

# British supervisors' conceptions of ideal and successful PhD attributes and their implications for equity in doctoral candidate selection

Bukola Oyinloye & Paul Wakeling  
*Widening Participation in PGR Workshop*  
University of Durham  
Tuesday, 31 March 2026



Yorkshire Consortium for  
Equity in Doctoral Education

# What is YCEDE? today is our last day! :’(

A collaboration between five universities in Yorkshire, 12 UKRI funded Doctoral Training partnerships and Centres for Doctoral Training plus a number of external partners dedicated to equity at doctoral level.

Central to YCEDE is the question of access to doctoral study for graduates from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds.

Funded by OfS, Research England plus partners

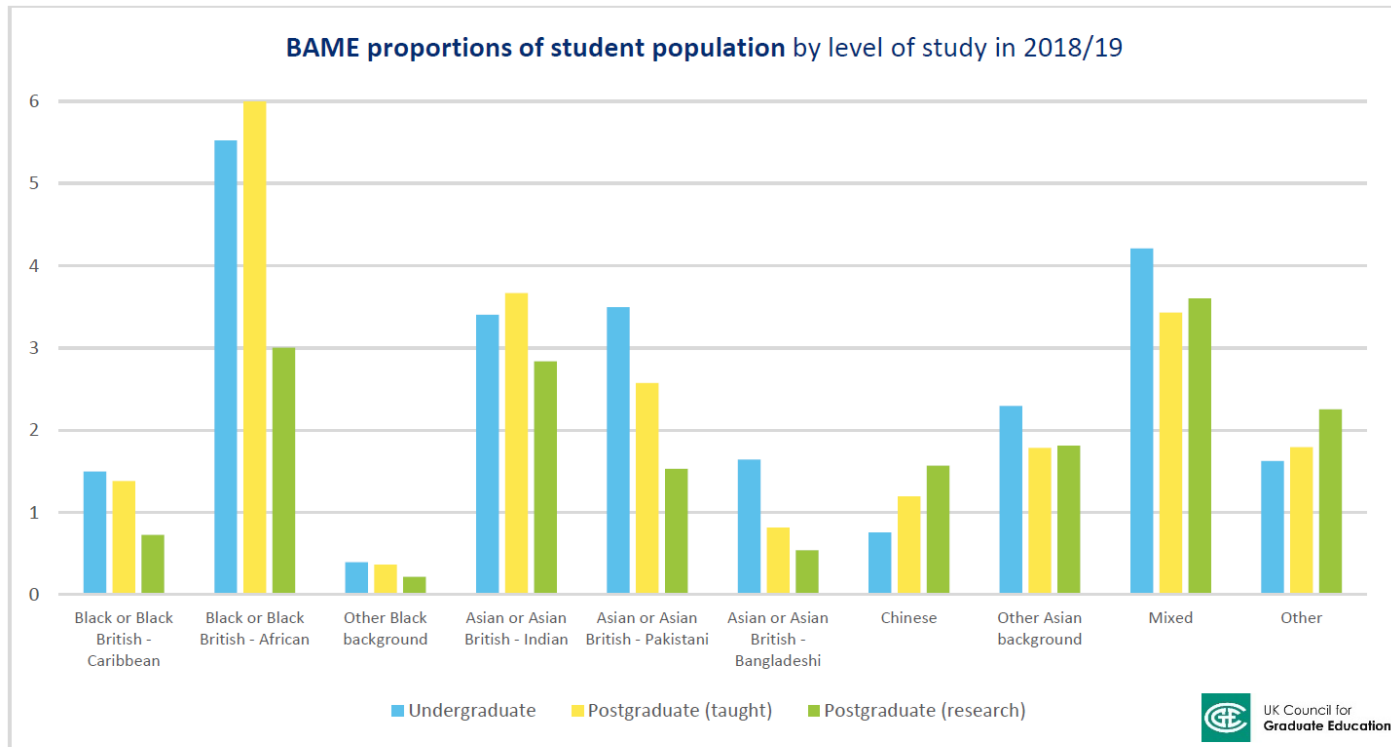


The University  
Of  
Sheffield.

