

Fostering Inclusive Reconfiguring doctoral admissions through competency: a multi-institutional ethnography of equity-in-practice

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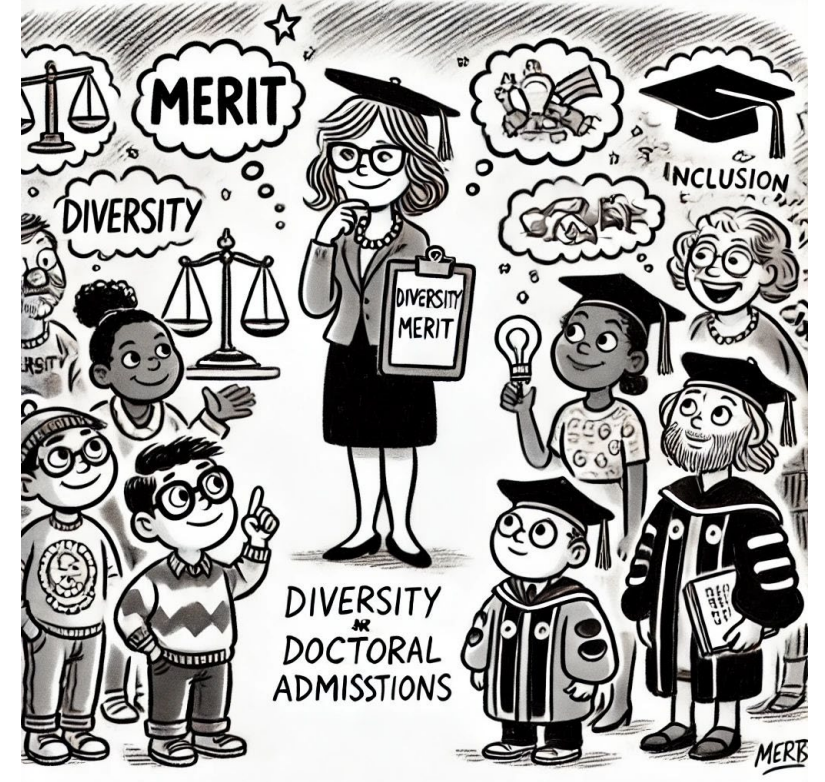
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Introduction: why PGR admissions matter?

Postgraduate researcher (PGR) admissions play a crucial role in shaping research cultures, yet traditional selection processes often reinforce systemic barriers to access (Posselt, 2016).

Scholars advocate revisiting evaluation metrics for more equitable graduation admissions (Reyes, 2021).

