



**BUILDING A POSTGRADUATE RESEARCH COMMUNITY WITH A  
SENSE OF BELONGING:  
REFLECTIONS ON BEST PRACTICE FROM  
THE BRISTOL DOCTORAL COLLEGE**

UKCGE Annual Conference 2023

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# INTRODUCTIONS

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⑩ How about you....?

# TODAY'S SESSION

- **Postgraduate researcher experience** – setting the context and outlining obstacles
- **University of Bristol context** – PGR Strategic Plan and the Bristol Doctoral College
- **Six lessons for community connection**
- **Group discussion** –opportunities and successes

# POSTGRADUATE RESEARCHER EXPERIENCE

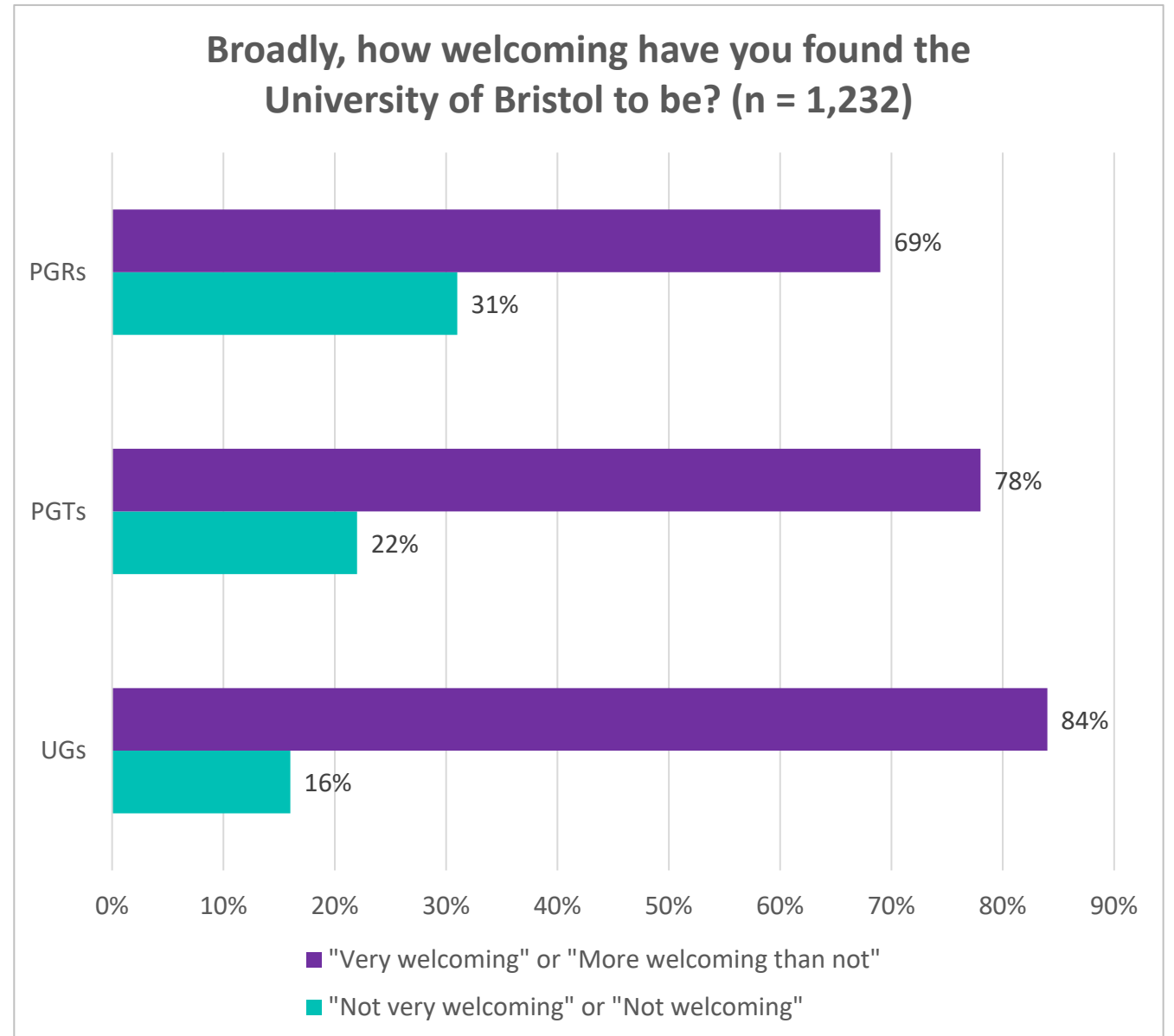
Setting the context and outlining obstacles