Sheffield  
Hallam  
University

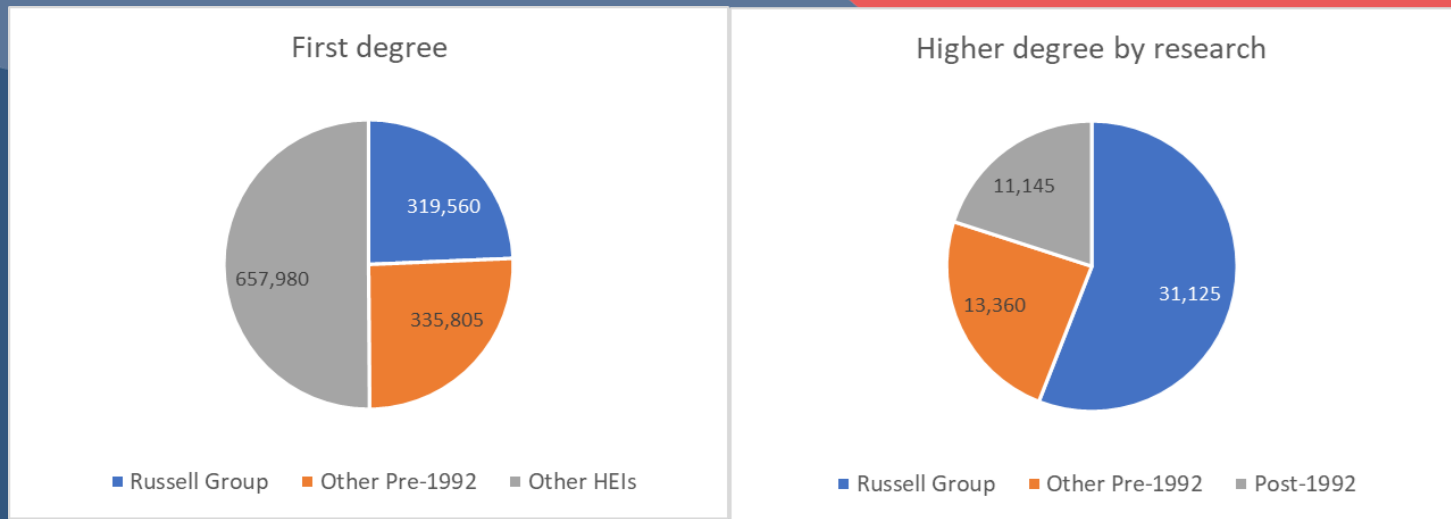


# The problem



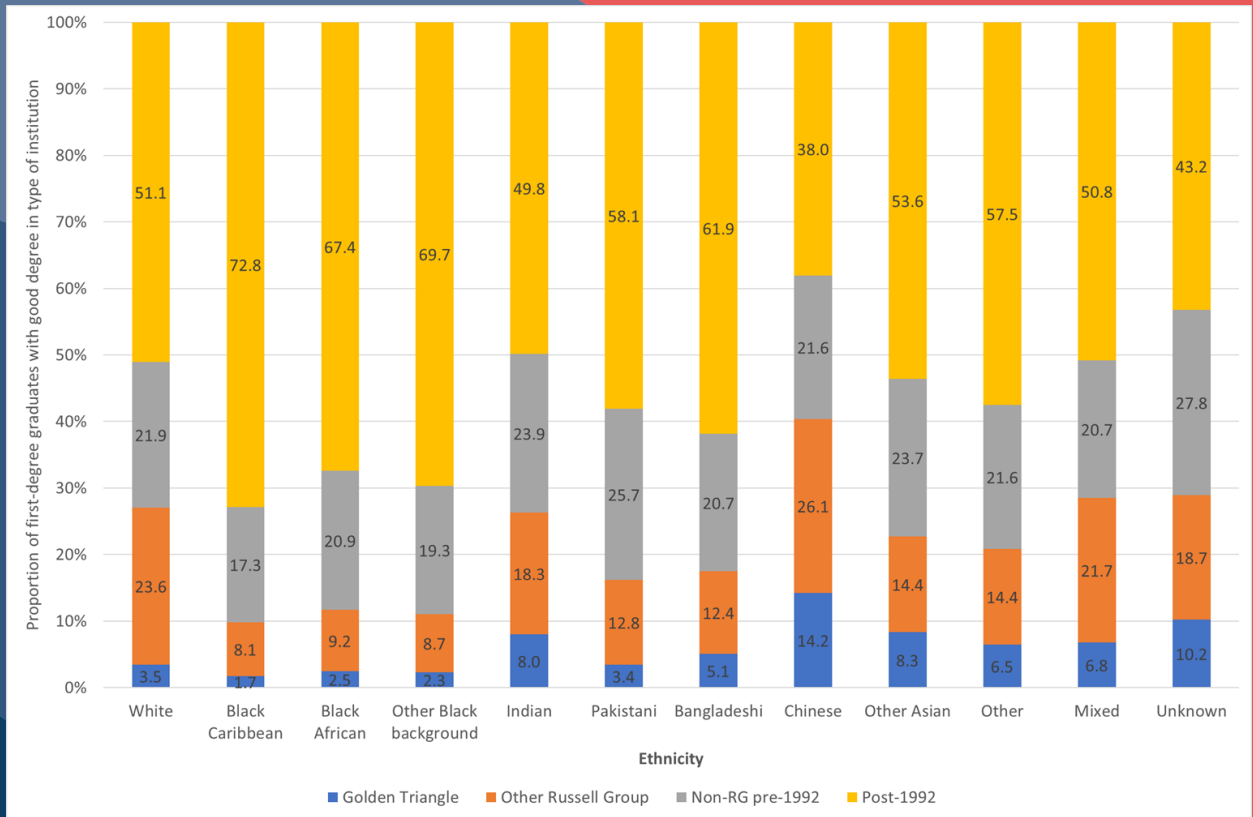
White student enrolments in 2018/19 were 75.19% at undergraduate level and 81.93% of the