

Professional Doctorates in the UK and Ireland: Trends, Provision and Institutional Strategies

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Graduate Education



**University
Alliance**



Basis for the study and report

Conflicting views on what is happening with Professional Doctorates: CRAC reported identifiable growth in 2016 across English HEIs, yet HEPI suggested in 2020 that enrolments had halved between 2008 and 2018.

UKCGE report of 2022 indicated that growing Professional Doctorate provision was instrumental in growing their PGR population.

The study has examined the current position of Professional Doctorates across the UK and Ireland, offering insight into institutional strategies and rationale behind their provision and growth. It provides an overview of current trends of provision and examines the utility and purpose of professional doctorates against broader national and international policy and government agenda and calls for more flexible approaches to doctoral funding to be inclusive of doctoral pathways beyond the PhD.

Methodology

Survey

160 research degree-awarding institutions across the UK and Ireland were invited to participate in the 2025 survey.

73 responses were received, representing a 46% response rate.

Desk-based

Desk based research was also undertaken to provide a more comprehensive picture at understanding professional doctorate provision.

Results – Research Professional Doctorates

Does your institution offer Research Professional Doctorates?

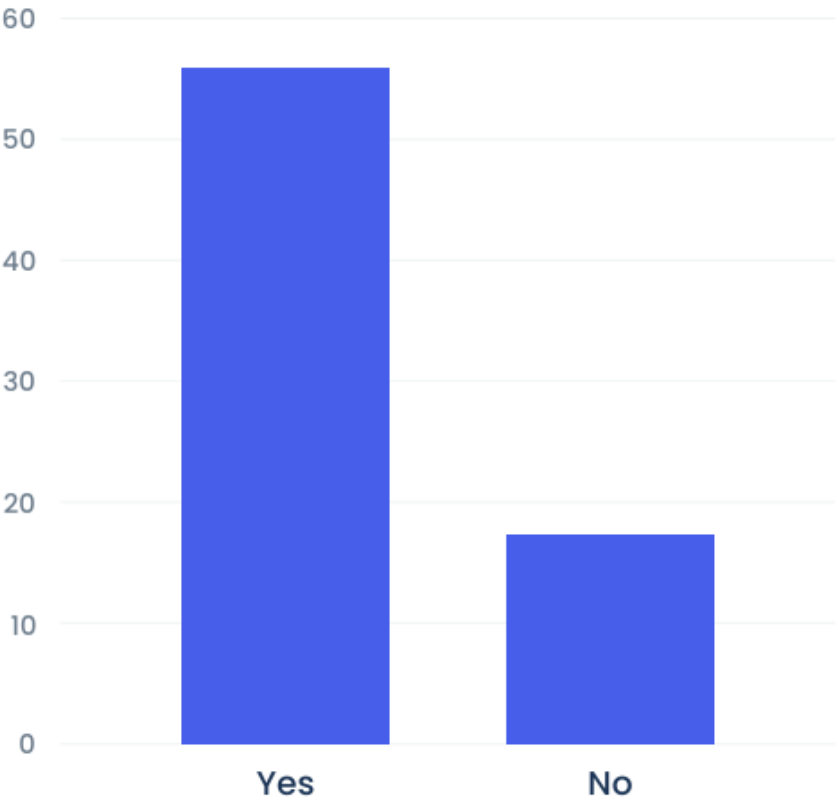


Figure 1 – Does your institution offer Research Professional Doctorates? (n=73)

Pre 1992	16
Post 1992	32
Irish University	3
Irish Technological University	2

Table 5 – Breakdown of responding institutions that offer Research Professional Doctorates by affiliated institution type

Results

UK Institutions		Irish Institutions	
Pre 1992	Post 1992	Irish University	Irish Technological University
46	59	5	2

Table 3 – Breakdown of institutions offering professional doctorates from desk-based research by institution type



**73% of institutions in the UK,
41% of institutions in Ireland
offer professional doctorates.**

Is your institution intending on developing Research Professional Doctorates over the next 5 years?

