



# In2research system level evaluation plan

September 2025

Brilliant Consulting





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## Foreword

The In2research programme is one of 13 projects funded by Research England and Office for Students to address widening participation in and improve access to doctoral research. UCL and In2scienceUK collaboratively established the programme in response to the ground-breaking Broken Pipeline report (Leading Routes, 2019), which called for urgent action to address systemic barriers facing underrepresented people in pursuing doctoral research. Each of the 13 projects, in their own distinct ways, have informed us about the barriers to participation and demonstrated the profound impact of inclusive recruitment practices and research culture for all.

At UCL, we are always seeking to develop and implement bold and innovative ways to overcome persistent structural and cultural barriers in research. The In2research programme is not just an isolated institutional intervention but intended to be a programme with sector-wide ambitions. The programme counters deficit-based approaches, which focus solely on the perceived shortcomings and pre-conceived notions of students' abilities. However, we recognise that meaningful and sustainable impact, beyond the impact on the participants, is far from straightforward.

To understand how best to evaluate system-level impact for In2research, we mapped current practices, identified gaps, and sought guidance from experts in research and higher education. Led by The Brilliant Club, the evaluation began as an internal review and mapping of our outcomes against our intentions as outlined in the Theory of Change model. Soon, it evolved into something far more significant: a potential framework for evaluating cultural transformation within complex higher education institutions that needed to be shared and communicated.

With this exercise, we were reminded of the value of recognising and internalising progress and sharing practice to create lasting change to empowered research and research communities. We remain convinced of the transformative power of widening participation in doctoral research. But more importantly, we believe in the need for lasting change that embeds inclusion into the research ecosystem. Our hope is that this report, using UCL as a case study, highlights what has been achieved through the In2research programme but also beacons best practices for facilitating system-level evaluation.

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## Executive Summary

The In2research programme is a year-long access intervention intended to increase access to postgraduate research (PGR) for underrepresented people and to enhance inclusive doctoral research culture. This report focuses on developing a framework of evaluation to examine its long-term and system-level impact. By assessing how inclusive behaviours, reinforced by the programme, can be embedded across departments and faculties, the report highlights the importance of evaluating research culture change at a system-level for PGR.

### Purpose of the evaluation

The development of a framework for system-level evaluation was commissioned by In2scienceUK and University College London (UCL), and conducted by Brilliant Consulting, and examines how the In2research programme influences institutional change for PGR. It complements the annually conducted [impact evaluation](#) that is focused on short- and medium- term participant outcomes, such as the experience of the programme and changes in attitudes and behaviours.

### Audience and use

This report is intended for staff at In2scienceUK, UCL, participating institutes and universities, and prospective higher education partners, who are involved in programme management, design, delivery, and strategic planning. It is also intended for senior leadership teams (SLT) at higher education institutes (HEIs) and funders as it can provide insight into how interventions such as In2research can contribute to institutional culture change. This report offers practical recommendations for embedding across departments and faculties to support internal reflection, sharing of good practice, enhancing future iterations of the programme, and guiding alignment with broader institutional strategies, e.g., the UCL's Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) and Research Culture strategies.

### Key findings

This evaluation consisted of three key components: reviewing existing survey analysis from the latest impact evaluation of data from In2research participants and volunteers (i.e., academic mentors and placement hosts), two senior UCL stakeholder workshops and focus groups and interviews with In2research alumni participants and volunteers. Key findings include:

- 71% of mentors and 62% of placement hosts from the most recent programme survey of 2023-24 were, after the programme, more likely to advocate for cultural change within their institutions.
- 80% of participants reported in the most recent post-programme survey of 2023-24 that they felt a connection with academics in their field of study, and 91% felt confident working with other professionals and/or researchers in their field of study.
- UCL stakeholders identified opportunities to align In2research in EDI strategies, embed it into strategic planning and target finance and resource allocation to strengthen the programme's reach.

- Alumni participants reported positive placement experiences and spoke about making meaningful connections with the wider research community through their involvement in In2research.
- Mentors and placement hosts expressed strong commitment to inclusion, found the programme rewarding, and were more likely to be already engaged with EDI activities within their contexts.

### Selected recommendations by theme

Theme	Recommendation
<b>Alignment</b>	Mapping In2research outcomes against specific faculty EDI targets may support accountability and help demonstrate the programme's value in achieving measurable change
<b>Advocacy</b>	Mentors and placement hosts who have engaged with the programme may be well-placed to advocate for inclusive research practices and inspire broader departmental involvement.
<b>Communication and visibility</b>	Tailoring communications to different staff roles may help clarify the programme's relevance and encourage broader engagement.
<b>Engagement</b>	Hosting events or seminars can provide a platform to share success stories from In2research participants, promote inclusive research culture, and encourage peer learning.
<b>Planning</b>	Strategic planning at faculty level, including targeted finance and resource allocation, may help identify opportunities to grow departmental involvement and strengthen the programme's reach.
<b>Promotion</b>	Showcasing stories and examples of impact from In2research participants, mentors and placement hosts, can support wider engagement and help faculties connect the programme with their own goals.
<b>Building inclusive communities of support</b>	Identify and implement ways to feasibly include or share impact to family and peers of participants
<b>Embedding race and cultural literacy</b>	Refine any staff training, such as the race and cultural literacy provisions based on evaluation findings, to support volunteers, and staff in navigating complex cultural dynamics in research spaces.

For the full tables of recommendations, please see Section 4. System-level recommendations



## **Citation**

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## **Abbreviations**

EDI = Equity, diversity, and inclusion

HEI = Higher Education Institute

PGR = postgraduate research or doctoral research

PI = Principal Investigator

SLT = senior leadership team

UCL = University College London

ToC = Theory of Change

## 1. Introduction

In2research is a one-year programme developed by In2scienceUK and UCL which aims to give people from low socioeconomic and underrepresented backgrounds the skills and experience they need to access PGR degrees and other research career opportunities. In2research addresses three main barriers that people from low socioeconomic backgrounds face when accessing PGR careers:

### 1. Knowledge and information:

- The programme aims to demystify research by providing information on the pathways to research careers. This is done through professional development away days, workshops, and mentorship by an academic/research staff member.

### 2. Lack of experience relevant to postgraduate careers:

- Postgraduate research study programmes often demand (implicitly) substantial prior research experience. In2research provides a paid 8-week research placement, including an opportunity to develop and communicate research outputs.

### 3. Research culture and wellbeing:

- The programme recognises the significant unconscious and conscious biases that exist within institutions and provides a tailored race and cultural literacy workshop for all volunteers to promote a more inclusive and welcoming PGR research culture. All volunteers of the programme undertake a workshop on race and cultural literacy facilitated by Leading Routes and UPSIGN (UK Pakistan Science and Innovation Global Network).

