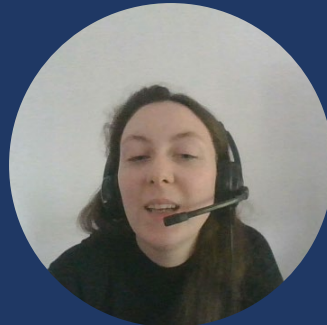


Inclusion in Doctoral Education

A Critical Review of the Literature

Findings presented to the NWSSDTP EDI Committee

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Supervised by Dr Laura Radcliffe.



Why We Changed Our Approach

Rapid Evidence Review → Standard Literature Review

What We Tried

Rapid Evidence Review

A structured, time-limited synthesis of existing literature — designed to be faster than a full systematic review while still mapping the evidence landscape.



Scrapped

Why It Failed

No agreed definition

"Inclusion" means different things across disciplines — disability, diversity, belonging, participation. No single search term captured it consistently.

Inconsistent language

Studies used "inclusion", "belonging", "equity", "widening participation" — often interchangeably, producing either missed evidence or thousands of irrelevant results.

Term absent entirely

Many directly relevant studies never used the word "inclusion" at all. A keyword-driven rapid review would have missed a significant portion of the evidence.

The concept itself resisted the structured, keyword-driven logic a rapid review depends on.

What We Did Instead

Standard Literature Review



- Allows flexible, iterative searching beyond fixed keywords
- Engages with definitional debates directly
- Captures literature where the concept is unlabeled
- More honest about the nature of the evidence



Key learning: The terminological issue in the inclusion literature is not a minor inconvenience — it is a finding in itself, and a methodological decision.

The Scale of the Problem

Key statistics on doctoral inclusion in the UK

1.2%

of all UKRI-funded PhD
studentships (2016–19)
awarded to Black or
Black Mixed students

Williams et al., 2019

6×

more likely — graduate
students experience
anxiety & depression
vs. general population

Evans et al., 2018

70%

of BME PhD students
felt disadvantaged due
to their ethnicity during
their doctorate

Mattocks & B...



Why Definitions Matter

Three terms that are frequently conflated — but shouldn't be

INCLUSION

Structural conditions and institutional practices that enable or constrain participation.

Often claimed rhetorically but rarely operationalised (Bakogiannis, 2026).

BELONGING

A student's subjective experience of being connected, valued, and accepted.

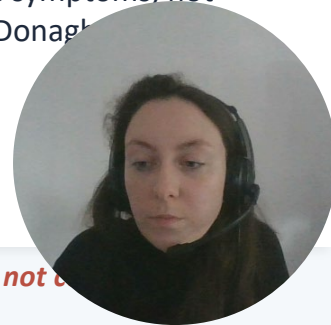
Most research on belonging is based on undergraduates (Strayhorn, 2012).

WELLBEING

Individual psychological distress or flourishing.

Framing inclusion as a wellbeing problem treats symptoms, not causes (Gill & Donagh

Key message: if you design an inclusion strategy around student mental health, you will address symptoms not causes



A Critical Caveat: Where Is the Evidence?

UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH

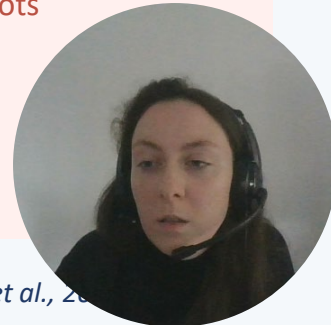
- ✓ Extensive belonging literature (Strayhorn, 2012)
- ✓ BAME attainment gap well documented
- ✓ Care leaver & first-gen studies exist
- ✓ Disability & accessibility frameworks
- ✓ Access & participation plans required
- ✓ Large-scale survey data available

VS.

