CONVINCE

CO-creation aNd eValuatIon of Novel reCruitment procEsses

Creating inclusive centres for PhD study:

the need for change in recruitment processes and pre-application guidance to support students from minoritized ethnic groups

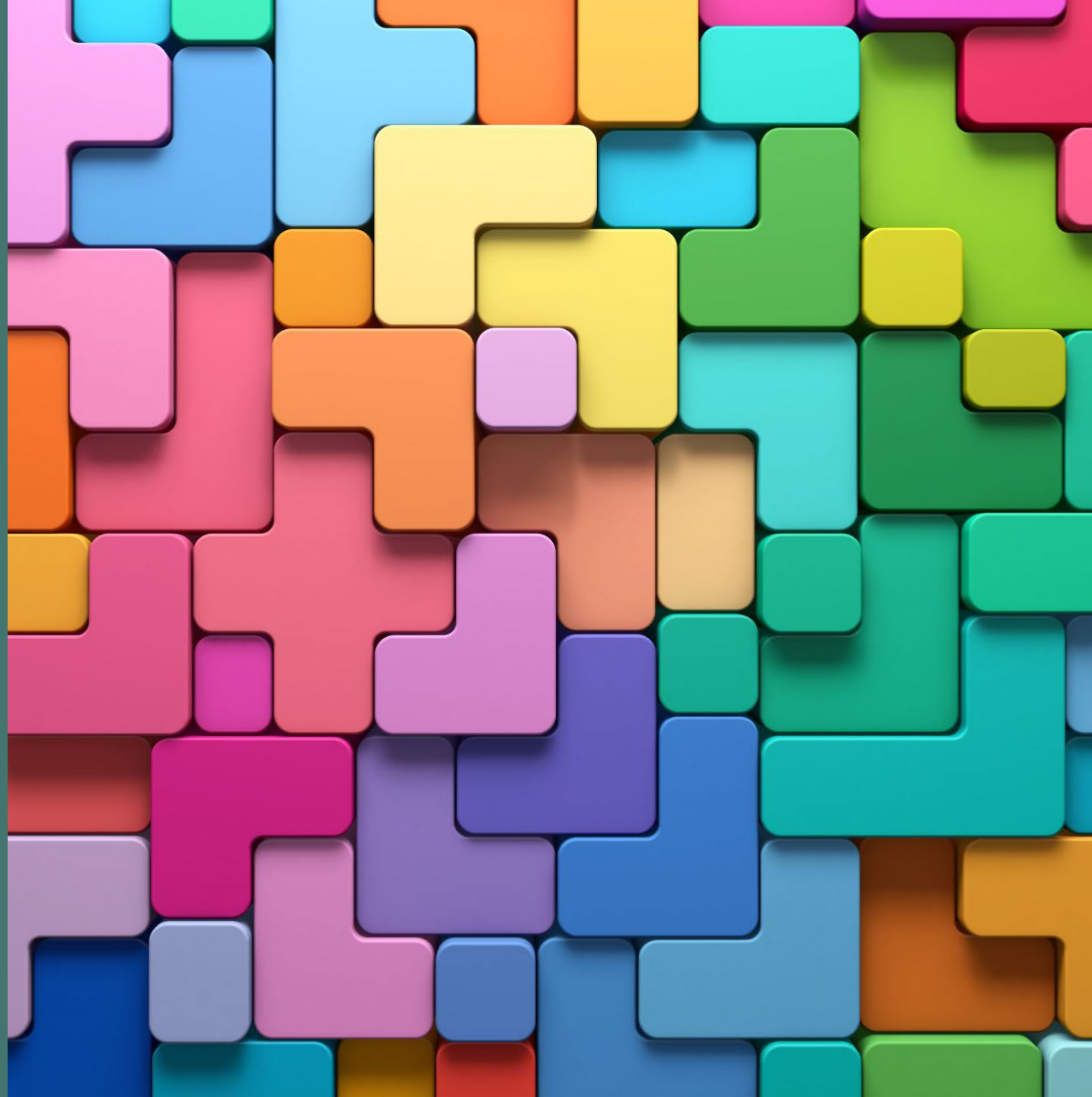
NERC Funded | ONE Planet DTP

Mehmet Sebih Oruç, Gail de Blaquière

Rebekah Puttick, Michelle Palmer,

UKRI Natural Environment Research Council

ONE Planet



ONE PLANET DOCTORAL TRAINING PARTNERSHIP

NERC are leading the way to improve Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) within UKRI, particularly in environmental science research:

- Best Practice in Doctoral Recruitment & Training – released December 2021
- £1.7m funding to a diverse range of projects seeking to make environmental science more diverse, equitable and inclusive (DEI).