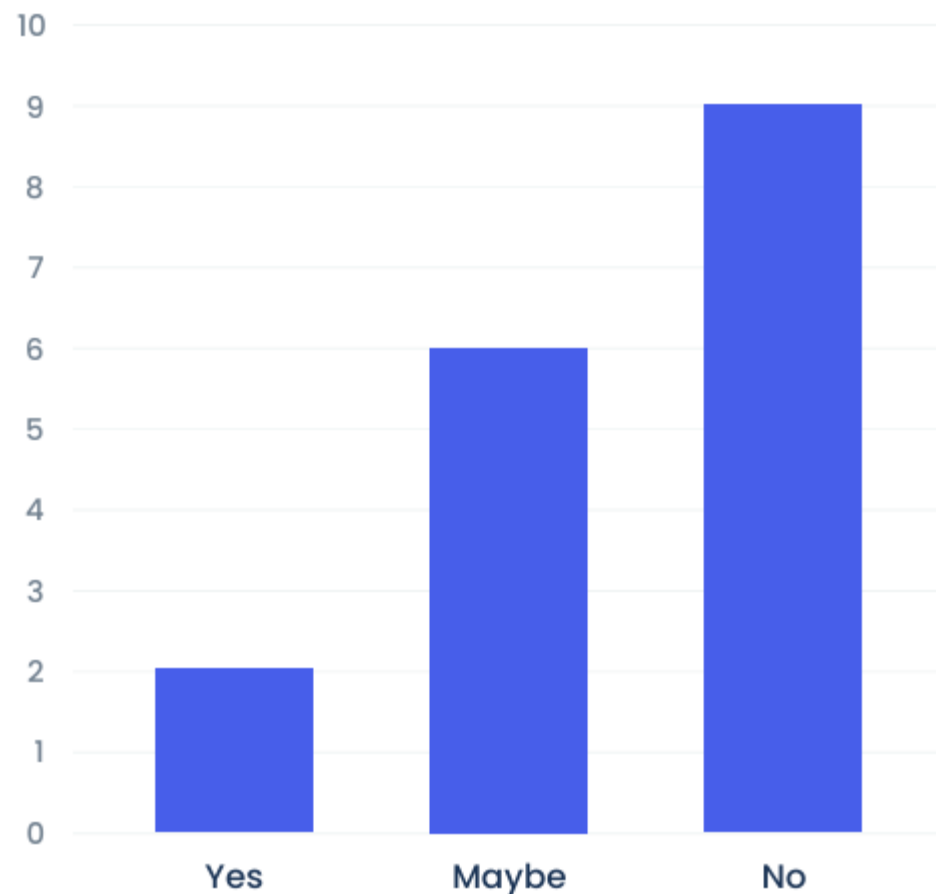


Figure 2 – Is your institution intending on developing Research Professional Doctorates over the next 5 years? (n=17)

Over the last 5 years the number of Research Professional Doctorate programmes have increased, decreased or stayed the same?

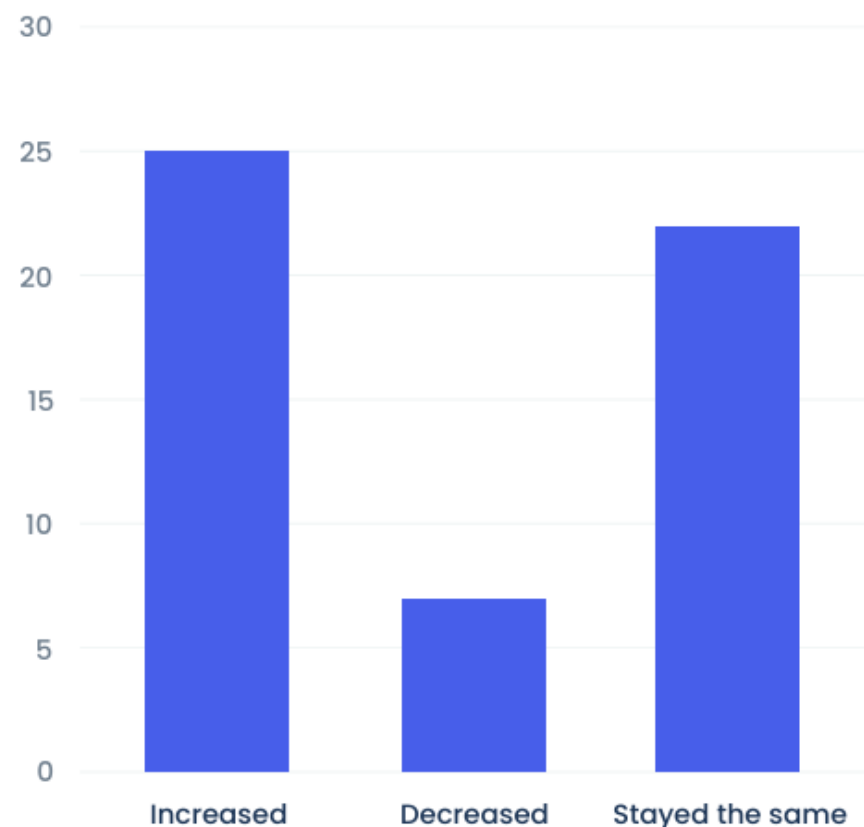


Figure 3 – Over the last 5 years the number of Research Professional Doctorate programmes have increased, decreased or stayed the same? (n=54)

Over the last five years have the number of Research Professional Doctorates Programmes increased, decreased or stayed the same?