PGR / DOCTORAL RESEARCH

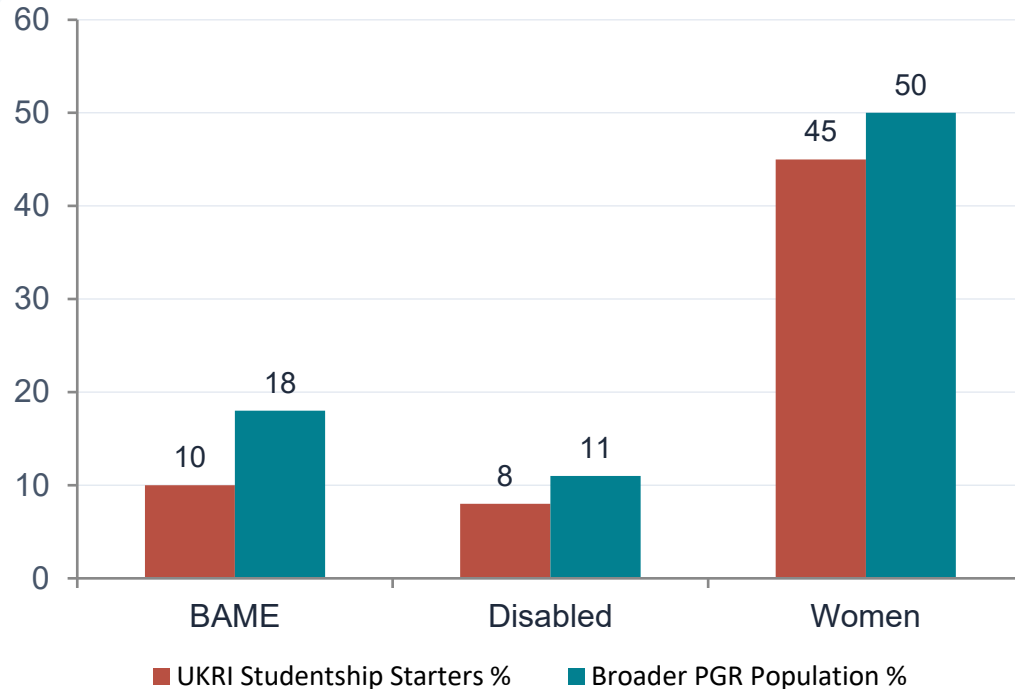
- ✗ Almost no longitudinal studies
- ✗ Care leavers: zero PGR evidence
- ✗ First-gen: emerging only
- ✗ Disabled students: only grey lit
- ✗ LGBTQ+: almost entirely absent
- ✗ Mostly single-institution snapshots

Applying undergraduate frameworks to doctoral contexts is not appropriate — but it happens routinely. (Sverdlik et al., 2020)



Who Gets In? Structural Barriers to Access

UKRI studentship starters vs. broader PGR population (Sotiropoulou, 2022)



Selection bias

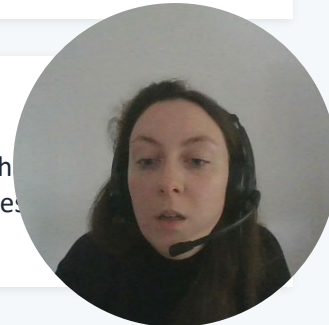
Formal selection uses degree class + institutional prestige, criteria that structurally favour already-privileged applicants.

Financial trap

44% of Black doctoral students self-fund part-time, the highest of any group. Complex funding landscape rewards social capital.

Hidden barriers

The unfunded 4th year hits home for those managing disability, caring responsibilities, and financial hardship.



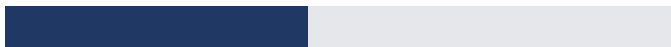
Five Groups — Very Different Evidence Bases

How much do we actually know at doctoral level?

BAME Students

Moderate (UG→PGR pipeline data strong; within-programme qualitative thin)

Evidence at PGR level: 45%

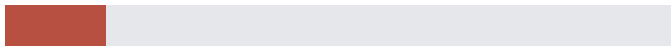


Most BAME inclusion research is undergraduate. Only 2 UK doctoral qualitative studies.

Disabled Students

Very limited (1 UK PGR report: O'Dell & DSUK, 2026; rest is UG)

Evidence at PGR level: 15%

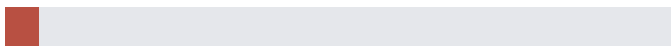


UG disability frameworks don't map to unstructured doctoral education.