- DEI Doctoral Training Flexible Funding Award call – February 2022
  - ONE Planet DTP bid successful (Newcastle & Northumbria Universities)
  - 1 year project completion date of March 2023) - extension of 6 months to carry out actions
  - Focus on understanding barriers and improving recruitment of UK minoritized ethnic groups
  - Recruitment of 2 PGR interns – Rebekah Puttick & Mehmet Sebih Oruç

OUR PROJECT AIMS, LITERATURE, AND DATA REVIEW

- Data shows that **fewer students from minoritized ethnic** groups in the UK transition to **Postgraduate Research** level studies
- Academia in the UK is still "*administratively, normatively, habitually, and intellectually 'White'*" (Shilliam, 2015: 32)
- Application and admissions data from Newcastle University demonstrate **low ethnic diversity** when it comes to **UK-domiciled PhD students.**
- CONVINCE aims to increase the visibility of the ONE Planet DTP as an **inclusive centre** for PhD study.

RATIONALE

Exploratory study designed to document perceptions and experiences of recruitment into postgraduate research (PGR) in the environmental sciences focusing upon how these experiences may **differ with respect to student race and/or ethnicity**.

The data collected to feed directly into **practical, actionable guidance** on best practice to **improve uptake of UK-domiciled minoritized ethnicity students**.

METHODS

- Focus Groups and 1-on-1 Interviews
- Undergraduates, Masters students & PhD researchers
- Focus Group topics:
    1. Advertising and Application
    2. Belonging, Cultural Resistance, Respect, And Awareness
    3. Progress And Assessment

OBJECTIVES

Investigate ONE Planet's advertising processes

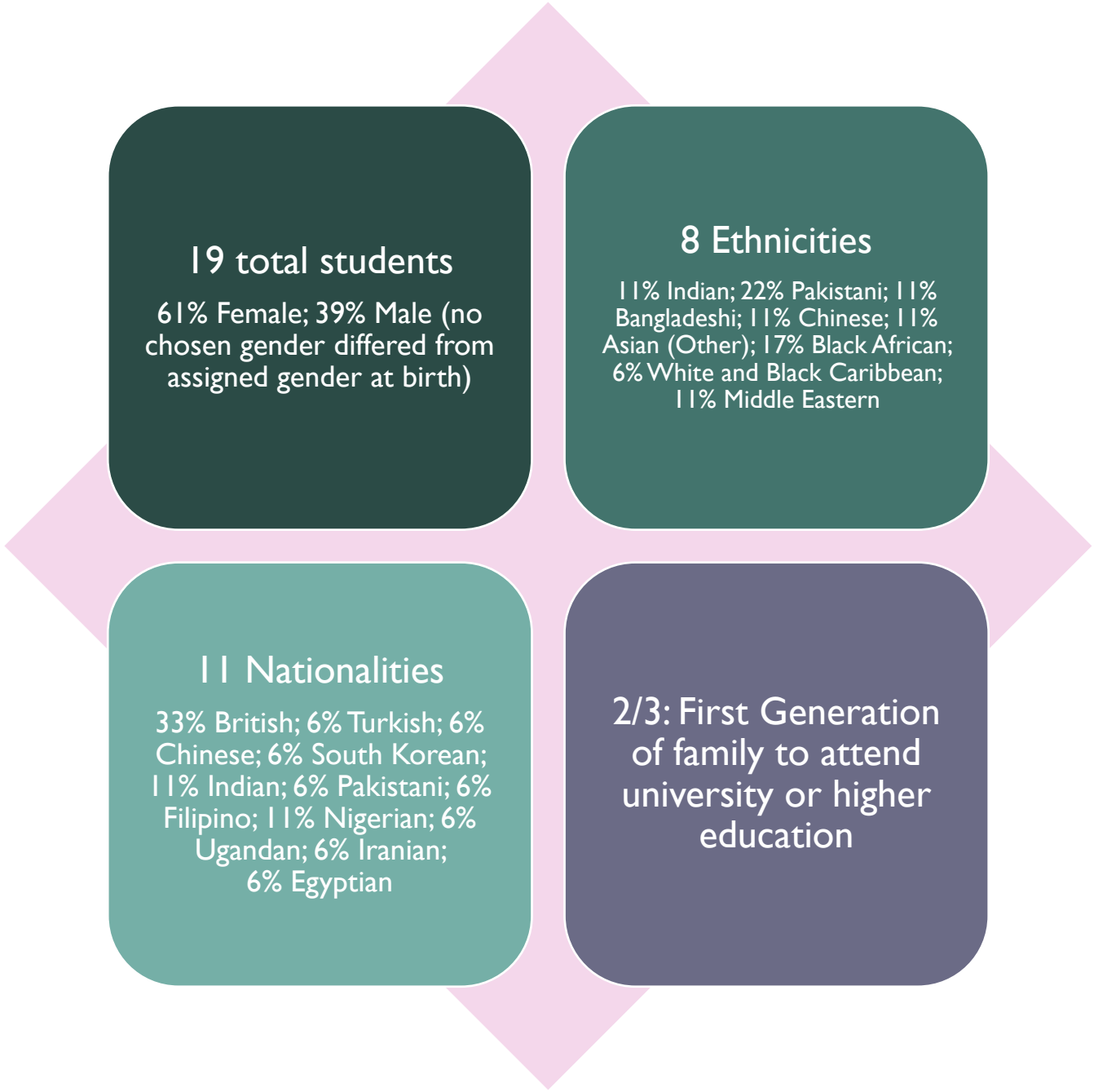
Understand the best routes to increase ONE Planet's visibility to minoritized ethnic groups