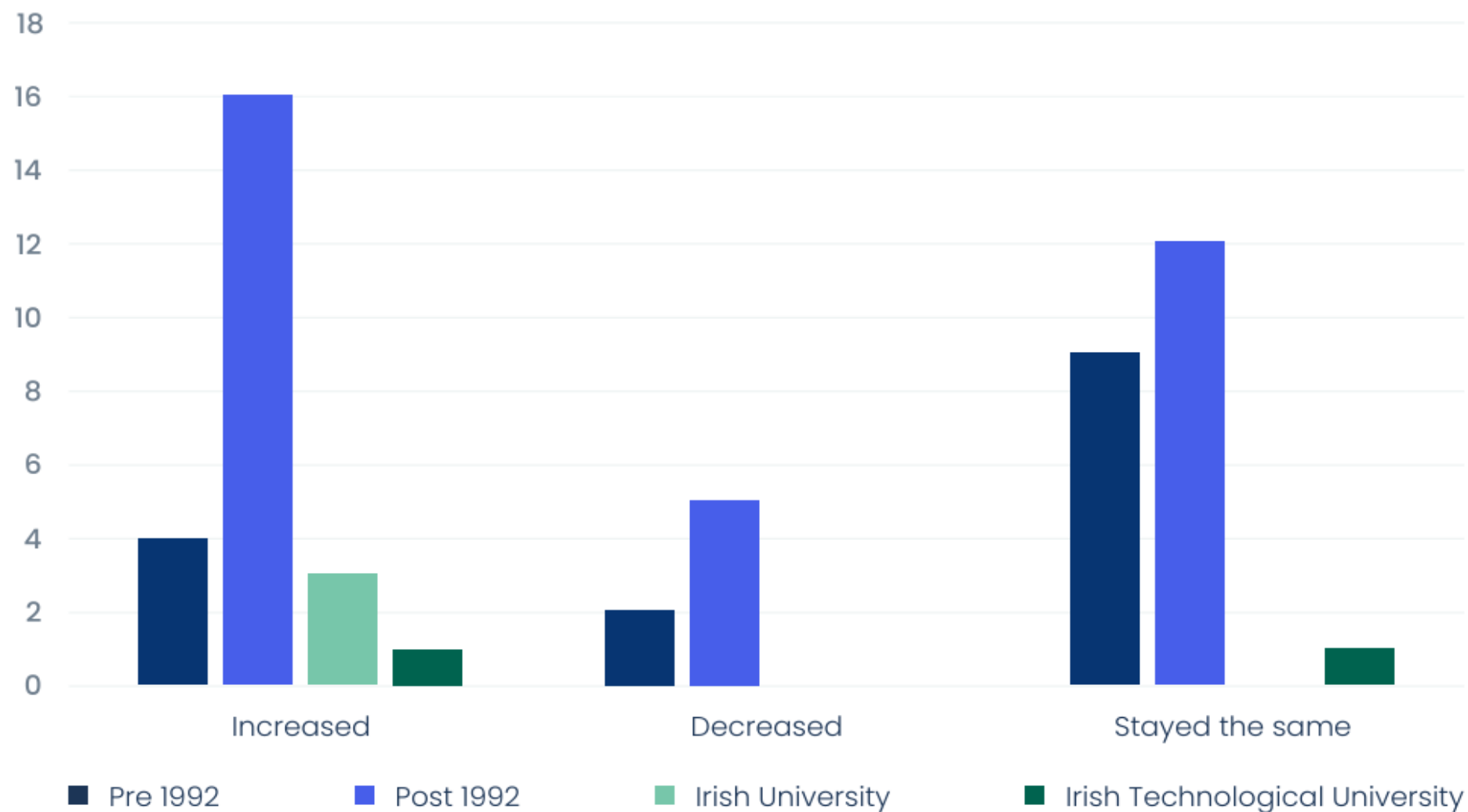


Figure 4 – Over the last five years have the number of Research Professional Doctorates Programmes increased, decreased or stayed the same? (by institution type, n=53)

Over the last five years, have the number of enrolments on Research Professional Doctorates increased, decreased or stayed the same?

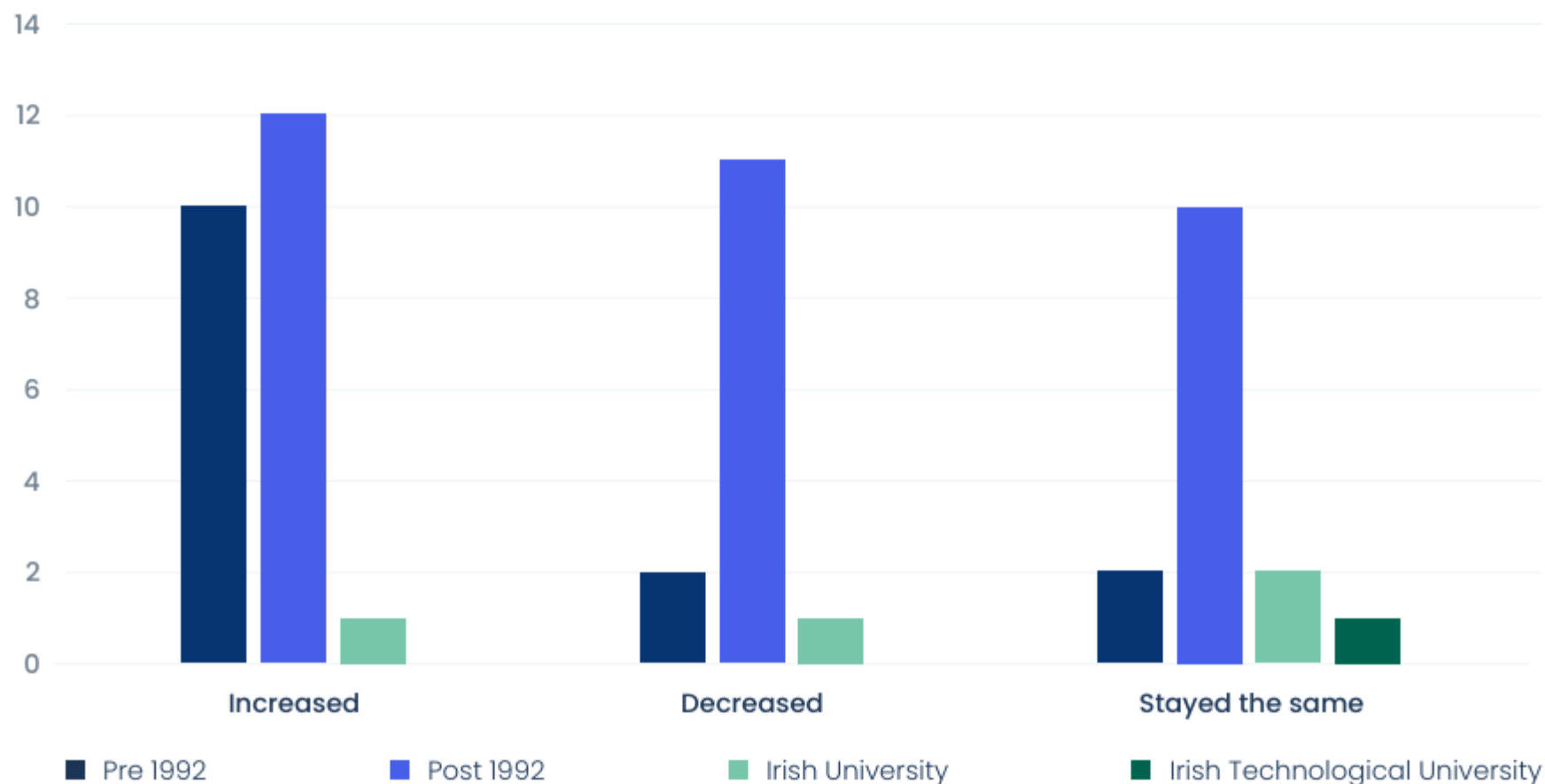


Figure 6 – Over the last five years, have the number of enrolments on Research Professional Doctorates increased, decreased or stayed the same? (by institution type, n=52)

Reasons for considering closing Research Professional Doctorate Programmes



concentrating efforts into other research degree programmes where we know there will be guaranteed funding or indeed a better chance of having them funded externally.