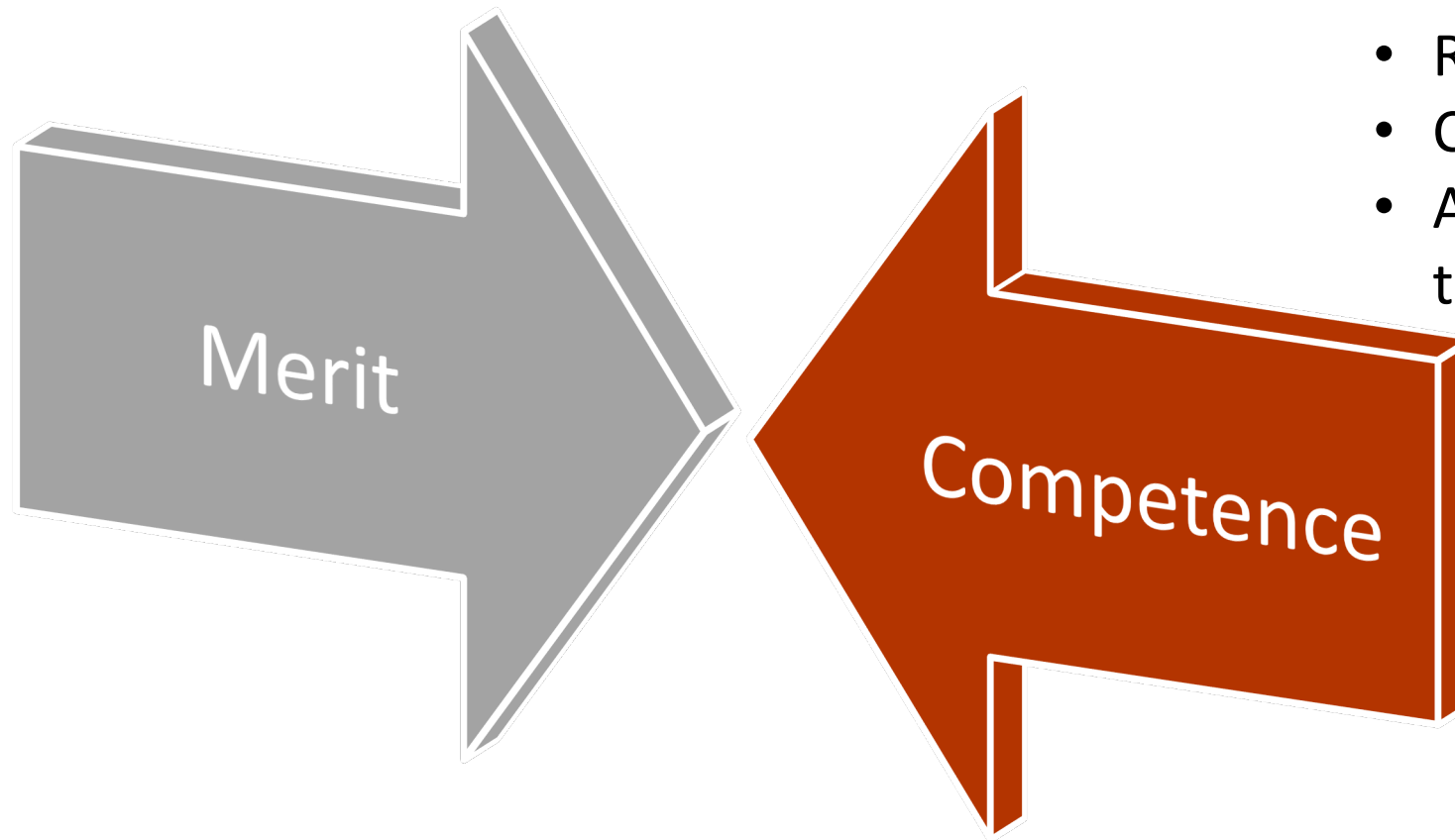


How is competency-based doctoral admissions translated into institutional practice across different UK higher education settings?



Merit and Competence

- Degree classification
- Publication record
- Institutional prestige



- Ability to undertake doctoral work
- Motivation
- Resilience
- Communication
- Analytical/critical thinking



Richard Freeman

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Tags

**ACCESS & WP
PHD**

To most undergraduate and postgraduate students, deciding to undertake a doctoral degree is not common.

What is involved can be rather opaque – if not completely mysterious – with potential applicants unaware of how to navigate the PhD journey.

Unfortunately, there is evidence of underrepresentation for some groups at doctoral level. For example, 59 per cent of the undergraduate population identified as White, rising to 68 per cent of taught postgraduates and 74 per cent for research degrees **as of 2022-23**.

This **broken pipeline** is demonstrated by just 1.2 per cent of the 19,868 studentships awarded by all UKRI research councils from 2016-17 – 2018-19 to Black or Black Mixed students, with just 30 of those being from a Black Caribbean background.

In addition, those from underrepresented groups have fewer role models in study and in academia. For academic staff, **HESA data** for 2023-24 shows that 3.4 per cent of all academic staff are Black, with data from **2022-23** showing that 1 per cent of all professors are Black (and just 31 per cent of professors are female).

The value of personal contact

One of the most effective ways to help potential applicants understand what

by Bing Lu, Rebekah Smith McGloin and Scott Foster



This blog post reflects on ongoing collaborative efforts to advance more equitable doctoral admissions between a group of UK institutions. It argues that transforming graduate admissions is not simply driven by competitive logic, nor by a search for a single, universal framework that can be applied across the sector. Instead, sector-level change emerges through collective, interactional, and often emotional work.

Inclusive postgraduate research (PGR) admission and recruitment have become an increasing global concern ([Posselt, 2016](#); [Bastedo, 2026](#); [Boghdady, 2025](#)). Drawing on ongoing collaborative work between a group of UK institutions, this blog post reflects on collective efforts to advance more equitable doctoral admissions. We argue that inclusive doctoral admission is not a competition to produce an exhaustive, finished framework, but an ongoing process of collective problem solving, one that requires humility, openness, and sustained commitment across institutional boundaries.

