates were dissuaded from postgraduate study due to cost. Graduates with graduate parents were more likely to pursue postgraduate study (7).
- WP (widening participation) students are under-represented at postgraduate level, but students studying at a selective university were more likely to progress to postgraduate (7).

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