Post 1992 Institution, offers Research Professional Doctorates

It doesn't form part of our wider strategy for research or research degree provision to offer Professional Doctorates, there isn't the appetite to develop them and we would not have the staff capacity to be able to run them.

Irish University

Figure 8 – Reasons for considering closing Research Professional Doctorate Programmes (n=11)

We have undertaken a review of markets and funder preferences and while the demand for part time and distance learning doctorates remain high, funders are still preferring to fund PhDs. We have therefore developed a number of structured PhDs that are perhaps similarly structured as Prof Docs and the same in all but name.

Post 1992 Institution, offers Research Professional Doctorates

Will your institution be developing other doctoral programmes to replace Research Professional Doctorates?

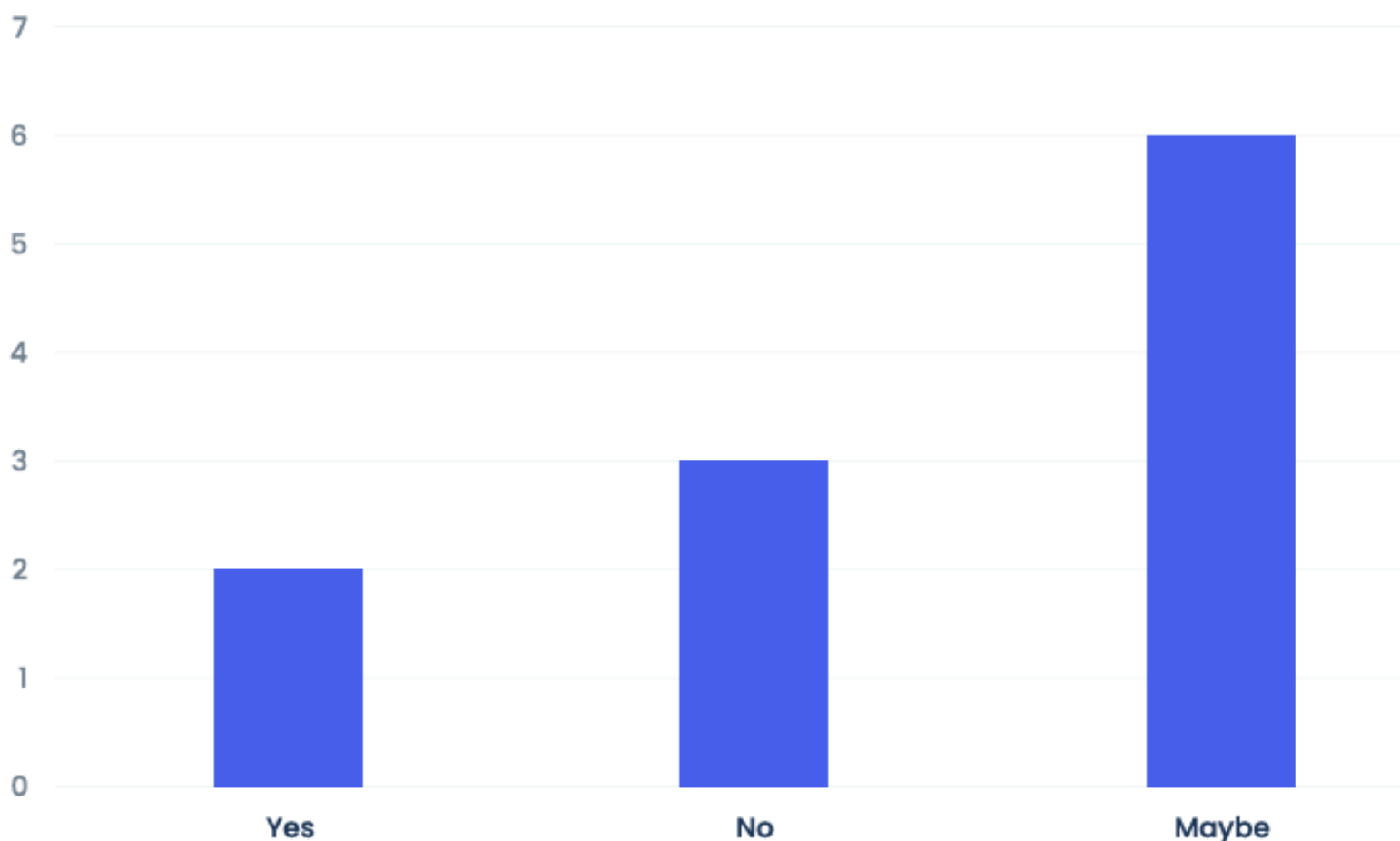


Figure 9 – Will your institution be developing other doctoral programmes to replace Research Professional Doctorates? (n=11)

Is there improved representation from under-represented groups among your professional doctorate cohorts?