PGR students are strategically vital to the UK's research capacity, innovation and future academic workforce. PhD programmes increasingly function as the primary entry route into academic careers and shape who is able to imagine themselves, and be recognised, as future researchers. Within the doctoral lifecycle, admission is a particularly critical intervention point. Yet, compared with undergraduate or taught postgraduate recruitment, the mechanisms shaping PGR admissions have historically received less sustained scrutiny.

A report commissioned by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) in 2014 highlighted that UK institutions primarily value academic attainment, the quality of research proposals, and evidence of prior research skills when selecting candidates ([Mellors-Bourne et al, 2014](#)). Since 2020, a growing body of UK-based scholarship has

The EDEPI framework as intervention

COLLECT, ORDER, EVALUATE AND REVIEW RESULTS OBJECTIVELY, AND COMMUNICATE WITH CLARITY

COMPREHENSION & EVALUATION	<u>ANALYTICAL & PROBLEM SOLVING</u>	<u>COMMUNICATION</u>	<u>PLANNING & ORGANISATION</u>
	Recognise connections and patterns in information/data, text or artefacts	Communicate in writing with clarity and precision using evidence to support your assertions	Grasp and order information coming from multiple sources
	Evaluate information/data, text or artefacts for credibility and accuracy	Tailor communications appropriately to different audiences	Set, maintain and ensure a clear direction for a project or activity
	Make evidence-based judgements based on analysis of information/data, text or artefact	Present information and ideas verbally, using active listening	Anticipate, think ahead and identify next steps in a project or activity
	Explain the value/potential contribution of the research to knowledge and those who will benefit	Consider impact of research and how it might reach the widest audiences	Adjust objectives and deadlines appropriately as new ideas or issues emerge

ASSUME RESPONSIBILITY FOR PERFORMANCE AND SEEK HELP WHEN NECESSARY

SOCIO-EMOTIONAL COMPETENCIES	<u>MOTIVATION</u>	<u>CURIOSITY</u>	<u>RESILIENCE</u>
	Show how you plan to actively engage with policy, practice, publications in your proposed area of research to keep up to date	Show that you want to ask challenging 'why' questions about your topic	Take positive steps to maintain a positive work/life balance and seek help when challenges occur
	Understand your own personal motivations and demonstrate how these will drive your research	Be prepared to deepen your investigation to shed new light on information/data, text or artefact	Willingness to admit to errors and challenges and seek appropriate support
	Recognise and take up opportunities for improvement	Be willing to think deeply about complex ideas and theories in the context of the topic	Adjust approaches and responses when faced with change or setbacks
	Willingness to engage fully in the chosen area and contribute to conversations and debates in that field	Value but be prepared to question the knowledge of others	Demonstrate the courage to engage with complex ideas and viewpoints



GENERATION AND DELIVERY OF OUTCOMES TO A HIGH STANDARD AND COLLABORATION

DELIVERING RESULTS	<u>INTEGRITY</u>	<u>WORKING WITH OTHERS</u>	<u>INDEPENDENCE</u>
	Be prepared to carry out your project with rigour and integrity, being committed to a compliance with ethics policy	Work effectively with collaborators and supervisors, treating each with respect and keeping them informed of progress	Autonomously meet deadlines and objectives for your own research project
	Understand the importance of treating data or information confidentially and responsibly	Actively listen to others, share information, and propose suggestions and solutions	Take responsibility for identifying the technical, personal or professional skills required for a task and take action to develop those skills appropriately
	Be alert to and challenge your own biases and assumptions	Respond appropriately to guidance and feedback from supervisors and collaborators and take action to improve	Take initiative to suggest ideas for improvements, sharing ideas in a constructive manner
	Show that you respect diverse points of view and can treat others, and their views, with fairness	Seek out and make use of opportunities to collaborate, support others and/or make a positive contribution to your discipline or community in the context of your proposed research project	Reflect on challenges and successes, and make and implement an action plan to maintain or improve your performance

