



University of
Salford
MANCHESTER

EMPOWERED POSTGRADUATE RESEARCH STUDENTS CAN LEAD SUBSTANTIAL EDI ENHANCEMENT INITIATIVES

University of Salford PGR EDI lead team

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UNIVERSITY OF SALFORD PGR EDI LEADS

Student-Staff Collaboration

THE EDI LEAD ROLE

- EDI leads proposed, co-created and led staff-student projects that aimed to mitigate barriers to equity and address inequalities.
- Implementation of the role showed PGRs are well placed to lead change, while also highlighting the centrality of empowerment and offering a practical model for fostering equitable PGR environments.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- Can co-creation and partnership working enhance efforts to address EDI challenges in this PGR environment?
- Can PGR students effectively lead pan-institutional initiatives that result in tangible outcomes?
- What factors enable or limit the effectiveness of PGR student-led (student-staff) projects?

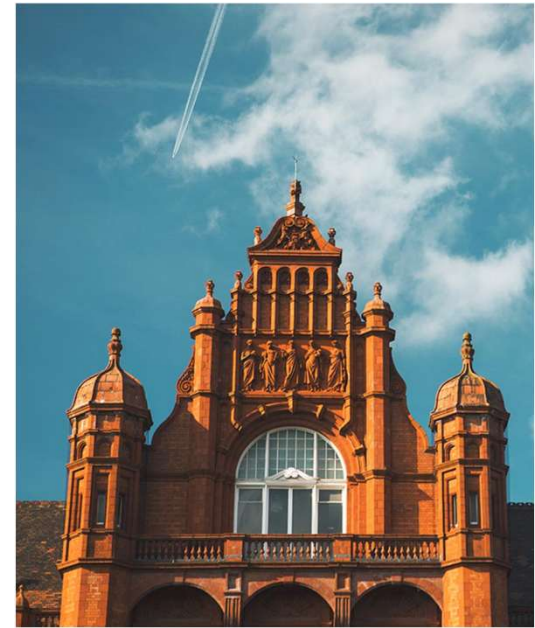


Figure 1: The University of Salford's Peel Building.

BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE

Patterns of Exclusion

INEQUALITIES AND IMPACT ON ACCESS TO HE

- There are systemic, persistent, and pervasive inequalities that shape access to, participation in, and completion of HE programmes, including entry to and success in postgraduate research (Leathwood, 2004; Lowe, 2023).
- Socioeconomic background remains one of the most significant barriers; financial challenges affect progression.
- Race, ethnicity, gender, disability, and caring responsibilities also affect access and attainment.

BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION

- Experiences of stigma, isolation, poor levels of mental wellbeing and stress, financial strain, harassment, inadequate or reduced institutional support, and forced non-participation all result in exclusion from research spaces, communities, and cultures, as well as from professional development opportunities.
- International students experience additional barriers, including visa restrictions, language and linguistic challenges, difficulties with cultural adjustment, and limited integration into academic networks.
- There remain significant EDI challenges – PGR voices are vital to identifying lived experience of barriers.

THE EDI LEAD ROLE

Developing the Initiative

PRACTICE-BASED RESEARCH APPROACH

- Professional practice positioned as both the site and generator of knowledge – Schön’s “reflective practitioner” (1983).
- Role addresses limited PGR engagement with additional research.

RECRUITMENT AND FULFILLMENT OF ROLE

- PGRs propose and lead on the development of their projects.
- Partnership working – opened dialogue and pathways for outputs and insights to be embedded (not just suggested!) to affect real and lasting cross-institutional change.
- “Whole person” approach to growth and support.
- Bursary, formal introductions to PGR community and leadership, dedicated budget, and external training and events facilitated.



Figure 2: Outer of the University of Salford's Peel Building.

THE EDI LEAD ROLE

Outcomes

DEVELOPMENT

- EDI leads span multiple disciplines across the University's School structure, bringing together diverse epistemologies and methods.
- Impact on three levels:
 - Individual development.
 - Institutional PGR community.
 - National and international PGR and HE community.

TRANSFORMATIVE OPPORTUNITY

- All EDI leads reported the substantial transformative impact of the role on their own personal, professional, and academic growth.
- EDI leads secured awards, fellowships, established WP work, and contributing to conversations about EDI beyond the institution.



Figure 3: Photograph of the 2022-23 EDI lead team.