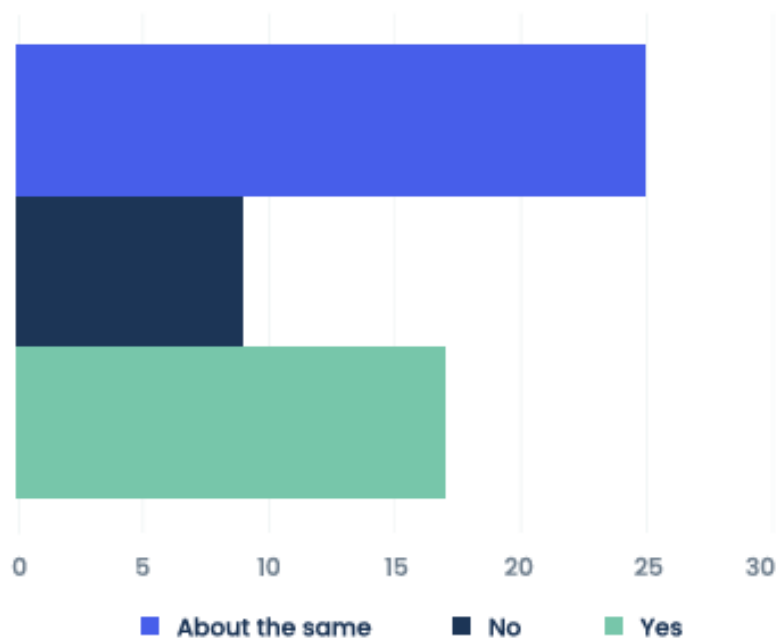
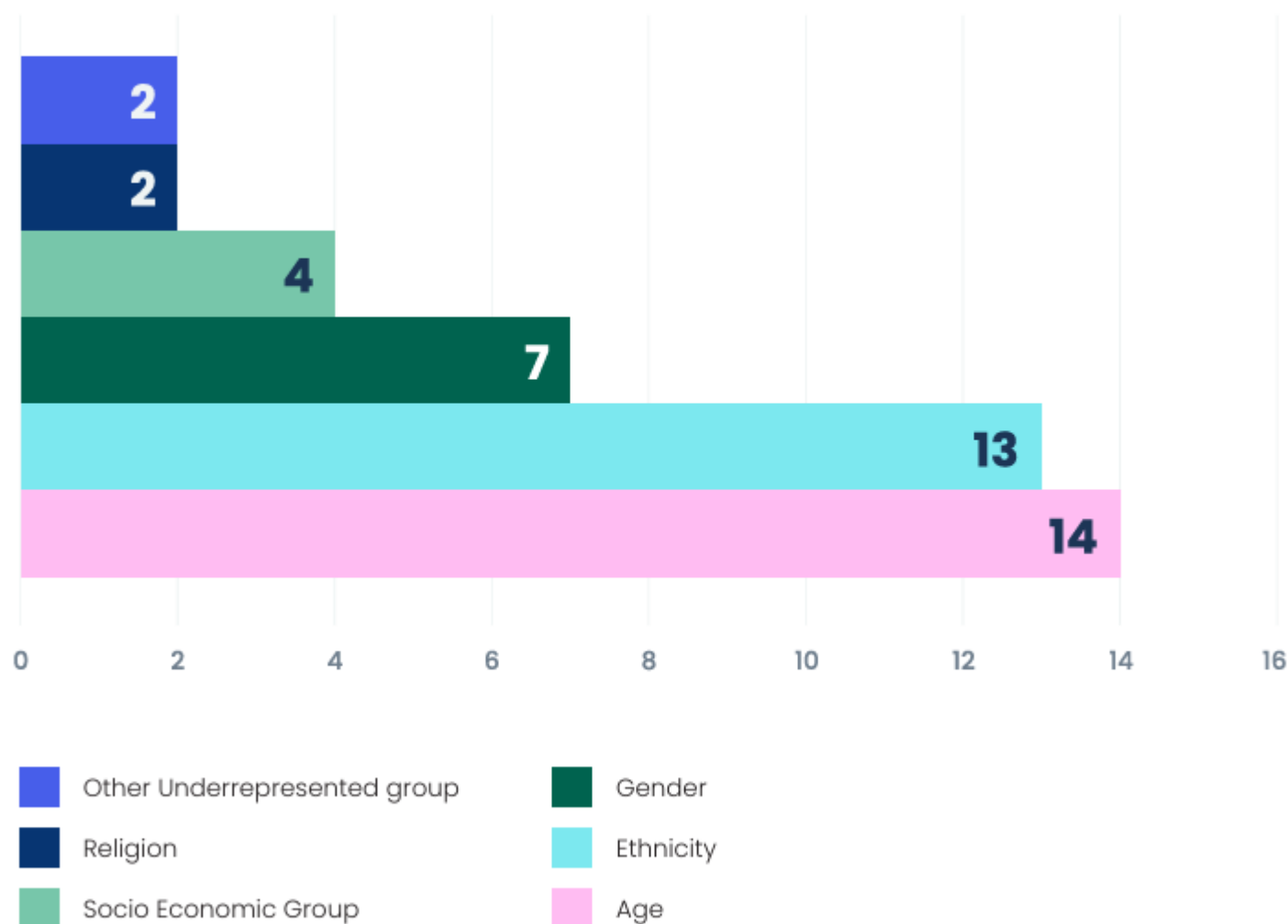


Figure 13 – Is there improved representation from under-represented groups among your professional doctorate cohorts? (n=51)

Institutional responses on how representation from under-represented groups is improved



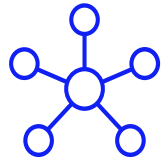
Institutional strategies for offering Professional Doctorates