To participate in the programme, participants need to be from a low socioeconomic background and be a second year or above undergraduate student. They do not need to be currently enrolled as a student and could be returning to education. International students or those enrolled in a doctoral degree are not eligible.

The programme consists of four different elements for participants: in-person away days, online workshops, mentoring sessions and an eight-week paid summer research placement at a participating HEI. Participants get inducted onto an alumni network at the end of the year for continued support and information about doctoral research and other research development and career opportunities. There is an emphasis on building a sense of community and creating opportunities for the development of informal networks of peer support.

Academics and researchers from HEIs across the UK can apply to volunteer on the programme as a mentor, and those based at specific participating HEIs can also apply as a placement host. If eligible, they can apply for both roles. In this report, mentors and placement hosts are referred to as volunteers. Being a mentor includes holding mentoring sessions and providing subject-specific guidance and advice for participants, while



placement hosts are required to provide an 8-week research placement for participants. Placement hosts also:

- Review and provide feedback on participants' CVs and personal statements.
- Hold and provide feedback on an informal 'mock' interview with participants to mimic the experience of a PhD interview.
- Oversee participant's creation of a research output they can present at In2research's celebration event.

## 1.2 Evaluation aims and rationale for a system-level approach

Brilliant Consulting, an evaluation and strategy unit part of the education charity The Brilliant Club, was commissioned for the In2research programme to conduct two evaluations:

- An impact evaluation of the programme assessing outcomes for participants, mentors and placement hosts (consisting of survey analysis and creating impact reports).
- The development of a framework or plan to examine the system level impact of the programme within UCL (consisting of UCL stakeholder workshops and focus groups/interviews with alumni participants, mentors and placement hosts).

The evaluation of the In2research programme is guided by two Theory of Change (ToC) models developed by external evaluators working alongside UCL and In2scienceUK. These models have been referenced throughout the evaluation process to guide analysis and interpretation. The ToC models include outcomes for volunteers related to research culture and institutional change, such as increased confidence in hosting, supervising, or mentoring students from different backgrounds, increased advocacy for cultural change within academia and increased likelihood to influence institutional policies and practices to be more inclusive. The ToC models also focus on outcomes at a broader level such as increased recognition of long-term change as a result of removing barriers and greater evidence of influencing and progressing institutional EDI strategy and funding objectives.

System-level evaluations are important to understand how different components interact with each other, looking at the overall effectiveness, efficiency, and impact of the entire system rather than individual performance. While individual-level outcomes provide important insight into participant experience and impact, they do not capture how inclusive practices are being embedded, or challenged, within the broader institutional context. This report focuses on the system-level evaluation of the programme and presents the key findings from the survey analysis, stakeholder workshops and focus groups/interviews. This report also includes recommendations for how UCL could embed system-level evaluation for future cohorts and support enhancement of a positive doctoral research culture.

The insight from the evaluation can benefit other HEIs who would like to examine the impact of their interventions and access programmes on research culture change across the institution.

In order to define what is meant by system-level evaluation for the In2research programme, colleagues at UCL developed a guiding conceptualisation of institutional culture change (**Table 1**). This was based on extant literature on research culture in HEIs and the ToC models. This conceptualisation was further refined by the Brilliant Consulting team and was utilised to drive the exploration of shifts in individual and collective values, key learnings, and SLT engagement with and advocacy of In2research that may drive and reinforce the need for inclusive practices at both faculty and institutional levels.

**Table 1. Themes and definitions of institutional change**

Theme	Definition
<b>Attitudes, knowledge, perceptions</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Attitudes:</b> Increased comfort in talking about EDI with colleagues and students.</li> <li>• <b>Knowledge:</b> Increased awareness and understanding of unconscious biases and barriers to accessing education faced by underrepresented groups</li> <li>• <b>Perceptions:</b> Increased awareness of tangible practices, tools to enhance inclusive admissions and research practices.</li> </ul>
<b>Behaviours</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improved confidence in hosting/supervising/mentoring/accommodating students from different backgrounds.</li> <li>• Increased participation in developing/advocating for outreach events and inclusive practices.</li> <li>• Increased interest in exploring a diverse range of topics and questions in respective disciplines and research.</li> </ul>
<b>Networks and relationships</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To review the level of influence and confidence of participating researchers in contributing to overall organisational change.</li> <li>• Increased likelihood to influence institutional policies and practices to be more inclusive.</li> </ul>
<b>Institutional commitments</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sustained senior advocacy for underrepresented students.</li> <li>• Greater evidence of influencing and progressing institutional EDI strategy and funding objectives.</li> <li>• Increased creation of and participation in opportunities for shared learning on EDI in PGR within and across institutions.</li> <li>• Increased incentivisation and support for staff for the development and facilitation of initiatives to address barriers to PGR.</li> <li>• Increased uptake or participation in PGR access initiatives (including In2research).</li> </ul>

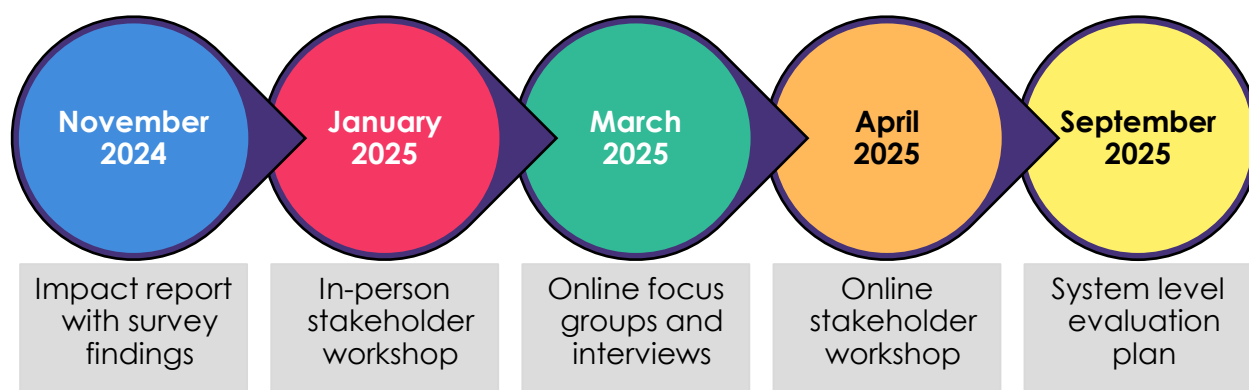
## 2. Evaluation approach

This system-level evaluation consists of three key components:

- Reviewing existing survey analysis of data from In2research participants, mentors and placement hosts, which has previously been written up in an impact report.
- Two UCL senior stakeholder workshops.
- Focus groups and interviews with In2research alumni participants, mentors and a placement host.