postgraduate research population, a difference of +6.74%.

# Some existing data: Institutional selectivity



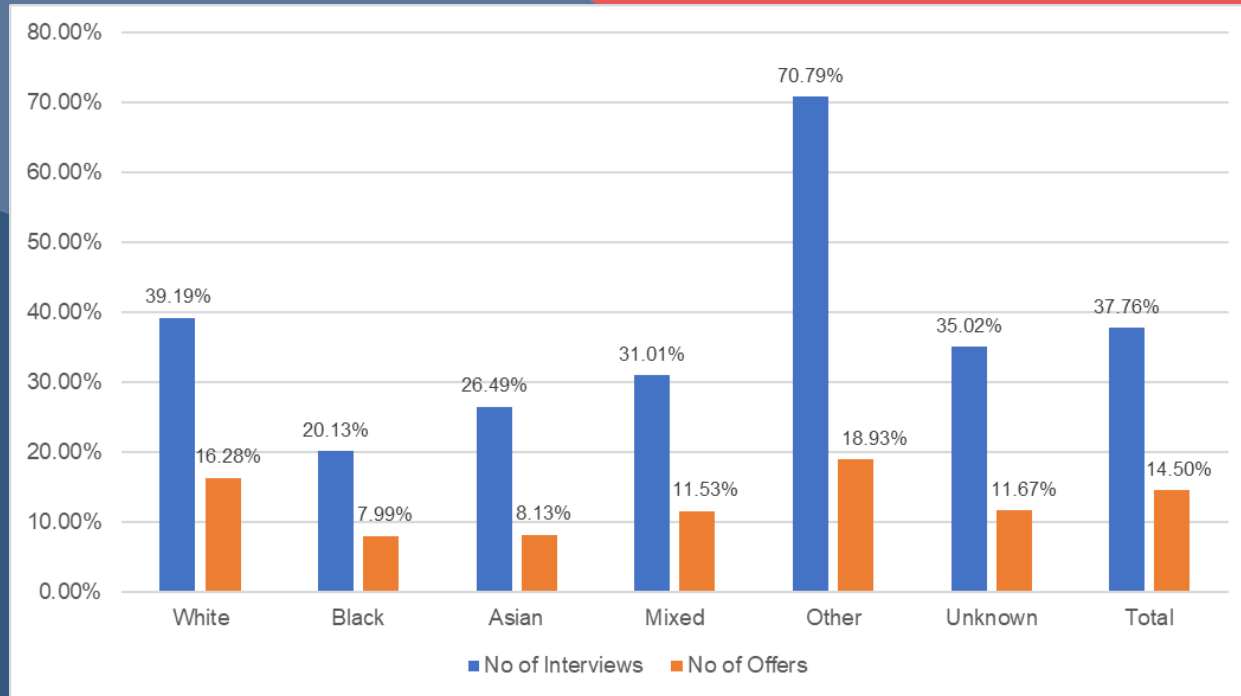
Institutional location of students (UK-domiciled only) by level, 2018/19