Increasing PGR numbers



Increasing PGR income



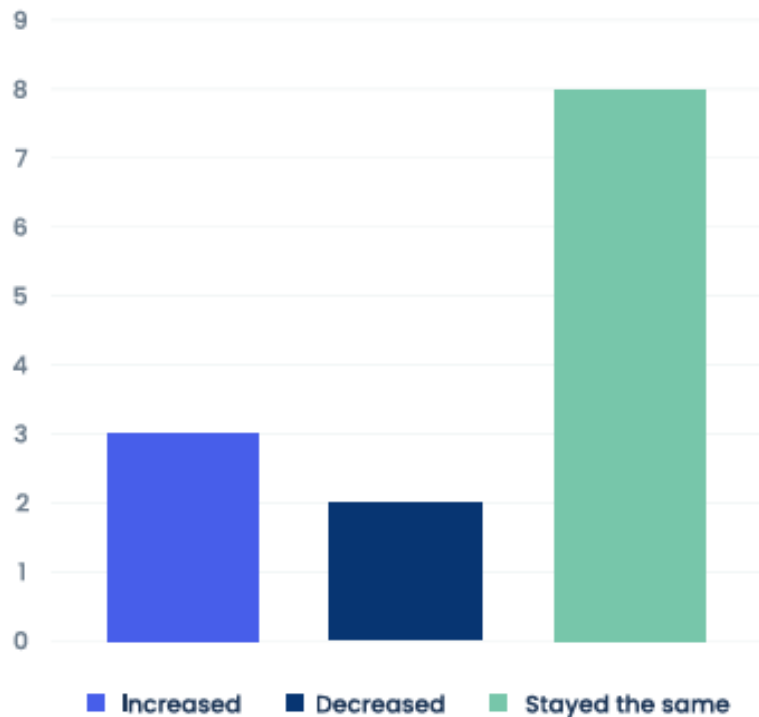
Engagement with collaborative partners



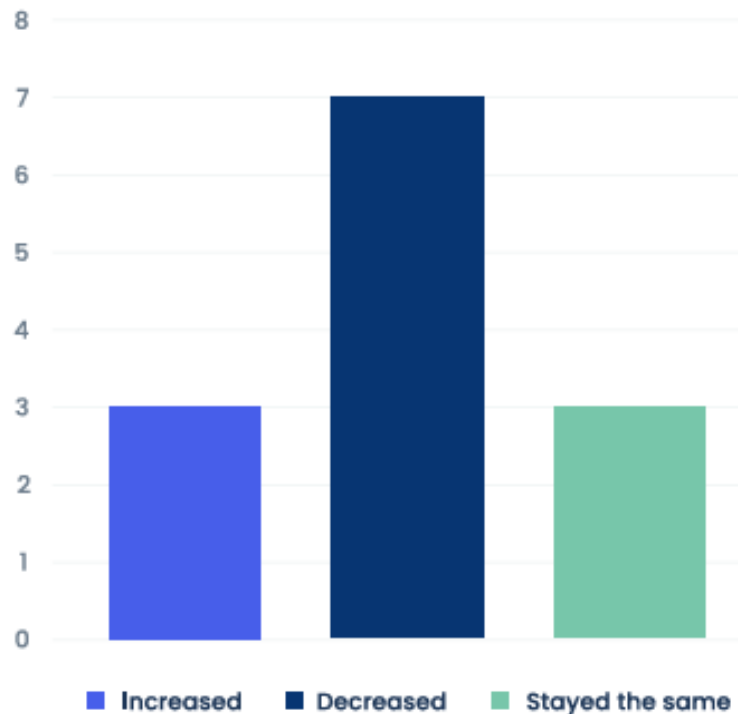
Widening participation at doctoral level

Results – Taught Professional Doctorates

Over the last 5 years have the number of Taught Professional Doctorates Programmes increased, decreased or stayed the same?

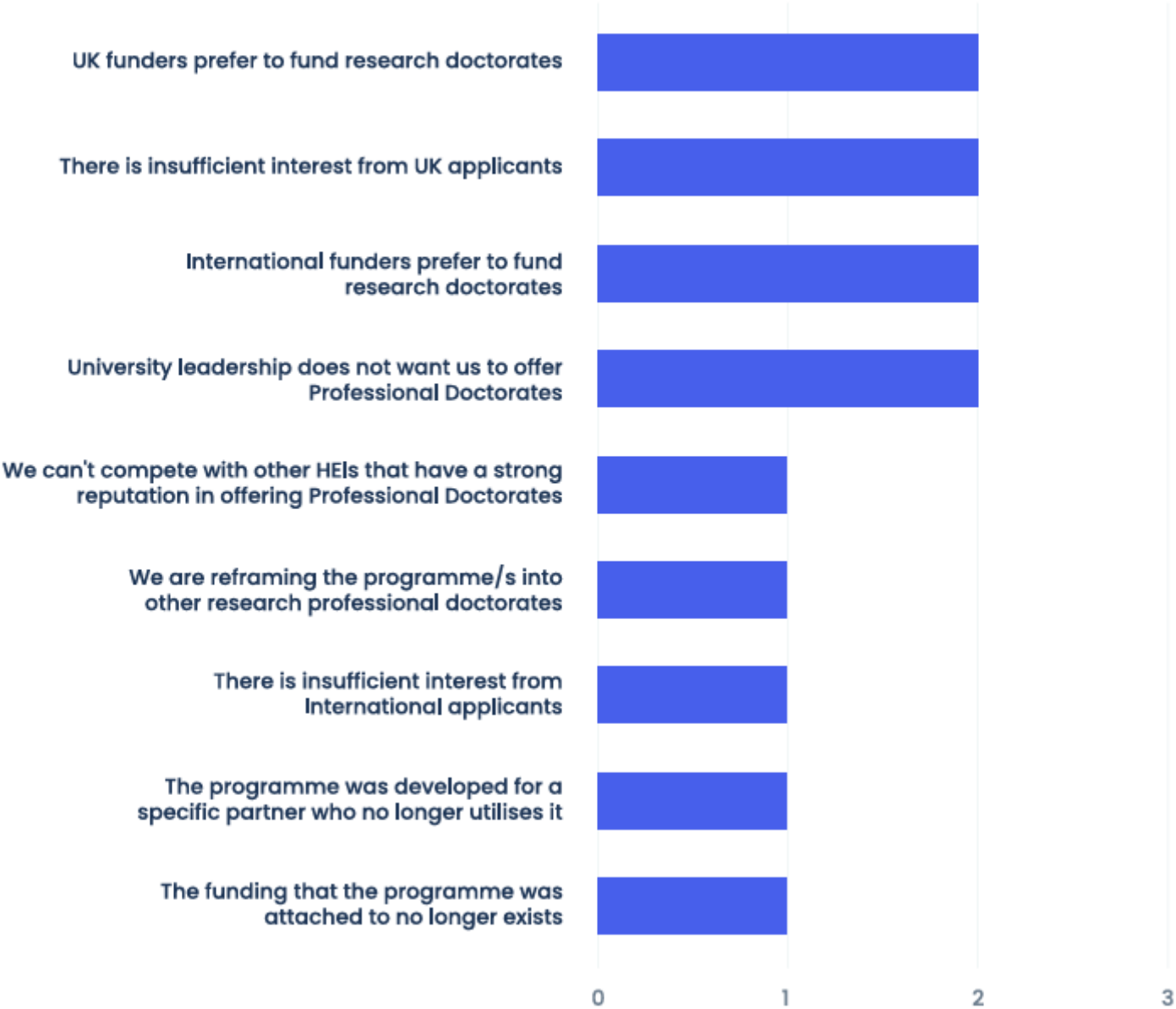


Over the last 5 years have the number of enrolments on Taught Professional Doctorate Programmes increased, decreased or stayed the same?