Between November 2024 and September 2025, the system-level evaluation progressed through five key stages (Figure 1). The impact report, drawing on survey findings from In2research participants, mentors, and placement hosts, was published in November 2024. This was followed by a senior stakeholder workshop held in-person in January 2025, and online focus groups and interviews in March 2025. In April 2025, a second stakeholder workshop took place online, with the system-level evaluation plan finalised in September 2025.

**Figure 1. Timeline of each evaluation activity**



### 2.1 Survey analysis

The programme evaluation of In2research includes analysis of online surveys completed by programme participants, mentors and placement hosts. While impact-related surveys have been collected from previous cohorts, this evaluation focused on data from the 2023–24 cohort. In November 2024, we published an impact report of the survey findings from the 2023-24 cohort. This [report](#) brought together responses from participants and volunteers across three time points: pre-, mid-, and post-programme. This approach allowed for a more nuanced understanding of changes in attitudes, confidence, and perceptions over the course of the programme.

While the surveys mainly focused on programme impact, parts of the post-survey for volunteers explored the programme's impact on research culture. Volunteers were asked perceived barriers to PGR for individuals from low socioeconomic backgrounds, their confidence in supervising people from underrepresented groups and their likelihood of

advocating for cultural change. In total, 139 volunteers (70 mentors and 69 placement hosts) responded to these questions related to research and institutional culture, except for the first question in Figure 4 and Figure 5, which were answered by 85 volunteers (47 mentors and 38 placement hosts). Participants (n=96) were not asked specifically about research culture or institutional change. However, they were asked about their perceived sense of belonging and confidence in research environments. These were deemed to be relevant to the system-level analysis.

Insights from the participant and volunteer surveys helped shape the stakeholder workshop, as well as the interviews and focus groups used in the system-level evaluation. In particular, the survey findings informed the identification of key areas for deeper exploration, including structural barriers to PGR progression, experiences of inclusive supervision, and opportunities for institutional culture change.

## 2.2 Senior stakeholder workshops

We carried out two senior UCL stakeholder workshops in January and April 2025. The January workshop took place in-person and aimed to identify system-level change outcomes that In2research could bring about and testing with stakeholders the assumptions about institutional change outcomes (e.g., institutional commitments and networks and relationships) as outlined in Table 1. The findings from the workshop helped inform the focus of enquiry for the focus groups and interviews conducted in March 2025.

The online senior stakeholder workshop took place in April 2025, after the focus groups and interviews had taken place, and was used to reflect on the evaluation findings collected so far and how the In2research programme influences institutional change at the departmental and institutional level. The aim was also to identify institutional gaps and opportunities that need addressing, as well as getting feedback on key recommendations and priorities for the system-level evaluation plan.

Six senior stakeholders across UCL attended the in-person workshop and nine attended the online workshop. These stakeholders had direct or indirect relationship with the In2research programme.

## 2.3 Online focus groups and interviews

We conducted qualitative focus groups and semi-structured interviews with alumni participants, mentors and placement hosts. The aim was to explore perceptions of academic research culture, including barriers to inclusion, sense of community, and engagement with institutions as a result of taking part in In2research. The focus groups and interviews also examined how involvement in In2research influenced mentors' and placement hosts' attitudes, actions, and confidence in challenging and shaping academic and institutional practices.

While our original intention was to only conduct focus groups, it proved difficult to find dates and times that worked for everyone to attend. To ensure their insights were still captured, we adapted our approach and conducted one-to-one interviews with some volunteers instead. In total, we conducted:

- 1 focus group with two alumni participants
- 1 focus group with two mentors
- 1 semi-structured interview with a mentor
- 1 semi-structured interview with a placement host

### 3. Key evaluation findings

#### 3.1 Survey analysis

##### Participants

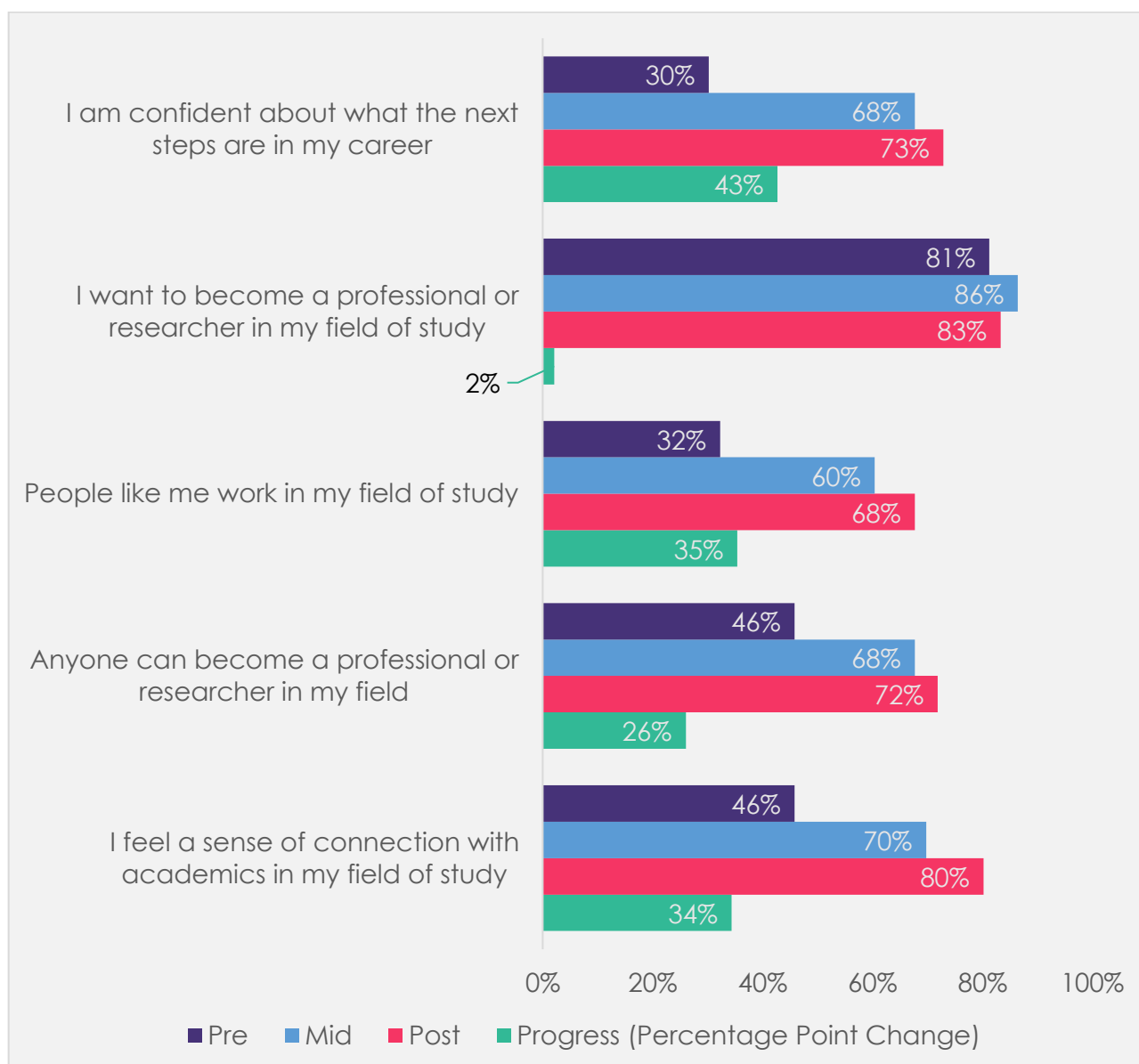
Sense of belonging has been identified as a significant roadblock in access to and success in higher education, and this trend has also been identified within PGR specifically<sup>1</sup>. Increasing participants' sense of belonging is an important part of empowering them to enter postgraduate research and persist in their field. Findings from the 2023-24 survey analysis indicated that participants' feelings of sense of belonging increased throughout the In2research programme (Figure 2).