Increase the diversity of ONE Planet by widening both the geographical areas and communities from which UK students apply

Review best practice in pre-application processes for applicants from minoritized ethnic groups

Co-create resources for attracting, supporting, and mentoring prospective students from minoritized ethnic groups

PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS



I - Advertisement And Application

Findings

Online search is the most common practice.

Deracialized advertisement and **recruitment** will be needed to tackle these issues

Role of the staff, particularly supervisors, is pivotal: opportunities shared through networks.

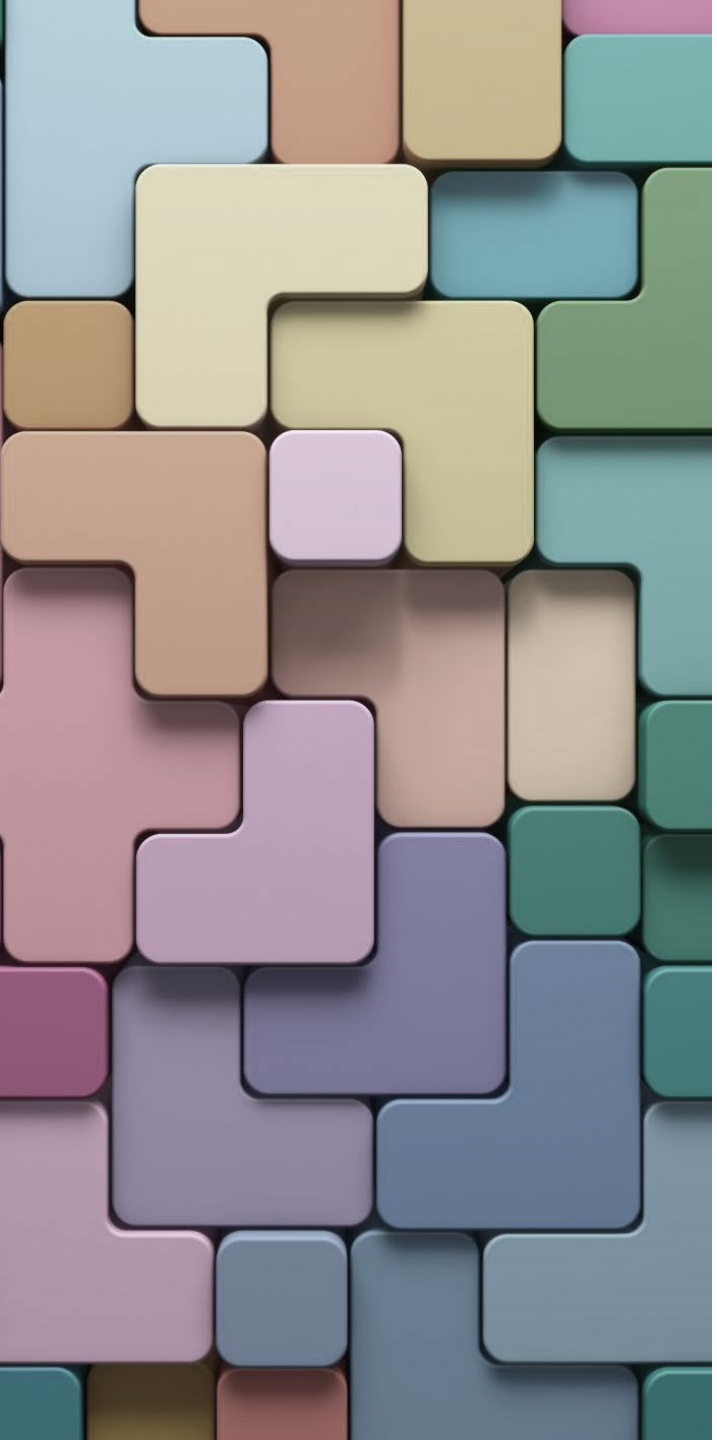
Most important criteria is funding for all participants.