EDEPI WP2 data overview

2022-2025

PHASE 1: SECTOR MAPPING & PROBLEM IDENTIFICATION

APS-22: Admissions Practices Survey ($n = 253$ staff | 46 HEIs)
AFG-22: Admissions Focus Groups ($n \approx 28$ participants | 3 groups)
Identified tensions in culture, transparency, support, and decision-making

PHASE 2: FRAMEWORK DEVELOPMENT

RFG-22: Report and Framework Generation (Synthesis of survey + focus groups)
Produced: EDEPI PGR Admissions Report & Competency-Based Framework

PHASE 3: FRAMEWORK REVIEW & REFINEMENT

SFR-23: Stakeholder Feedback Review | **IPF-23:** Informal Practitioner Feedback
PPS-24: PGR Pulse Survey
Tested clarity, relevance, usability, and stakeholder response

PHASE 4: PILOTING, IMPLEMENTATION & UPSCALING

SII-25: Staff Interviews | **PILOT-25:** Institutional Piloting (3 HEIs)
TRN-25: Training Materials | **COP-25:** Community of Practice (23 HEIs)
Examined institutional translation, collective learning, and sector upscaling



Multi-institutional Ethnography (Smith, 2005)

Institutional ethnography is useful here because it asks how everyday practices are coordinated by institutional processes, texts and routines.

In this study, we are not only interested in formal policy statements.

- institutional reflections,
- admissions documents,
- CoP learning, workshops,
- templates,
- scoring matrices.

Work based on collaborative practice reflection and institutional documents, rather than a conventional external evaluation.

Three institutional translations



THE OPEN UNIVERSITY



NEWCASTLE UNIVERSITY



UNIVERSITY OF GLASGOW

Case 1: Glasgow/DiveIn: redesign for cohort-based interdisciplinary recruitment



DiveIn
connect belong thrive



University
of Glasgow



Engineering and
Physical Sciences
Research Council



Dr Caroline Müllenbroich
School of Physics & Astronomy



Prof Ross Forgan
School of Chemistry



Prof Qammer Abbasi
School of Engineering



Prof Caroline
Gauchotte-Lindsay
School of Engineering



Sandra Dopico
CDT Coordinator



Andy Todman
External Engagement
Manager



Jordan McNally
Events Coordinator

What is DiveIn?

- **EPSRC Centre for Doctoral Training in Diversity-Led, Mission-Driven Research**
- Aims to foster interdisciplinary and diverse teams to create impactful and innovative research
- Justice, Equity, Diversity, Inclusion embedded across governance, management, and recruitment
- Recruiting students across all STEM subjects in UKRI mission priority areas
- **Cohort-based learning** where the cohort is primary unit of training:
 - We do not recruit for individual projects; projects are co-created after entry
 - Selection implication: not just individuals but future teams
 - Peer leadership, collaborative problem solving, mentoring, interdisciplinary teamwork, shared ownership of research culture
- Admissions focus on both individual excellence and collective cohort potential

Case 1 features:

- pseudoanonymous competency-based shortlisting;
- separation of CDT offer and PhD project;
- structured competency questions and practical data exercise;
- pre-circulated interview questions;
- applicant webinars, office hours and application support videos;
- PGR participation in interview;
- use of recruitment data and PCA to test robustness;
- advocacy for candidates whose degree classifications would not traditionally mark them as strongest applicants.