While not a direct measure of research or institutional culture, sense of belonging is closely tied to how inclusive, supportive, and equitable those cultures feel to individuals, particularly those from underrepresented backgrounds. Improvements in participants' sense of belonging may therefore reflect small but meaningful shifts in how research culture is experienced and could point to the potential for broader institutional culture change over time.

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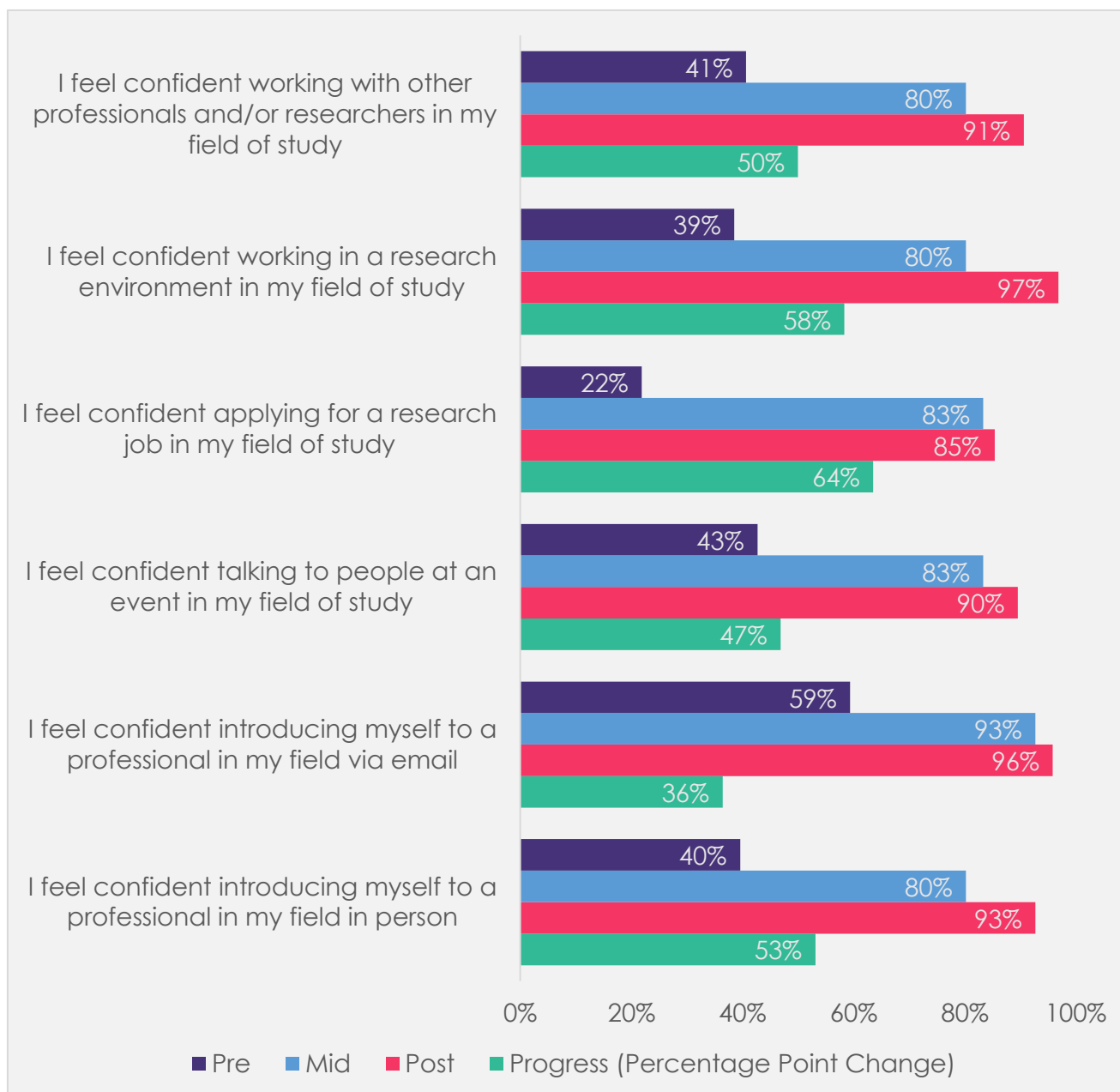
<sup>1</sup> [“Peering through the window looking in”: postgraduate experiences of non-belonging and belonging in relation to mental health and wellbeing \(Emerald Insight\)](#)

**Figure 2. Participants' perceptions of sense of belonging throughout the In2research programme (% who agreed + strongly agreed), n=96**



Participants were also asked about their professional confidence, which had increased throughout the programme (Figure 3). This included confidence in working with other professionals or researchers in their field, navigating research environments, and introducing themselves to professionals both via email and in person. They also have relevance to research culture and institutional culture, as inclusive and supportive placement experiences may have supported the participants' confidence and ability to engage with and navigate research spaces. As such, these findings may provide insight into how In2research can contribute to wider efforts to encourage positive culture change in academic research settings, where staff volunteers also gain confidence in creating inclusive cultures for their participants and future doctoral researchers.