THE EDI LEAD ROLE

Enabling and Limiting Factors

ENABLING FACTORS

- Bursary funding reduced need for precarious employment and removed financial pressures that prevent additional research.
- Supportive and mentorship-focused supervision.
- Training and development opportunities.
- Scaffolded access to Senior Leadership Teams provided legitimacy.
- Autonomy reinforced with ringfenced budget to support research.
- PGRDs report benefits of access to PGR community and voices.

LIMITING FACTORS

- Resource constraints.
- Steep learning curve for EDI leads in becoming familiar with institutional constraints and viable and inviable options in work.

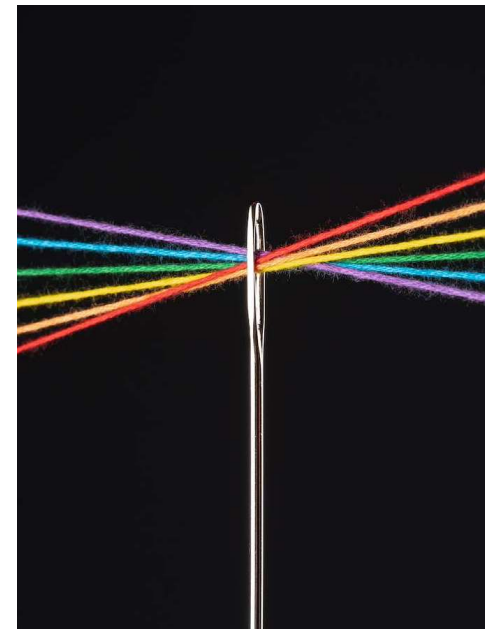


Figure 4: Stock photograph representing EDI.

THE EDI LEAD ROLE

Projects

PAST

- Decolonising the PhD.
- Widening Participation in Research.
- Experiences of International PGRs.
- Neurodiverse PGR Thesis and Post-Viva Feedback.
- Empowering Neurodiverse Researchers.
- Experiences of part time PGRs.
- Experiences of PGR parents and carers.

FUTURE

- Accessibility and inclusion of campus spaces for disabled PGRs.
- Supporting International PGRs – developing a pilot buddy scheme.



Figure 5: Photograph of the 2024-26 EDI lead team.

OUTCOMES

Professor Katherine Yates

BIGGEST TAKE HOMES

- Partnership working in PGR works – we need more of it, as there are lots of inherent opportunities.
- Student-staff partnership needs to be meaningful, complete with transfer of power, and made up of enabled leadership and not just participation
- Partnership must be student-staff, rather than staff-student.
- Immediate benefits were many and diverse, with lots of tangible and intangible value for the institution.
- Long-term impacts seen through the investment in the leadership skills and route to diversification of future HE leaders – arguably the most substantial and important outcome.



Figure 6: Photograph of Professor Katherine Yates.

OUTCOMES

EDI Leads

DR DAVID JR GILBERT

- 5-year fellowship secured following work to understand the needs of international PGRs.

DR MUS'HAF KHAN

- Empowered to produce project's review for multiple publication outcome: “gave me research, synthesis, and academic writing skills well beyond a typical early-career stage. [...] Real authority, not just participation.”

DR HANNAH HELM

- WP pilot scheme now ringfenced as an annual Doctoral School event – role led to successful in application to NWCDTP EDI Advocate role (2023-2026), then AHRC Northern Hub Manager, University of Manchester.

DR KEREN POLIAH

- Led online international symposium and raised awareness of decolonising research – created resources for supervisor training and raised questions about how to support PGRs.

ALL OTHER EDI LEADS REPORT EXPERIENCES AND OUTCOMES OF SIMILARLY SIGNIFICANT IMPACT!

CONCLUSION

Empowering PGRs to Lead

UTILITY OF CO-CREATION

- Redistribution of authority in enacting co-creation supported the development of agency and broader participation in EDI leads.
- Student-staff partnership model positions PGRs as **owners**.
- Institution and wider HE community gains PGR insight.

FUTURE HE LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

- Success of EDI lead role shows that PGRs are uniquely positioned to identify EDI issues lead substantial enhancement initiatives.
- Role proves mechanism to nurture next generation of HE leaders.
- **Only when PGRs are empowered as epistemic agents** can the spaces, communities, and cultures within which they work truly move towards equity, inclusion, and decolonial practice.



Figure 7: Stock photograph representing EDI.

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