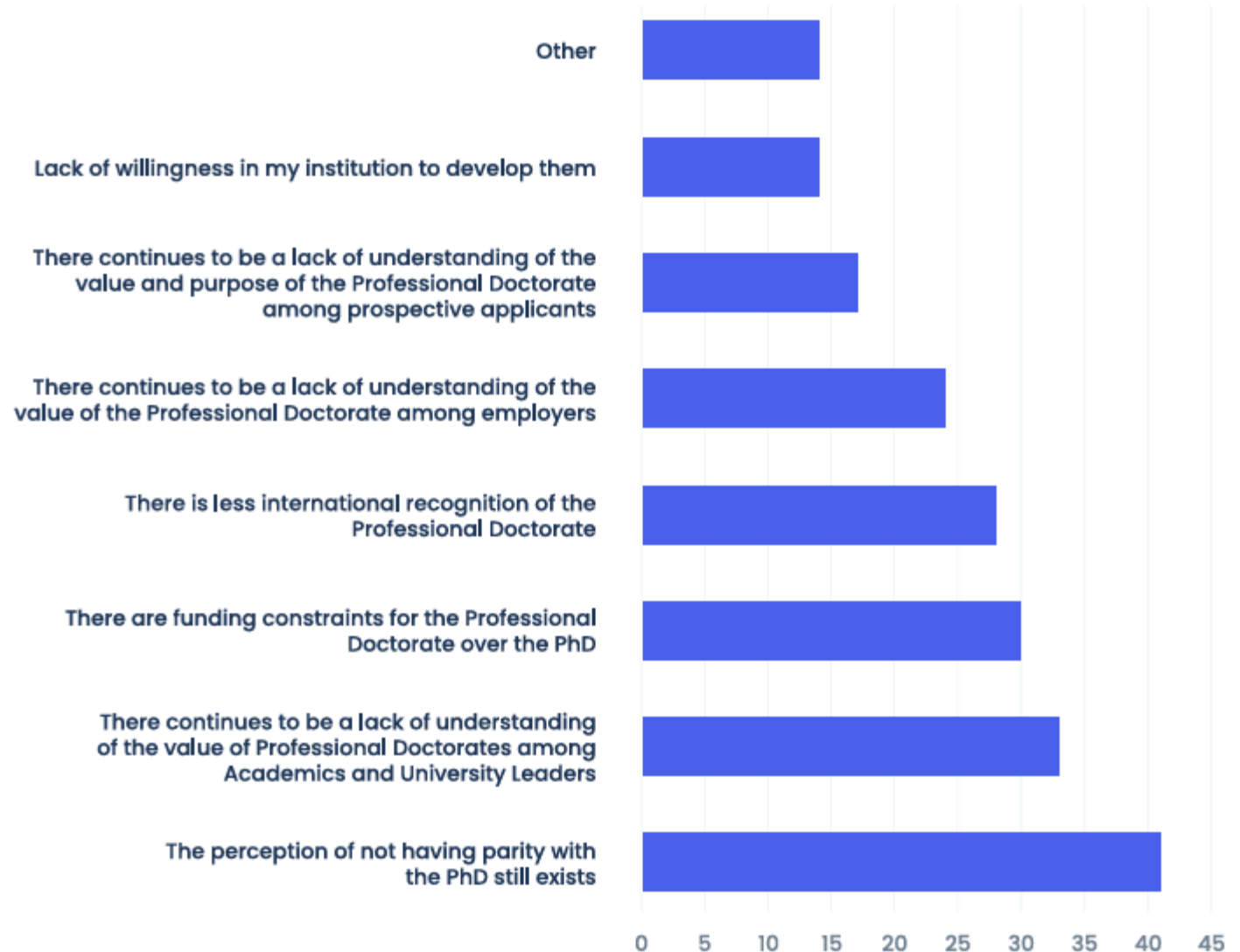
It is not a priority for the University at the moment amidst many other challenges.

Rationale for considering closing Taught Professional Doctorate Programmes



The market is saturated and there is huge variance in quality. University leaders have different understanding of the value compared to academics delivering, particularly in terms of what resourcing is required. It is unclear what the actual value is of a prof doc is (not lack of understanding, many differing views) International market dominated by agencies who over-promise and under-deliver. Post-1992 Institution, offers Research Professional Doctorates