Minority students consider funding (potential socio-economic barriers) alongside the diversity of the location (potential cultural barriers/concerns) as crucial aspects

Newcastle is found "white" by British students, but all participants were happy with the city and people (find it welcoming).

Participants usually find Newcastle University student body diverse, but they don't think the diversity is reflected among staff.

Writing personal statement and research proposal were identified as the most challenging documents to prepare.

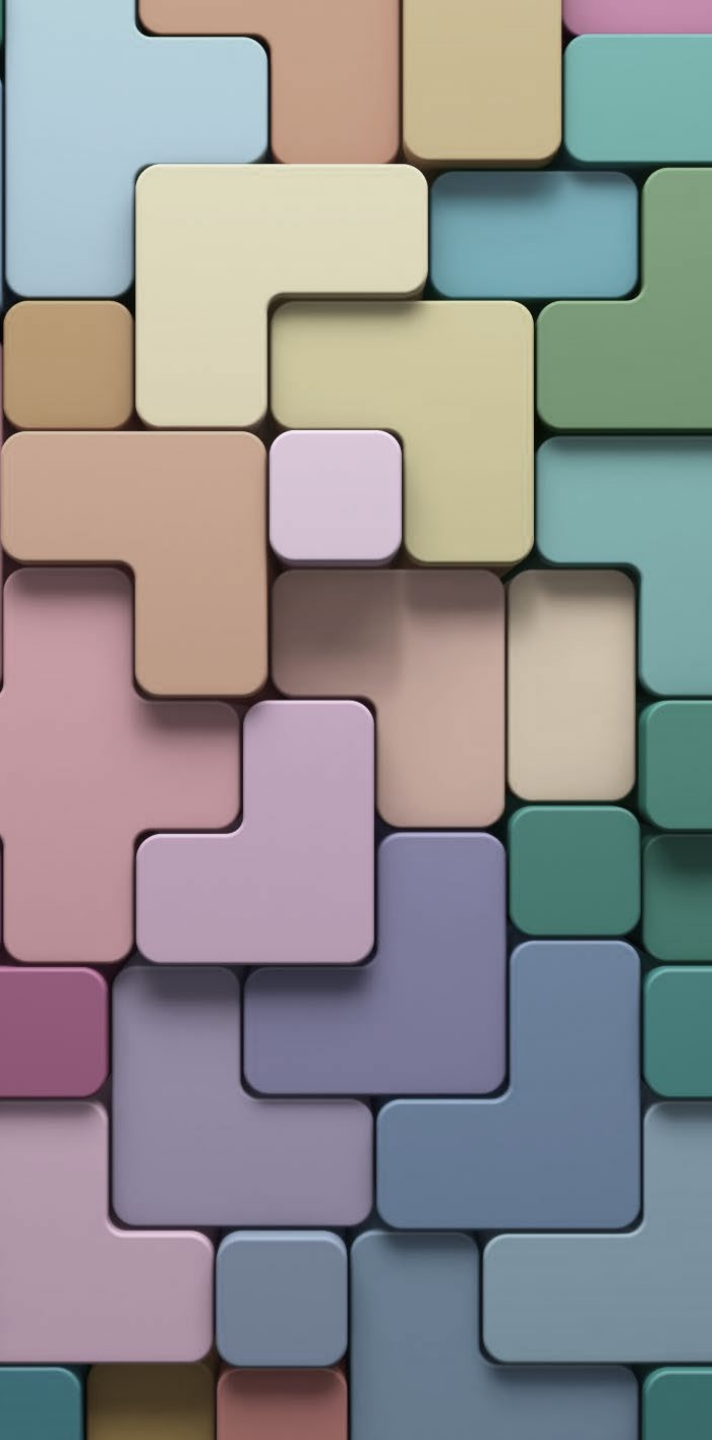


2- Belonging, Cultural Resistance, Respect, And Awareness

- Majority of students accepted academia (both in terms of staff body and culture) as a "white space"

"I looked at the panel running the CDT; yes, it was majority white male, however I accept that, as it is unfortunately academia. It didn't put me off entirely…it would be a little more encouraging to see a professor of colour who is female. I could identify more with that"

- Another female PGR expressed that **"*seeing someone with a similar identity was really encouraging*"** and claimed that it would have been "*really discouraging*" if they were all white men.
- **Intersectionality is evident:** women of colour face more issues when it comes to being represented, respected and feeling as "belonging" in academic spaces.
- One UG participant responded that they face ***"mental barriers"*** about academia because of the visible **lack of racial and gender representation** present in faculty.



3- Progress And Assessment

- Participants did not believe they are being/would be discriminated against because of race or religion, however there are unfair practices within academia:
- ***"Different levels of support are given by supervisors prior to the main interview…it should be a uniform level for everyone"***
- ***"Some supervisors already have someone in mind when they put a call out"***