**Figure 3. Participants' perceptions of professional confidence throughout the In2research programme (% who agreed + strongly agreed), n=96**



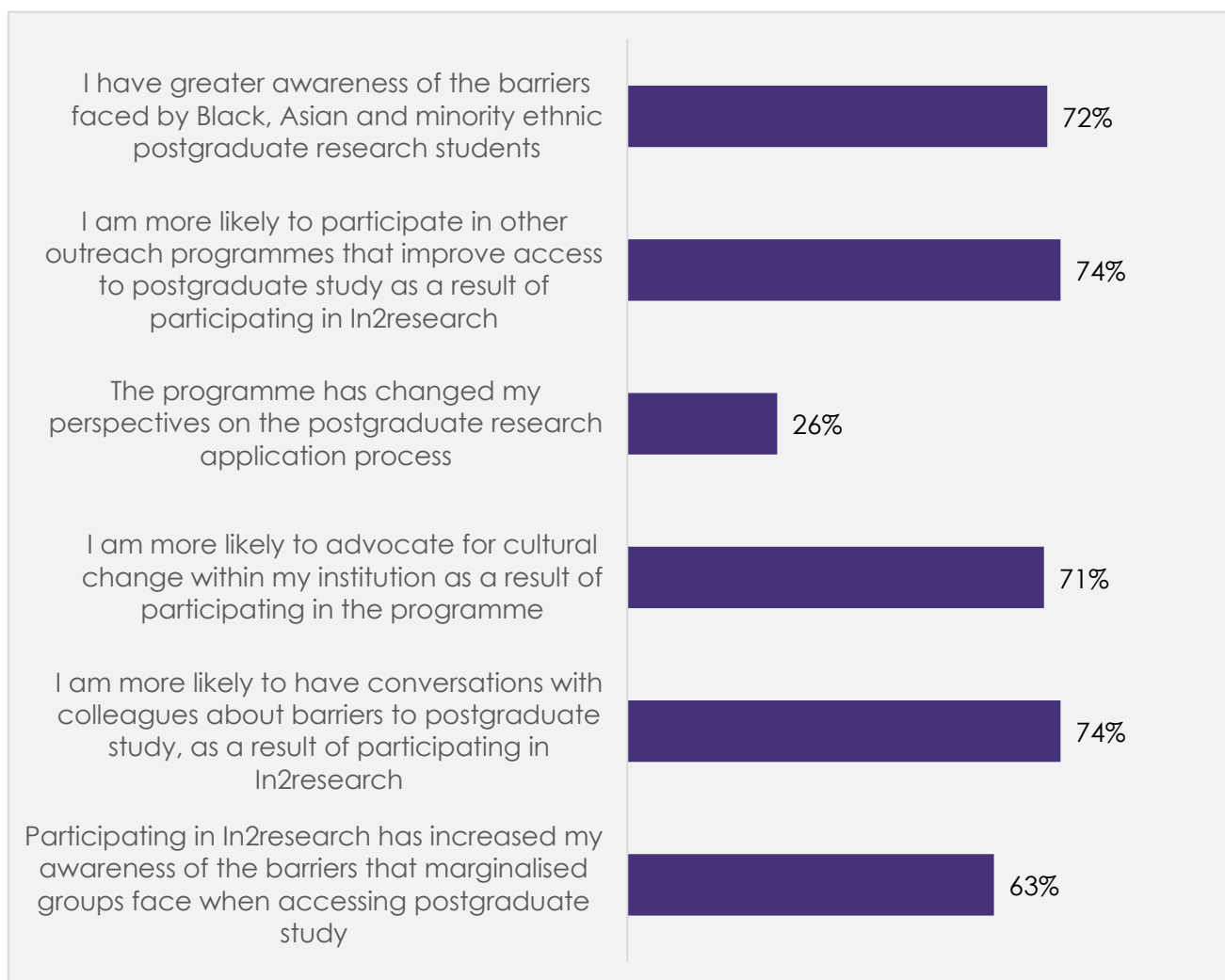
### Mentors

One of the key aims of the In2research programme is to reduce barriers to PGR by positively influencing research culture and wellbeing to promote a more inclusive and welcoming workplace for doctoral researchers. To assess this, the mentor survey included questions on perceptions of barriers for individuals for people from low socioeconomic backgrounds, outreach programmes and their confidence in supervising people from underrepresented groups.

Mentors were more likely to advocate for cultural change within their institution as a result of participating in the programme (71%) (Figure 4). They were also more likely to have conversations with colleagues about barriers to postgraduate study (74%). Mentors also felt

the programme had increased their awareness of the barriers that marginalised groups face when accessing PGR study (63%).

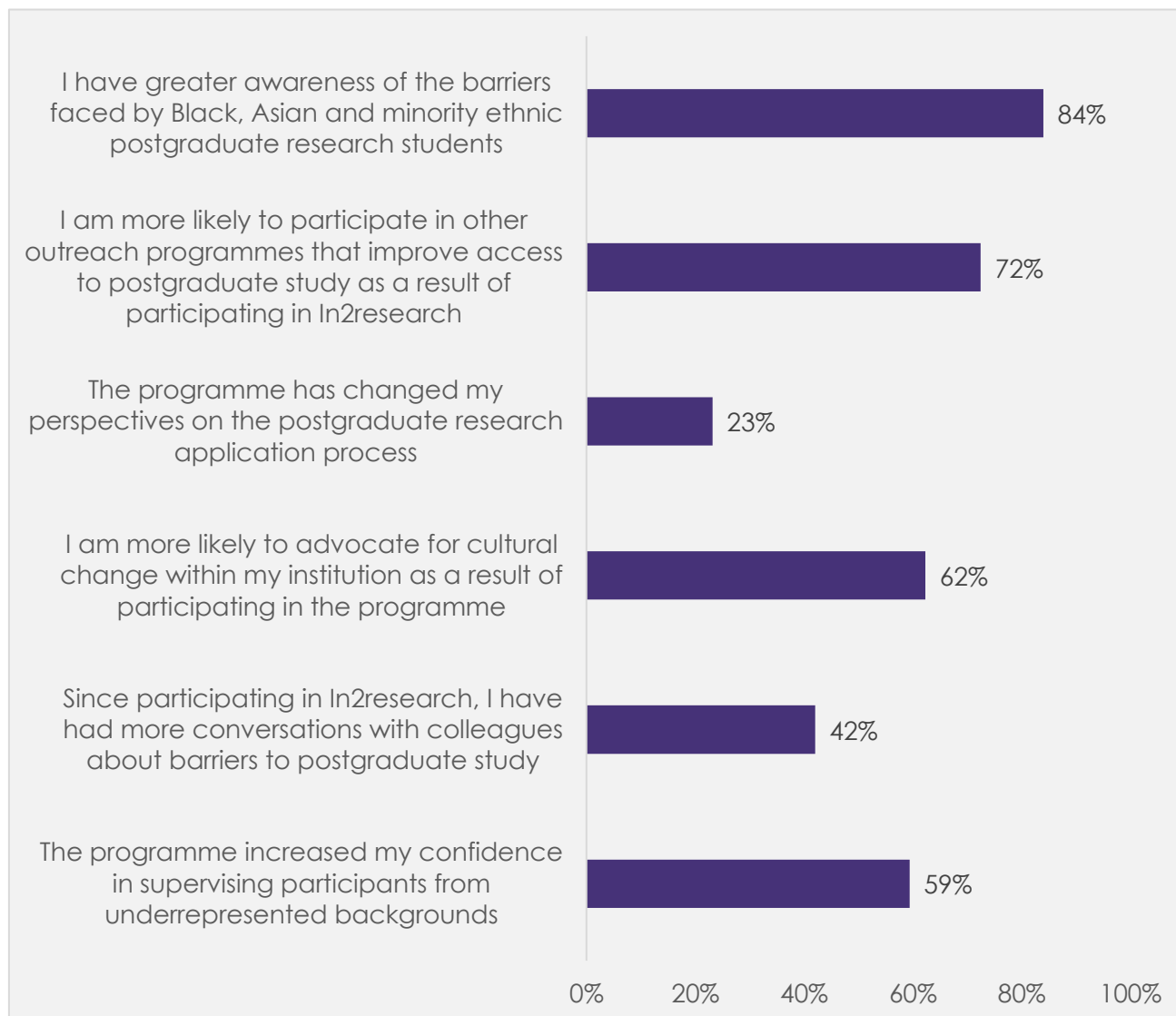
**Figure 4. Mentors' perceptions of research culture and institutional culture change (% who agreed + strongly agreed), n=70, except for the first statement, where n=47**