Case 2: Contextual admissions through institutional texts and staged rollout



Introduction to the team

Michelle Palmer



Postgraduate Research
Manager

EPSRC DLA Manager

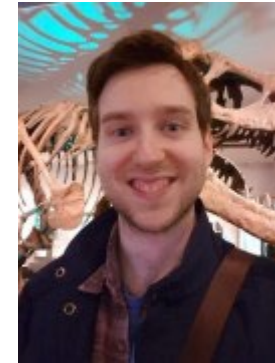
Elizabeth Gibson



Professor of Energy
Materials

Newcastle ReNU+ CDT
Director

Craig Hinds



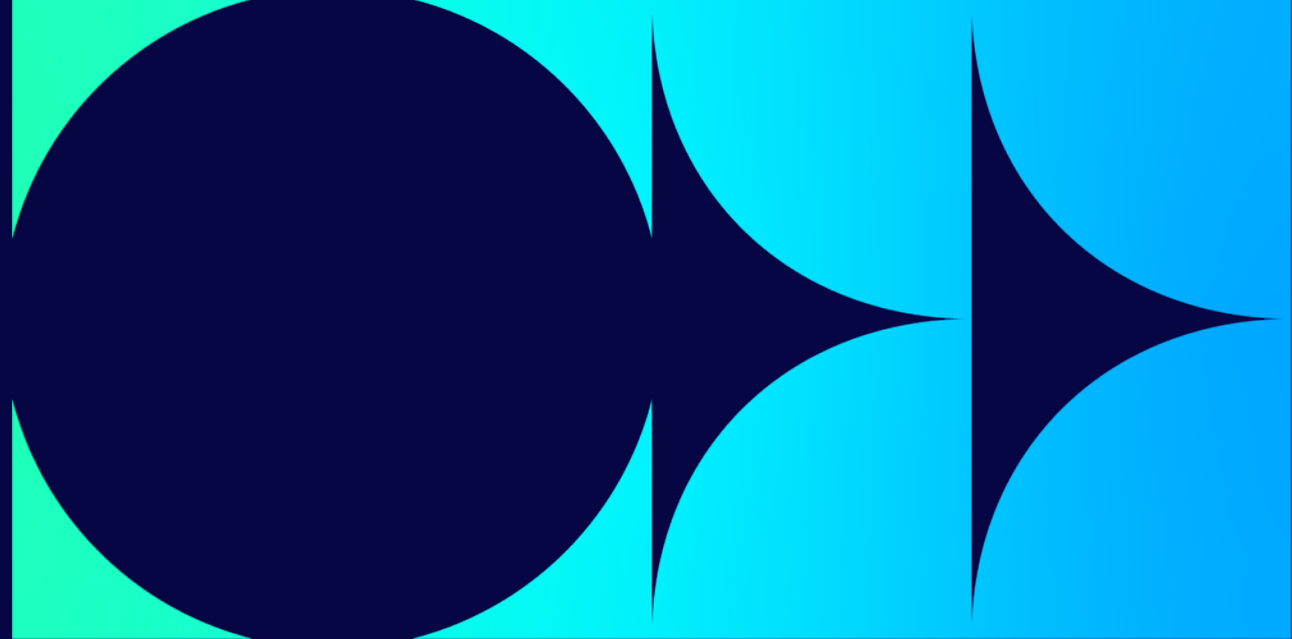
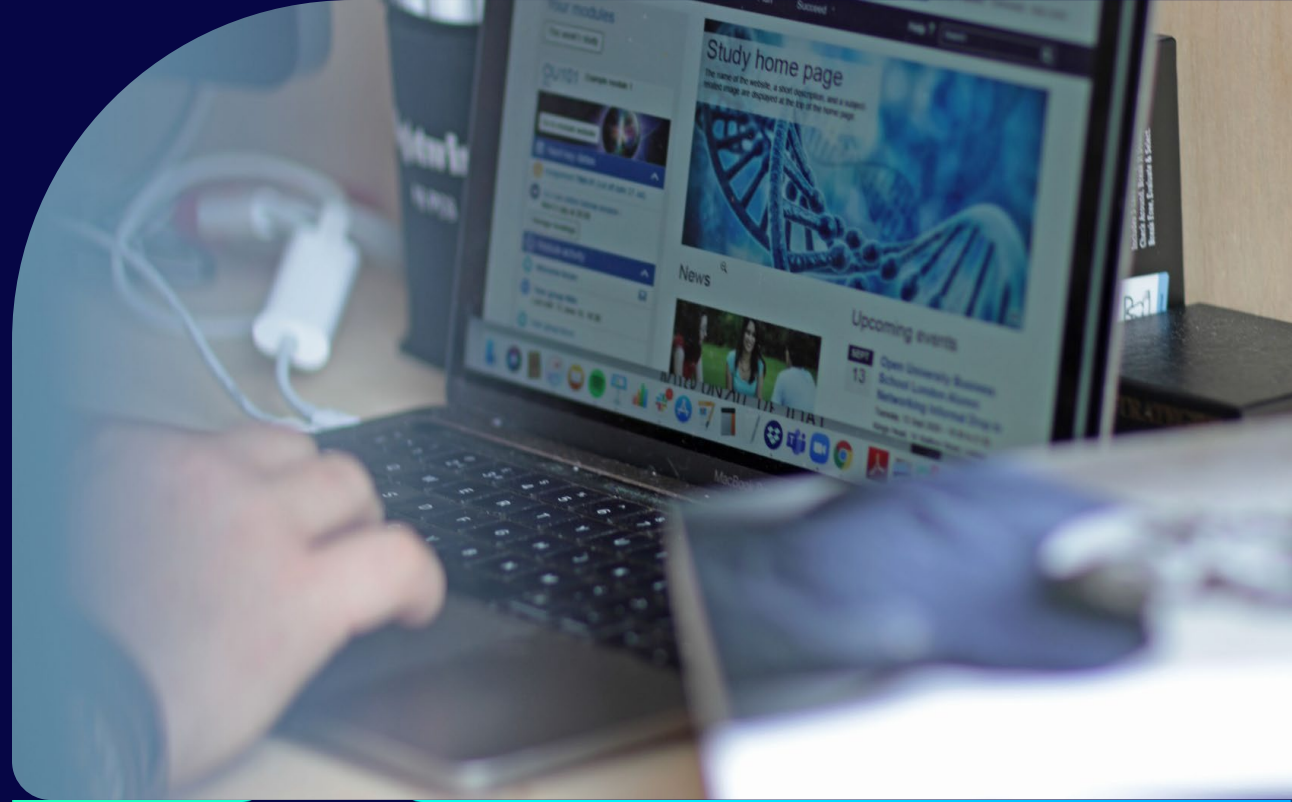
CDT Manager