- Lack of cultural capital (although students did not used the term) of the family and their immediate environment is believed to be one of the core reasons of the poor representation of ethnically minoritized British students.

- The primary concern for career progression was job competitiveness.

Key Findings

- The issue has structural, economic, institutional and cultural roots and long-term projects and positive actions are needed to tackle this.
- Increasing financial and cultural capital of minoritized ethnic groups is key.
- Although representation matters, embedding EDI values and creating such academic spaces are necessary for real and long-term change.
- To diversify PGR cohorts and programs, there is a need to diversify staff and embrace "*diversity of thought*" and critical approaches in programs and research projects.
- Acknowledge the existence of academia as a white dominated space. Critically evaluate individual attitudes and be welcoming and considerate of all cultures and beliefs when doing academic/social events.

PROJECT RECOMMENDATIONS

Action 1 - Develop online content in the form of “starter-packs” to answer student queries across a range of topics – CV, personal statement etc.

Action 2 - Develop video content featuring our ONE Planet students talking openly about how they manage a PhD, deal with cultural or societal resistance, and overcome challenges to successfully pursue their academic career.

Action 3 - Host in-person events, specifically as an opportunity to meet existing PGRs from diverse racial, ethnic, and religious backgrounds before applying.

Action 4 - Facilitate peer support networks

Action 5 - Work in collaboration with HEI partner colleagues and academic supervisors to ensure consistent and inclusive recruitment practices are undertaken at each step of the process.

Action 6 - Introduce a ‘ring-fencing’ strategy, to commit at least 1 studentship for students of UK minoritized ethnicity.

Action 7 - Promote research projects that are mindful of issues around race and equality (and/or projects that focuses on racial aspects of natural sciences).