# PGR student experience - facts

- The average PhD student works around **37 hours per week** - this is over 50% more than the average undergraduate and three hours less per week than the average academic staff.
- **One-fifth** have a job alongside their PhD. Mostly, this is to make ends meet.
- **53% of researchers** have sought professional help (or wanted to) for depression and anxiety?

# Community and belonging at Bristol

- In March 2022, Bristol Students' Union ran a survey about belonging, connection and community.
- The survey sampled 1344 students, of which 107 were PGRs
- PGRs were the student group who felt least connected to the University



# PRES 2023: Belonging

In response to the statements

**“I feel part of a community of PGRs” or “I feel a sense of belonging at my institution”**

60%

at UoB  
agree or definitely agree

59%

at other institutions surveyed  
agree or definitely agree

# PRES 2023: Belonging

In response to the statement:

**“There are sufficient options to interact with other PGRs”**

62%

at UoB

agree or definitely agree

58%

at other institutions surveyed

agree or definitely agree





# UNIVERSITY OF BRISTOL CONTEXT

PGR Strategic Plan and the Bristol Doctoral College

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# PGR Strategy 2030: our ambition

“To ensure that every one of our PGR students, regardless of their background, discipline or situation, has an enriching and fulfilling experience at Bristol, that is beneficial to their lives and careers.”



# Our emerging 'PGR priorities'

## **Community and environment**

- Equity, diversity and inclusion – access and belonging
- Wellbeing
- International PGR student experience

## **Support and training**

- Supervisory support, provision and quality
- Training and development
- Communications and information provision

## **Size and shape of our PGR cohort**

- PGR Marketing, widening participation and recruitment
- Administration and PGR integration in 'Business as usual'

## **Partnerships**

- International, industry and other HE

# Communications and engagement

- The PGR Hub – a dedicated space for our PGR community
- Multi-faceted staff support
- Specific PGR-related communications sent from the Bristol Doctoral College as part of a holistic comms plan
- Incentivised feedback surveys and focus groups for continuous improvement
- Community fund



# SIX LESSONS FOR COMMUNITY CONNECTION

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# 1. Draw on expertise within your institution

**"The instructor was really good and the sessions have helped my flexibility and posture and I'm getting less soreness at my desk now."**

PGR yoga attendee, 2020



## 2. Bring creativity to your community

**"I thought this event was brilliant - I'd be keen for more outdoor events like this, particularly in the spring to see what other plants are growing!"**

Foraging workshop attendee, Oct 2022



3. Let PGRs  
create their  
own groups





## 4. Pay PGRs for their time



## 5. Create safe spaces for underrepresented communities

**“Meeting other minority ethnic researchers really improved my sense of belonging at the university.”**

Coffee Connect participant, 2022



## 6. #refreshmentswillbeprovided

**“The event was fab, thank you for organising! I got to see a few colleagues of different departments whom I hadn't seen for almost half a year and it was a lovely catchups over tacos.”**

PGR Summer Party attendee, June 2023

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Foodie pic

# Discussion

- What do you think the main obstacles are to PGRs feeling a sense of community at your institution?
- What has worked well at your institution to foster PGR community?

# THANK YOU!

Any questions for us?

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