### Placement hosts

Placement hosts were also asked about perceived barriers to PGR for people from low socioeconomic backgrounds, outreach programmes and their confidence in supervising people from underrepresented groups. They were also asked about their perspective on the postgraduate research application process, and advocating for cultural change. The findings indicate a positive shift in attitudes and behaviours following participation in In2research. The majority of hosts (72%) were more likely to participate in other outreach programmes that improve access to postgraduate study (Figure 5). Additionally, 62% were more likely to advocate for cultural change within their institution, and 59% felt the programme had increased their confidence in supervising participants from underrepresented backgrounds.

**Figure 5. Placement hosts' perceptions of research culture and institutional culture change (% who agreed + strongly agreed), n=69, except for the first statement, where n=38**



### 3.2 Stakeholder workshop

#### In-person workshop

The in-person senior stakeholder workshop focused on identifying system level change outcomes that the In2research programme could bring about. Stakeholders were asked to discuss potential outcomes within the following four themes, and at which level the outcome(s) would fall under (individual, departmental or faculty level) as outlined in Table 1:

- Attitudes, perception and knowledge
- Behaviour
- Networks and relationships
- Institutional commitments

Key findings in relation to accessibility and engagement of the programme included:

- Expanding participation by reaching a more diverse range of students, including those who may not have previously considered research, and increasing involvement from a broader mix of disciplines (e.g., Social Sciences, Arts & Humanities).
- Improving the programme's visibility through stronger communication, better integration with existing initiatives, and increased engagement between relevant HEI individuals, such as PIs and Heads of Research (at UCL, these could be Faculty Graduate Tutors or Faculty Deans of EDI and/or Research).
- Exploring the programme's impact on participants' wider communities, including families, peers, and others in their support networks.

Key findings in relation to system-level improvements included:

- Increase visibility among university leadership (e.g., deans) through direct engagement such as socialisation of evaluation findings.
- Highlight role models and success stories to encourage student and staff participation.
- Develop a communication toolkit to help staff and departments promote the programme effectively.
- The programme's capacity to engage students may be influenced by funding and faculty availability. Proactively allocating resources and exploring other funding sources, such as inclusion in grant funding applications, will be key to addressing these challenges.

### **Online workshop**

The online workshop discussed the key findings from the system-level evaluation to assess how the In2research programme influenced institutional change at the departmental and faculty levels. Discussion centred around themes such as governance, funding priorities, faculty engagement, and financial and departmental considerations to enhance access to and experience of PGR.

#### *Governance*

- Aligning the programme more closely with institutional EDI strategies could strengthen its perceived value and impact.
- Opportunities exist to connect the programme with existing initiatives, such as the Dean's Pledge, Race Equality Charter among others, to support long-term financial sustainability.
- Clarifying and communicating the programme's purpose, particularly its role in supporting a more diverse PhD pipeline, is important.
- Ensuring the programme's purpose is consistently evidenced will help reinforce its value.

#### *Funding priorities*

- Data-driven evidence is essential to secure ongoing funding and stakeholder support.

- Demonstrating clear outcomes is particularly influential for senior leadership (e.g., Vice-Deans of Research/EDI), even if faculties do not see immediate direct benefits.
- Promoting MSc pathways as a route to doctoral study could add value, but financial accessibility remains a concern for underrepresented groups.

### *Engaging departments and faculties*

- Widening the focus of the programme to encompass systemic change rather than only individual outcomes, to enhance institutional engagement.
- Embedding the programme in existing departmental forums can help normalise participation.
- Highlighting research and reputational benefits ('what's in it for them') may motivate departmental involvement.
- A lighter-touch engagement approach, such as brief presentations at faculty meetings, could effectively reach less-engaged staff.

### *Financial and departmental considerations*

- Sustaining programme budgets is critical for ongoing delivery.
- Developing faculty-level funding strategies could distribute financial responsibility more fairly.
- Hosting events, such as mini-conferences to showcase participants' work, can help promote impact and foster cross-departmental engagement.

## **3.3 Online focus groups and interviews**

### **Alumni participants**

We conducted one focus group with two alumni participants to explore their experiences of the programme, including barriers to participation, placement support, and community impact:

- Participants reported positive experiences with their placements, highlighting valuable exposure to the realities of research culture. They described supportive relationships with supervisors and colleagues, which helped them navigate both independent work and collaborative environments. Participants appreciated the flexibility around hybrid working, balancing remote and lab-based tasks without feeling isolated, and spoke about the approachable nature of the lab community, including informal interactions outside typical hours.
- Participants described making meaningful connections with the wider research community through their involvement in In2research. One of the participant's placement was part of a wider consortium, allowing them to collaborate with various academics. As a result, they are now engaged in a new project with leaders from that consortium.
- When asked whether the programme had influenced their interactions with their family or community regarding research careers or pursuing a PhD, one participant said their family was already supportive. However, they noted a shift in how their

friends from their hometown engaged with them. Their involvement in In2research had raised questions and curiosity among friends unfamiliar with academic research, prompting conversations and interest in postgraduate study. The other participant described ongoing tensions with their family, who come from a working-class background and did not view academic work, particularly remote or laptop-based research, as 'proper' work, highlighting a cultural disconnect that shaped their experience of pursuing a research career.