# Some existing data: Institutional distributions



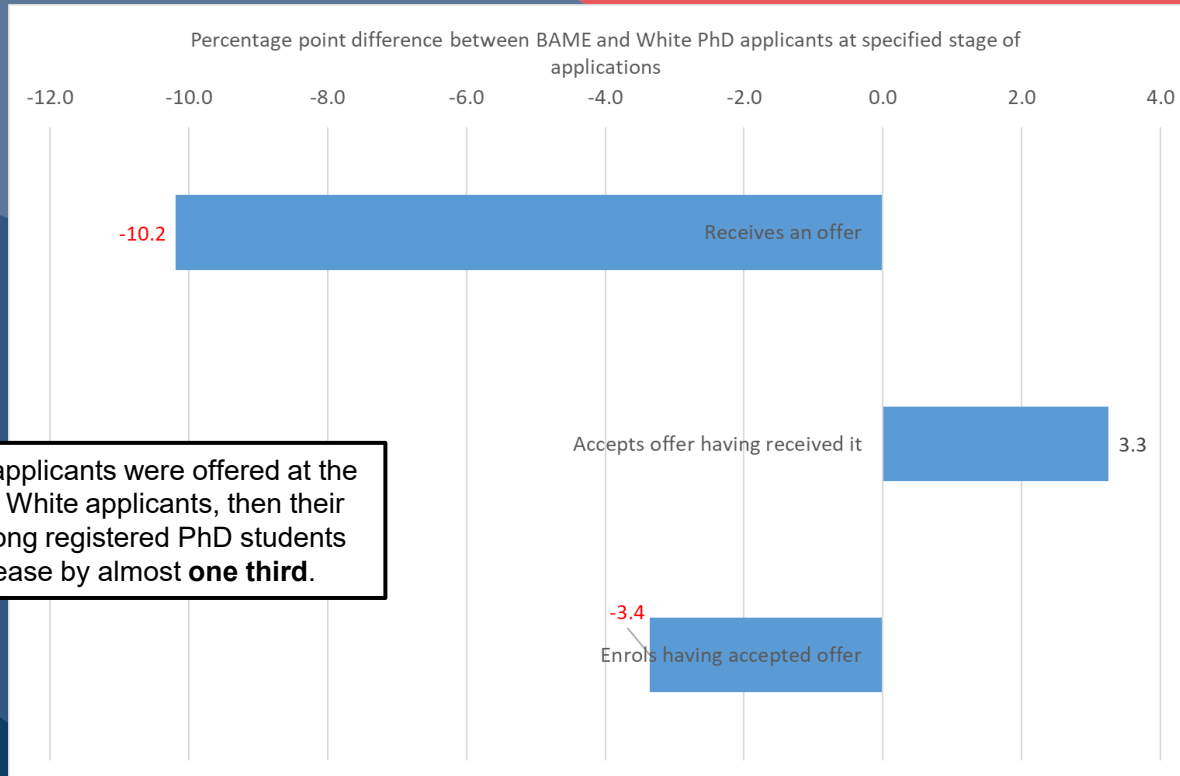
Mission group location of first-degree graduates from selected ethnicities, 2012/13 – 2016/17 (UK-domiciled graduates with ‘good’ degree only)

# Between application and enrolment



Rates of invitation to interview and offers of a place for BBSRC studentships (all BBSRC DTPs combined) (2017/18 – 2019/20) (Source: BBSRC DTPs, thanks to Alice Dias Lopes)

# Focusing on University of York



If minoritised applicants were offered at the same rate as White applicants, then their numbers among registered PhD students would increase by almost **one third**.