ReNU+ CDT

Case 2 features:

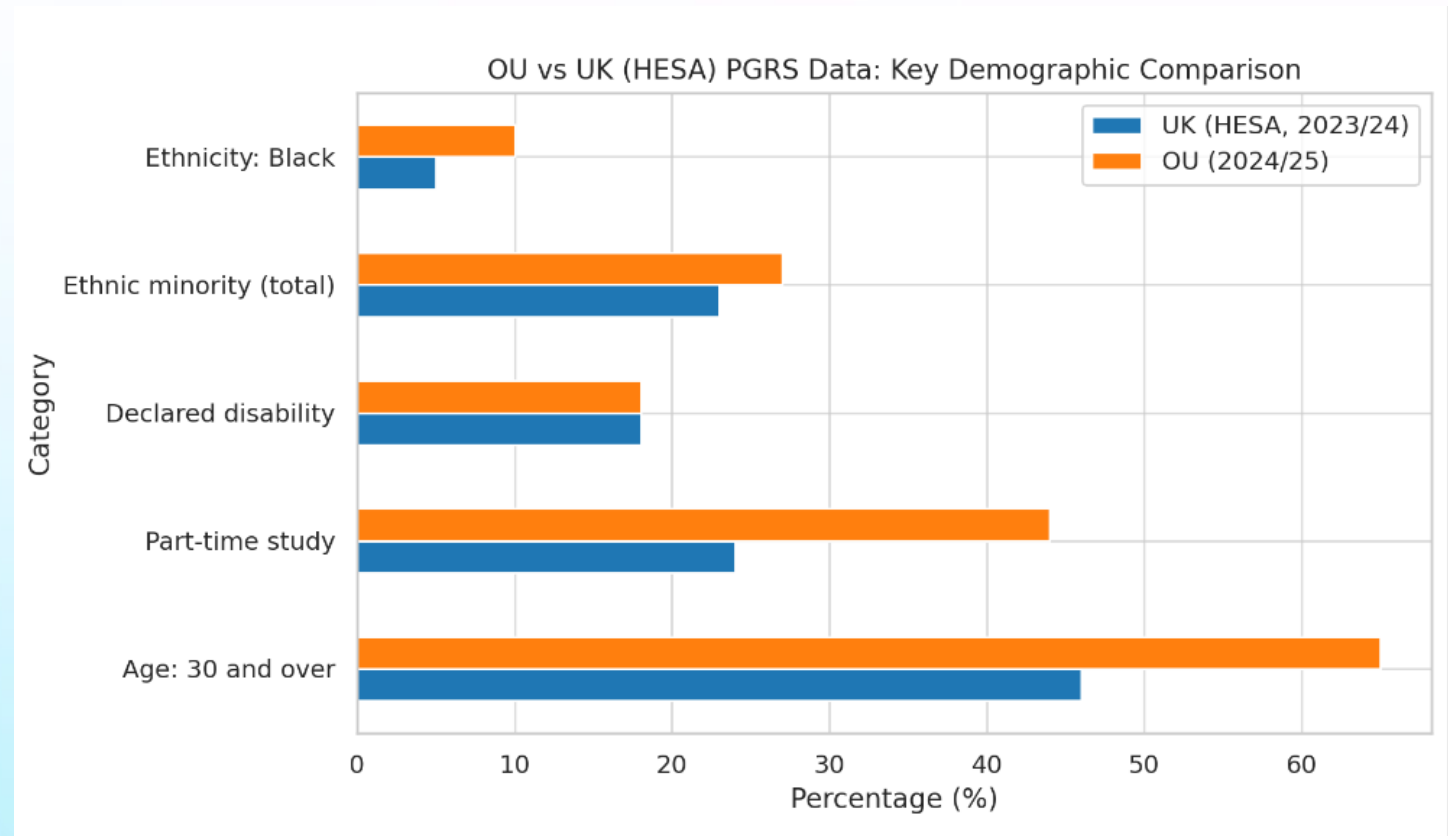
- competency-based shortlisting using scoring matrix;
- structured competency questions and practical data exercise;
- pre-circulated interview questions (ReNU+ CDT);
- applicant webinars, briefings, and application support videos;
- focus groups to understand relevant competencies in SAgE as they compare to EDEPI framework;
- consultations to understand success of implementation across different disciplines;
- use of recruitment data to test robustness as part of wider roll out of approach;
- advocacy for candidates whose degree classifications would not traditionally mark them as strongest applicants.