ACTION PLAN:

<u>First steps</u>: During the project and our 2023/24 entry recruitment we introduced:

- PGR Applicant mentors – from ONE Planet DTP
- A series of applicant & pre-interview webinars
- Provided examples of interview questions & criteria to all candidates
- Provided a recruitment process briefing for our project Supervisors which embedded EDI considerations.

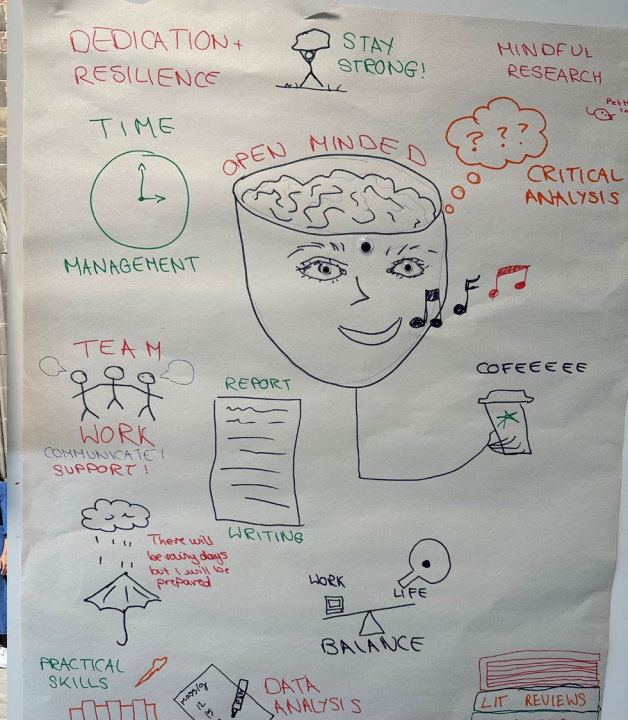
<u>Our next steps were….</u>

VIDEO PRODUCTION

- **We have created informative and engaging videos that celebrate diversity within the realm of PhD life.**
- These provide valuable insights into the experiences of individuals from various backgrounds and offer a glimpse into the realities of pursuing a PhD degree.
- By showcasing diverse perspectives, we aim to foster a more inclusive environment within academic spaces and empower potential PGRs with a better understanding of what their PhD journey would look like.
- Through these videos, we promote a sense of belonging, showcasing the inclusivity of all people.

1-DAY RESEARCH SUMMER SCHOOL

- NERC EDI network critical to advertising and attracting wider demographic of applicants
- Took place in August 2023 – paid for travel/ accommodation
- 20 attended - UK minoritised ethnic groups were prioritized, with additional UK & international students offered remaining places.
- Content: What actually is a PhD, current PhD students talks, details of the application process, & practical activities (What is an effective researcher?), tour of the 2 Universities
- 80% of attendees found it useful



RING FENCING STUDENTSHIP AWARDS

- One studentship award directly advertised and awarded for UK Minoritised ethnic groups (2024/25 entry).
- We also have a diversity candidate scheme where we prioritise candidates for interview who are:
  - UK Minoritised ethnic groups
  - Have disabilities, caring responsibilities or lower socio-economic backgrounds.

Find out more here:

https://research.ncl.ac.uk/one-planet/studentships/diversifyingourresearchcommunity/

APPLICANT & INTERVIEW SUPPORT

During our recruitment period (November - January) we host a series of applicant webinars.

These include information on:

- The ONE Planet DTP; including our programme, how to apply, and general advice on how to prepare your application.
- An opportunity to meet our PhD researchers - hear about their experiences and find out how to access our mentor scheme
- We also host **interview webinars** to help provide information on what to expect, and we have our PhD researchers present to provide hints and tips and answer your questions. These take place in February.

We also have **Applicant mentors from our ONE Planet DTP PGR community** who are available to be contacted at any stage during the process for peer-to-peer advice and support.

LOOKING AHEAD

- Measuring success:
  - *No data available yet*
  - *Pending outcome of 2024/25 recruitment process*
- A work in progress…
  - *We need National and Institutional change to effect major change to the diversity of PGR studies*
- *NERC 'Diversifying the Talent Pipeline' funding call:*
  - *Funding for outreach in Primary and secondary Schools*
    - *Application outcome pending…*

ANY QUESTIONS?