- Participants identified socioeconomic and financial barriers as key challenges that might prevent others from applying to or participating in the programme. While they had not personally experienced these barriers, they believed financial barriers could be a potential issue for some participants. Taking part in In2research is free for participants, and the programme provides a tax-free stipend to support participants when at their research placements. The programme also reimburses any travel costs for participants when travelling to their in-person away days. However, participants with placements in locations other than Cambridge need to arrange accommodation themselves for the full eight-weeks of their placement, which is most likely what the alumni participants were referring to.

### **Mentors and placement hosts**

We spoke with three mentors and one placement host to understand how In2research aligns with and contributes to research culture and institutional change:

- A notable theme among volunteers was the strong commitment to support people from underrepresented backgrounds, with volunteers being interested in broadening the sense of who belongs in research.
- All had positive experiences of the In2research programme. The placement host described it as rewarding, particularly in witnessing the growth in participants' confidence and sense of belonging. Mentors felt that even though some of the participants were focusing on topics outside the mentor's expertise, they were still able to provide support and advice in terms of career paths and working in an academic research setting. They emphasised the importance of ensuring young people understand how to access research opportunities, such as through summer internships, rather than assuming this knowledge is common.
- Volunteers were also asked for their views on the race and cultural literacy workshop. The placement host found the workshop helpful but felt it did not significantly influence their perspective on research culture or culture change, as it reinforced principles they were already familiar with and actively promoted. Similarly, mentors considered the workshop valuable, particularly for individuals with limited prior knowledge of EDI or research culture. However, for those already engaged in these areas, the content largely reflected their existing understanding and practices.
- When asked whether In2research had motivated them to take further action to support or challenge the existing culture within their academic environment, volunteers felt they were already active in this area. The placement host, for instance, sits on their institution's EDI committee and the PhD admissions committee.



- Mentors acknowledged limited capacity to take on additional initiatives but felt confident in their ability to influence research culture institutional practices if necessary. They shared examples of ongoing efforts, such as launching initiatives focused on women in AI and building supportive communities around these themes.

## 4. System-level recommendations

Drawing on feedback from across this evaluation, this section presents a selection of possible actions that UCL and In2scienceUK may wish to consider at a programme (Table 2), departmental (Table 3) and faculty level (Table 4). These suggestions reflect themes raised by alumni participants, mentors, placement hosts, and institutional stakeholders, and aim to support the continued embedding of In2research within wider EDI efforts and research culture initiatives. These suggestions are grouped by theme and intended as flexible options that HEI programme managers/Principal Investigators (PIs) (who are part of similar programmes like In2research), departments and faculties can adapt to their specific context and capacity. Where relevant, additional contextual evidence has been provided to support the recommendation.

**Table 2. Suggested recommendations for HEI programme managers and PIs for interventions such as the In2research programme**

Theme	Recommendation	Possible action	Additional context/evidence (where applicable)
Communication and visibility	<b>Develop a communication package for volunteers to support their understanding of and exposure to research culture.</b>	Consider creating onboarding materials for volunteers that explain academic research culture, including typical pathways, and cultural norms.	This recommendation is based on findings such as the survey analysis of volunteers, as well as focus groups and interviews with volunteers about whether In2research had motivated them to take further action to support or challenge the existing culture within their academic environment.
Communication and visibility	<b>Develop a communication package for participating HEIs to help them frame their involvement in In2research within broader strategies (e.g., EDI plans, funding applications, and charter mark submissions)</b>	Consider coordinating with institutional EDI leads to embed In2research into their strategic planning documents or annual reporting cycles.	Stakeholders in the workshops highlighted the potential benefits of aligning the programme more closely with institutional EDI strategies.

<p><b>Building inclusive communities of support</b></p>	<p><b>Identify and implement ways to feasibly include or share impact to family and peers of participants</b></p>	<p>Providing material or additional information about research careers that participants may wish to share with their family and/or friends.</p> <p>Include family and peer involvement in celebration events, where financially and logistically feasible, to strengthen participants' support systems and affirm their achievements.</p>	<p>This recommendation is informed by insights from the participant alumni focus group, where participants spoke about whether their families were supportive and understanding of their careers in research and/or academia.</p>
<p><b>Embedding race and cultural literacy</b></p>	<p><b>Refine any staff training, such as the race and cultural literacy provisions based on evaluation findings, to support volunteers, and staff in navigating complex cultural dynamics in research spaces.</b></p>	<p>Planning regular reflective practice forums or learning sessions to share experiences and challenges related to inclusive mentoring may help to further embed race and cultural literacy within the programme.</p>	<p>This recommendation emerges from the finding that the contents of the current provision of race and cultural literacy workshop is familiar to the staff volunteers and may not reach those who tend to not participate in programmes such as In2research.</p>

**Table 3. Suggested recommendations at a departmental level**

Theme	Recommendation	Possible actions	Additional context/evidence (where applicable)
<b>Alignment</b>	<b>Embedding In2research in departmental EDI conversations and action plans.</b>	Consider presenting evaluation findings to relevant stakeholders, such as EDI leads, and including the programme in relevant meetings and committee discussions where appropriate.	To embed the programme at the departmental level requires leveraging funding sources, and the increased focus on inclusion by UKRI and other funding bodies means the additive strength of In2research should be applied to grant funding applications. In addition, the positive impact on the research environment means it is an invaluable part of Equality Charter Marks and Research Excellence Framework submissions.
<b>Advocacy</b>	<b>Mentors and placement hosts who have engaged with the programme may be well-placed to advocate for inclusive research practices and inspire broader departmental involvement.</b>	There may be benefit in identifying past mentors/placement hosts and invite them to speak at departmental meetings or training events.	This recommendation is informed by insights gathered through focus groups and interviews with the volunteers. As one mentor noted:  "I am passionate and active. I start initiatives, looking at women and AI for example and building up a group of people within this topic. Working with my own PhD students, working with other volunteers in different organisations, I'm trying to set up a