Care Leavers

None at PGR level

Evidence at PGR level: 5%

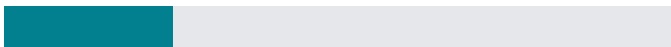


4× less likely to enter HE; 2.5× more likely to drop out, but all at UG (Rees Centre, 2025).

First Generation

Emerging (Hiscock et al., 2025; Wakeling & Mateos-González, 2021)

Evidence at PGR level: 25%

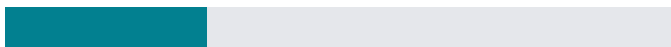


23% report imposter syndrome vs 2% pre-HE. Working-class grads 72% less likely to enter HE.

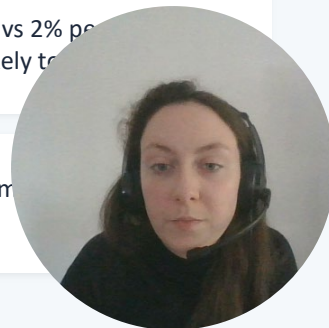
Financial / Socioeconomic

Access data good; within-experience data poor

Evidence at PGR level: 30%



No evaluation of doctoral loan impact on access exists.



Once Inside: How Exclusion Actually Operates

It is rarely explicit, it works through culture, interaction, and assumption

"Much of the discrimination was hidden and indirect — operating through informal networks, implicit expectations, and the everyday assumptions embedded in departmental culture."

Mattocks & Briscoe-Palmer, 2016 — UK politics departments

60
%

of BME respondents reported lack of support from departmental staff (vs 0% non-minority)

70
%

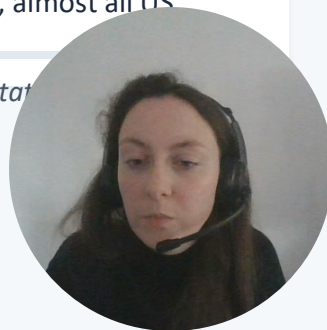
of BME respondents felt disadvantaged due to their ethnicity at some point

All

LGBTQ+, disabled, and parent trainees face specific documented barriers, almost all US evidence (Brown et al., 2022)

Epistemic injustice, research on decolonial perspectives dismissed as 'insufficiently rigorous' while White scholars dominate citation
(Krishnamurthy et al., 2026)

Key implication: formal complaints data and discrimination surveys will systematically underestimate prevalence.

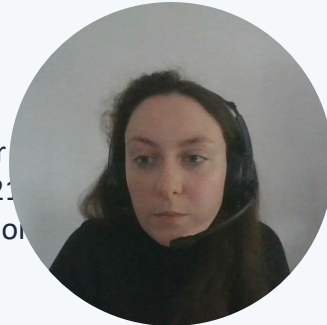


The Supervisory Relationship: The Most Studied Variable



What the literature tells us:

Early months are a 'sensitive period', supervisors shape researcher identity consciously and unconsciously (Gruber 2021). Supervisor training has not kept pace with the role's evolving inclusion demands (Riches-Suman & Delderfield, 2021). Culturally responsive mentorship, transparent, identity-affirming, structurally supported, measurably increases belonging (Riches-Suman et al., 2025)



International Doctoral Students: An Overlooked Population

Evans & Stevenson, 2010 — review of 16 empirical studies

01 Pedagogical shock

Many international students come from teacher-led, structured systems. The expectation of independent self-directed study from day one is disorienting, especially without feedback or structured milestones.

02 Language + identity

Developing critical academic thinking AND demonstrating it in a second language simultaneously, with minimal support, leads to acute confidence crises. Some contemplated withdrawal.

03 Social isolation

International students rarely access the informal peer cultures that sustain domestic students. They need active supervisor support to connect, not to be left to find their own way.

What helps: explicit norms of communication, clear doctoral roadmap, regular small-feedback, connection to professional development opportunities. These benefit ALL students.