Percentage point difference between UK Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic; and White applicants' rate of acceptance at specified admission stages, 2018/19 – 2020/21

# YCEDE objectives

1. Widen opportunities to ensure equity of access to and participation in research.
2. **Change institutional practices and culture to reduce inequality in offer rates.**
3. Ensure experience for PGRs of Colour by developing institutions in which they feel a valued part of the wider scholarly community.
4. Provide evidence base for interventions to share widely across the HE sector and beyond.

# Existing understanding of doctoral selection

- What evidence there is (Mantai and Morone, 2022; Smith McGloin *et al*, 2024) suggests:
  - Heavy emphasis on prior qualifications: grades and status of awarding university
  - Little consideration of broader skills and attributes (general European pattern, but most prominent in the UK)
- More extensive research on US doctoral admissions, showing in-principle commitment to diversity, but negated by
  - Emphasis on ‘pedigree’, ‘polish’ and prior experience where the latter is a matter of opportunity not ability (Posselt, 2016)
  - Hard grade boundaries which automatically exclude the underrepresented (Miller *et al*, 2019)
- “in PhD programs that enrolled and graduated more women and underrepresented minorities than their field, *every single one reformed admissions criteria and practices*” (Posselt, 2020, p. 7, emphasis added)

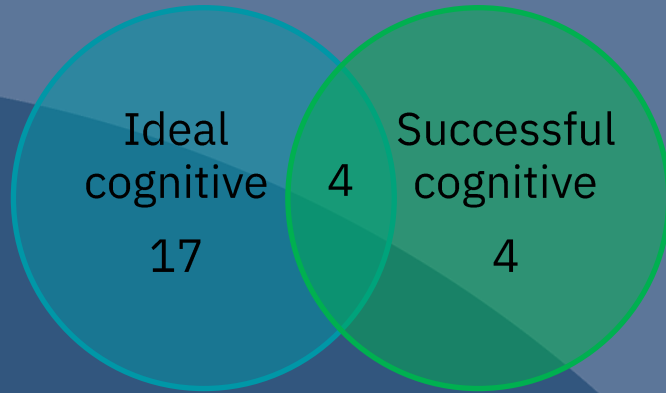
# Method

- Interview study to answer the following RQs:
  1. *What [valued] attributes do supervisors believe contribute to doctoral success, defined as completion?*
  2. *How do supervisors perceive that these contribute to doctoral success?*
- Participant demographics (these findings):
  - Members of pilot departments / schools
  - Eight female, three male
  - 11 interviews, 11 participants, 1 professional staff, 10 academic
  - Five Sciences, three Arts & Humanities, three Social Sciences

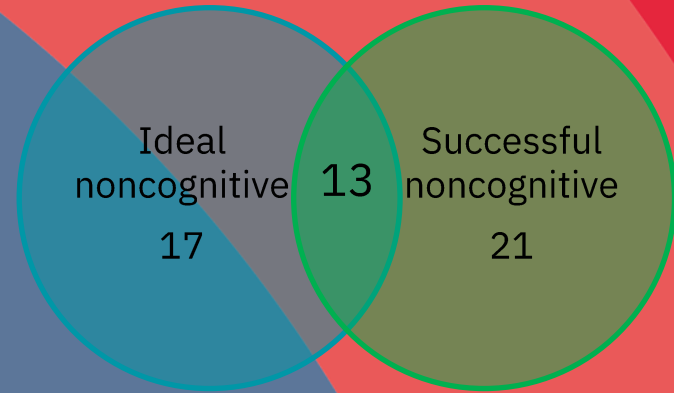
## Method (2)

- Questions around processes and practices of doctoral application, including implications of current processes and practices for equity and diversity
- Asked to distinguished between **ideal** and **successful** attributes
- Thematic and content analysis
  - Four categories: ideal (cognitive); ideal (non-cognitive); successful (cognitive); successful (non-cognitive)
  - Various sub-categories of the Vitae Research Development Framework (RDF) sub-domain
  - Various (59) 'attribute' codes