Case 3: whole-pipeline review and competency-informed flexibility



The Open University: context

- The OU's founding ethos: openness to people, places, methods, and ideas
- PGR student demographics: unusually diverse
- Existing inclusive practice, esp. for disabled and part-time students



Case 3 features:

- WELS pilot moving toward institution-wide review;
- revision of the Application Recommendation Form;
- university-wide PGR admissions workshop with 30 colleagues;
- focus on socio-economic diversity, mature/part-time applicants, disabled applicants and applicants without access to informal networks;
- attention to proposal guidance, CVs, references, interviews, ARF design and applicant communications;
- concerns around GenAI, awards/prizes, publications and informal pre-selection;
- move toward “competency-informed, not competency-mechanistic” practice.

Cross-case findings: redistributed judgement

- Admissions reform happens through texts, not only values;
- Competency-based admissions redistribute academic judgement;
- Competence redefines excellence without removing academic standards;
- Applicant support is part of admissions equity;
- Implementation produces new tensions: scale, AI, disciplinary variation and regulation.

Tensions and unresolved questions

- workload and scalability;
- how to weight academic criteria against competencies;
- whether competencies are best assessed in written applications or interviews;
- GenAI and authenticity of written responses;
- ATAS and international recruitment constraints;
- disciplinary variation;
- institutional risk perceptions around degree classification;
- how to evaluate impact over time and across small cohorts.

Practical implications for the sector questions

- Start by mapping actual admissions practice, not only formal policy.
- Treat forms, adverts, references, proposal guidance and interview questions as equity infrastructure.
- Define excellence locally and explicitly before designing criteria.
- Build applicant support into the admissions process.
- Create mechanisms for review, feedback and data collection across recruitment cycles.
- Pilot through funded schemes or cohorts before wider rollout.
- Anticipate workload, AI, regulatory and disciplinary challenges early.

Conclusion

- We explore not only *what* changes when equity is prioritised in admissions but *how* institutional practices are reorganised in response. Competency-based models challenge dominant definitions of merit, reshape decision-making processes, and enable new norms across institutional boundaries. Our findings illustrate how such frameworks can disrupt entrenched gatekeeping behaviours and expand recognition of academic potential.
- Competency-based admissions are not merely an alternative selection technique. They are a form of **institutional equity work** that changes how doctoral potential is recognised, how academic judgement is documented, and how research communities are imagined.