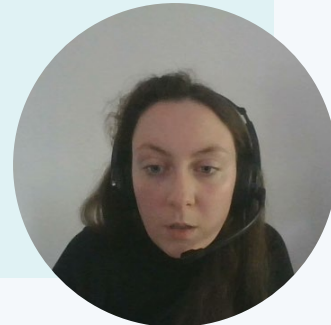
Peer Communities

What peer communities provide
(Krishnamurthy et al., 2026; McMahon et al., 2026;
O'Meara et al., 2017)

- Intellectual solidarity and epistemic validation
- Emotional support during isolation
- Honest conversation: impossible in supervision
- Belonging when the institution hasn't provided it
- Motivation and academic confidence

PGR Connections pilot (Wilson et al., 2023)

Online cross-disciplinary peer learning scheme during COVID-19 lockdown. Produced: sense of community, honest conversations, boosted motivation, learning from peers. International students over-represented in attendees.



What Good Practice Looks Like

Emerging evidence — small-scale but consistent in its principles

Decolonising mentorship (Sokoto et al., 2025)

- Supervisors model vulnerability and authenticity
- Mentorship allocated time + diverse faculty = structural commitment
- Personal & professional identities integrated, not compartmentalised
- Result: increased belonging and researcher identity among underrepresented trainees

Culturally responsive training (Brown et al., 2022)

- Relational, mentee-centred over hierarchical
- Explicit discussion of power, privilege, and diverse identities
- Active advocacy for trainees — not passive availability
- Formal policies on parental leave, disability, and diversity

Peer learning infrastructure (Wilson et al., 2023)

- Cross-disciplinary, cross-campus connections
- Online format lowers barriers for international & remote students
- Student-driven topics (not discipline-specific)
- Needs to be structurally funded — not run on goodwill

Key point: effective inclusion is a systemic property, it cannot be delivered by well-intentioned individuals alone.

Critical Gaps in the Evidence Base

What we urgently need to know and currently do not

Care leavers at PGR level

CRITICAL

Zero published peer-reviewed research ON INCLUSION. UG stats (4× less likely to enter HE) suggest severe disadvantage, entirely unexplored at doctoral level.

Longitudinal doctoral studies

HIGH

Almost all research is cross-sectional. How inclusion shifts across the doctoral journey, from entry through to completion, is unknown.

LGBTQ+ doctoral students (UK)

HIGH

Some literature very little on from the UK PGR literature. US psychology evidence exists but is not directly transferable.

DTP / doctoral college impact

HIGH

No published evidence on whether Doctoral Training Partnership structures foster or undermine inclusion.

Positive inclusion experience

MODERATE

The literature is almost entirely about what goes wrong. What does genuine inclusion feel like for doctoral researchers? What enables researcher identity?

Doctoral loan widening participation

No evaluation of whether the doctoral loan has widened access. A significant policy intervention with no



Recommendations

Grounded in the evidence, actionable at institutional level

1

Reframe inclusion as structural, not therapeutic

Move inclusion strategy away from mental health/wellbeing interventions toward structural change, selection criteria, funding access, supervisory accountability.

2

Commission PGR-specific research for missing groups

Urgently needed: care-experienced, first-generation, and LGBTQ+ doctoral students. Existing UG evidence cannot substitute.

3

Mandate and resource supervisor inclusion training

Not optional CPD, a structural feature. Supervisors shape researcher identity. Culturally responsive supervision requires funded, accountable development.

4

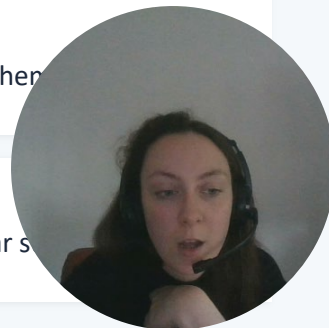
Invest in peer learning infrastructure

Allocate time, funding, and support for cross-disciplinary, student-driven peer learning schemes. Do not co-opt them.

5

Address financial architecture at doctoral level

Review access to studentships and funded places by group. Evaluate the doctoral loan. Extend unfunded 4th year support to those managing disability, caring responsibilities, or financial hardship.



Share Your Experience.

We want to hear what has meant for you.

To take part, email:

P.M.Monaghan @liverpool.ac.uk



Research Study: Experiences of Inclusion

Are you interested in sharing your experience?

We are currently looking for people to take part in an interview about their personal experiences of inclusion as a PGR student. What it has looked like in practice, how it has (or hasn't) shaped their journey, and what they think needs to change.



Format

One-to-one
interview/ Focus
groups



Length

Approx. 30- 60
minutes