			<p>framework that can be exported and applied elsewhere.”</p> <p>This was also evident in the survey findings, with 71% of mentors and 62% of placement hosts were more likely to advocate for cultural change within their institution.</p>
<b>Communication and visibility</b>	<b>Tailoring communications to different staff roles may help clarify the programme’s relevance and encourage broader engagement.</b>	Consider drafting and circulating role-specific comms highlighting benefits of participation.	
<b>Engagement</b>	<b>Hosting events or seminars can provide a platform to share success stories from In2research participants, promote inclusive research culture, and encourage peer learning.</b>	<p>It might be helpful to pilot a departmental seminar, showcase, or roundtable focused on widening participation and research access. Embedding these activities into research culture can also help develop practical, day-to-day life skills and reinforce the value of inclusive practices as part of the research culture. This can also help address any gaps in knowledge, such as the volunteers’ understanding of inclusive application processes as indicated in the surveys.</p>	<p>This recommendation is informed by insights gathered through focus groups and interviews with volunteers and alumni participants.</p> <p>As one mentor noted:</p> <p>“It’s easy for people to complain and not do anything, but I do representations, and I voice my opinion when I can. My department is very good at implementing certain rules and if you recruit on the interview panel make sure you got diverse representations, and it could</p>

			<p>be that some departments just haven't implement it yet because they haven't been told they have to."</p> <p>One of the alumni participants shared their most memorable moments from their participation in the In2research programme:</p> <p>"Memorable moments for me included writing a scoping review. It has just been accepted into a journal. I've also made lots of great connections, and I've stayed on to work at the placement".</p>
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**Table 4. Suggested recommendations at a faculty level**

Theme	Recommendation	Possible actions	Reference
<b>Alignment</b>	<b>Ensuring that In2research is meaningfully connected to the broader faculty-level EDI strategy may help embed the programme within long-term planning and priorities.</b>	Consider engaging senior stakeholders to explore how the programme contributes to faculty EDI aims and priorities.	Stakeholders in the workshops highlighted the potential benefits of aligning the programme more closely with institutional EDI strategies, including proactively allocating resources and exploring potential partnerships, such as inclusion in grant funding applications. EDI is increasingly prevalent in funding applications and the use of cross faculty access programmes would enhance larger research applications such as research hubs and Centres for Doctoral Training or Doctoral Training Partnerships.
<b>Alignment</b>	<b>Mapping In2research outcomes against specific faculty EDI targets may support accountability and help demonstrate the programme's value in achieving measurable change.</b>	Consider working with EDI leads to identify where the programme complements existing KPIs or progress indicators and use this to guide communication and planning.	Mentors and placement hosts during focus groups and interviews spoke about being part of EDI committees, PhD admissions committees, Women and AI etc.
<b>Planning</b>	<b>Strategic planning at faculty level, including targeted finance and resource allocation, may help identify opportunities to grow departmental involvement and strengthen the programme's reach.</b>	There may be benefit in using existing networks to map current departmental participation and identify areas with lower engagement.	Placement stipend costs should be budgeted within the financial planning, and the reliance on single points of contact should be avoided by embedding the overall programme throughout the faculty. To ensure programme resilience, where possible, long-term commitments (> 5 years)

			must be made that also take in to account inflationary changes.
<b>Communication and visibility</b>	<b>Raising the profile of In2research at senior levels can signal its strategic importance and enhance buy-in across faculties.</b>	Consider drafting a short message or briefing for Deans to share with Heads of Department and leadership teams, reinforcing the programme's value and impact.	This recommendation draws from the senior stakeholder workshops. Stakeholders in both sessions emphasised the importance of enhancing communication around the programme and strengthening communication efforts to raise the programme's profile.
<b>Promotion</b>	<b>Showcasing stories and examples of impact from In2research participants, mentors and placement hosts, can support wider engagement and help faculties connect the programme with their own goals.</b>	It might be helpful to partner with comms teams and showcase these in faculty newsletters and webpages.	<p>Alumni participants from the focus group were very positive about the In2research programme, in particular about their supervisor:</p> <p>"I engaged lots with my supervisor, and I worked closely with other people in department... I made good connections; it was quite social being in a lab. I received good support from my supervisor, I was able to work independently but if I had issues, I could always reach out".</p>

## 5. Conclusions

This report has focused on developing a framework to examine system-level impact of the In2research programme, outlining a set of recommendations. The recommendations are relevant to the Principal Investigators and HEI programme managers who are part of interventions similar to programmes like In2research; participating HEIs; funders; and staff volunteers. While the individual experience is important, institutional change at the departmental and wider faculty level is required to shift perceptions, behaviours, and institutional norms around who can access and thrive in postgraduate research. This aligns closely with the aims of the In2research programme to increase volunteer confidence and advocacy, and to broader institutional shifts in culture and policy.

While this evaluation provides valuable insights into the potential for system-level change through the In2research programme, there are limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings and the recommendations. First, the qualitative components of the evaluation were based on a relatively small sample of participants. For the alumni participant focus group, although their perspectives were rich and informative, they may not fully reflect the diversity of experiences across the wider participant cohort.

Similarly, interviews and focus groups with volunteers involved just four individuals (of which only one was a placement host). These volunteers were notably engaged and committed to equality and inclusion, and it is possible that their views may not represent those of all mentors and placement hosts involved in the programme. These qualitative insights are complemented by survey data collected from a broader group of volunteers who have previously taken part in the In2research programme, helping to mitigate this limitation. It is also important to acknowledge that interventions of this nature often attract individuals already invested in equity work, and it is important to avoid placing undue burden or expectations on underrepresented staff to carry the responsibility for engaging with such interventions.

The workshop findings, while extensive and insightful, are also shaped by the composition of attendees. Those who took part were often already involved with or supportive of In2research and broader institutional EDI agendas. This may have introduced a degree of positive bias in the discussion, with less engagement from individuals who are more sceptical or less familiar with the programme.

It is also important to acknowledge the complexity of research culture and institutional change. Cultural change is rarely linear or easily attributable to any single intervention. While this evaluation identifies perceived shifts in attitudes, behaviours, and institutional practices, these are often influenced by a range of external and internal factors beyond the programme itself. As such, recommendations should be viewed as contributing to an ongoing process of change, rather than offering definitive solutions or endpoints.

To fully realise the programme's systemic impact, departments and faculties must take coordinated, deliberate action to embed inclusive practices more deeply, thereby advancing the intended institutional change, such as influencing EDI strategy, funding priorities, and long-term cultural change. The recommendations presented in this report



offer practical pathways to support these goals, helping ensure that the In2research programme continues to positively impact participants from underrepresented backgrounds, and contributes to meaningful, lasting change within and beyond postgraduate research and academic careers.



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