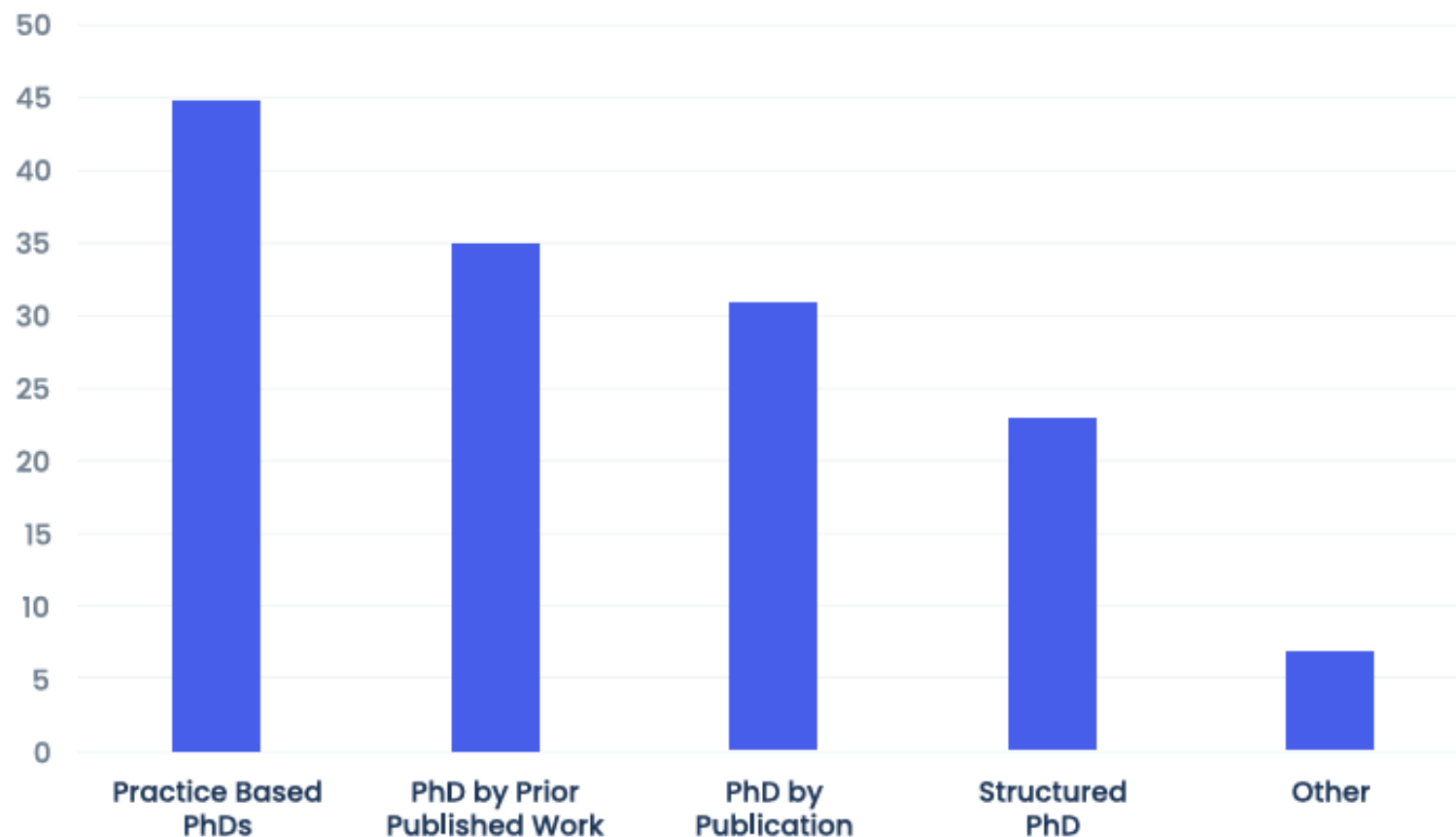
The main challenges in recruiting to and developing Professional Doctorates



All these routes address the established expert knowledge of professionals and/or provide additional structure to enable busy professionals greater opportunity to complete.

Post-1992 Institution

Doctoral programmes considered to be targeted at and attractive to professionals



What do the results tell us?

Position, purpose and place

The current environment is characterised by a degree of strategic “messiness”, with programme development driven as much by marketing considerations as by coherent academic design. Combined with sector-wide financial instability, this creates risks to the sustainability, credibility, and future development of professional doctorates unless clearer strategic direction and shared sector narratives are established.

Plateau of growth in professional doctorate programmes

Longitudinal trend analysis is difficult, but comparison with 2016 data (Mellors-Bourne et al., 2016) which looked at English HEIs only suggests that the number of institutions in England offering professional doctorates has reduced slightly from 86 in 2016 to 84 in 2025. Only two respondents suggested that they would be developing new RPDs over the next five years. The study therefore indicates that there has been a levelling off in the growth of the number of professional doctorate programmes in recent years.

The future of funding

Funding remains a significant unresolved challenge: funding disparities between the professional doctorate and the PhD were ranked third highest of all the challenges in developing and recruiting to professional doctorate programmes.

Professional doctorates or doctorates for professionals: does it matter?

While the professional doctorate has typically been developed to be attractive to mid and senior career professionals, institutions are also exploring whether other doctoral pathways are attractive to professionals.

Institutional approach, strategy and view of the professional doctorate

While it is not possible to draw definitive sector-wide conclusions about trends, the mood suggests a divergent landscape. Institutions with strong, well established RPD brands are thriving, while others, particularly those without a clear position or competitive advantage, are experiencing stagnation or decline.



Many new doctoral models are emerging, from industrial PhDs to practice based PhDs and hybrid pathways, slowly breaking down the idea that the traditional PhD is the only route to a doctorate.

What next for the professional doctorate: future trends?

...the evidence suggests not a decline, but a recalibration.

Professional Doctorates are moving into a phase of selective, strategic growth, shaped by institutional strengths, market positioning, and evolving conceptions of what doctoral education should achieve.

But the future is also dependent on UK & Irish Government policies and strategies and for major funders expanding their criteria to include alternative doctoral pathways

Further work and research

Future work and research to build on the argument of its value should be undertaken with employers and sponsors of professional doctorate candidates and graduates, as well as candidates and graduates themselves, to better understand their current value and impact.



The challenge ahead lies in ensuring that these programmes continue to offer meaningful, research-rich pathways for professionals while navigating the structural pressures that shape doctoral education more broadly.



It is clear that the professional doctorate continues to have a place and purpose in doctoral provision and features strongly as an established programme.

Final thought

In a contemporary policy context where employability, applied research capability and societal impact remain central to national skills agendas, it is increasingly plausible to argue that the professional doctorate is not an alternative or lesser pathway, but for many candidates a doctoral route particularly well suited to professional development in 2026 and beyond.

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