# Findings – ‘attribute’ codes



**Total # of cognitives: 21**



**Total # of noncognitives: 38**

# Findings – sub-categories (RDF sub-domains) intersect

Cognitive intersects	Noncognitive intersects
<p><b>Creativity (A3)</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1) Makes original systematic contribution</li><li>2) Creativity</li><li>3) Intellectual Independence</li></ol>	<p><b>Personal qualities (B1)</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1) Confidence</li><li>2) Drive / motivation</li><li>3) Enthusiasm / interested in subject / passion</li><li>4) Resilience/ perseverance/ determination / tenacity</li><li>5) Self-direction</li></ol>
<p><b>No RDF sub-domain</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>4) Meets PhD criteria / Produces PhD standard work / meets institutional progress requirements</li></ol>	<p><b>Self-management (B2)</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>6) Commitment (to PhD work) (incl. emotional, intellectual, etc.)</li><li>7) Time management skills</li></ol>
	<p><b>Working with others (D1)</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>8) Colleague-like</li></ol>
	<p><b>Communication and dissemination (D2)</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>9) Effective / good communicator</li></ol>
	<p><b>No RDF sub-domain</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>10) Adaptability / flexibility</li><li>11) Commitment to (active member of) PhD community / contributes to research environment</li><li>12) Enjoys doing and writing up research / flourishes / has organic and enriching PhD journey / personal fulfilment</li><li>13) Hard work</li></ol>

# Findings - themes

- Beyond technical competence
  - Cognitive ‘technical skills’ important, but overwhelming valuing of ‘not just technically competent’ but of diverse personal attributes and motivation t
    - Resilience perceived by nearly all participants as most critical success factor
    - Predominantly non-cognitive (e.g., commitment, enthusiasm, resilience)
- ‘You miss ‘em when they’re gone’
  - Microenvironmental influence through valuing of participation in research communities within and outside institution, and acknowledgement of influence of students’ personal life contexts.
- Ideal attributes typically discussed in relation to students’ experiences, success attributes in relation to completion of the thesis
  - differences often blurry.

*For our interviewees, the ideal or desired PhD student is an active member of their microenvironment. They are communal, building and sustaining positive social relations with others, particularly within the immediate programmatic and departmental setting of the PhD, underlining supervisors' interest in the social dimensions of the PhD (Cornér et al., 2019). They participate in research communities within, and collaborate beyond, the institution. They may face challenging circumstances, but can respond positively to the provision of suitable support. Although they show suitable subject knowledge, and where relevant, technical skills, these aspects form only one part of the picture.*

*(Oyinloye and Wakeling, 2026, p. 51)*



**Anthony Reddie** • 2nd

Professor of Black Theology, University of Oxford

7h •

+ Follow ...

One of the continued intriguing aspects of being a Professor in the [University of Oxford](#) is the knowledge that I would never have been accepted for undergraduate or postgraduate studies if I had applied to study here. It is now a matter of record that when I applied to undertake doctoral studies at the University of Birmingham, my supervisor, Professor John Hull looked at my academic transcript and said that I was 'not promising material' when it came to starting a PhD, given that I only had a 2:2 degree in history. There was also the fact that my degree was in the different subject to the one I wanted to study. I had not done a masters. I planned to go straight from a 2:2 BA to an MPhil and then PhD. But John took the risk. I completed my PhD in 4 years, studying part time, and with 27, soon to be 28 books later, and a string of academic awards to my name, I have proven that what is written down on an academic transcript does not define a person's potential.



# Implications

- Criteria used, especially for shortlisting, not consistent with supervisors' views of what leads to success
  - Valuing what can be measured, rather than measuring what is valued?
- Need to foster and support environments in which more holistic selection processes (Kent & McCarthy, 2016) feature more prominently
- Discussion point: fixing inequality is harder than describing inequality
  - 'Objective' measures simpler, cheaper, shortcut through high volume
  - Distinction between funding decisions and 'mere' offer of a place
  - Appetite for risk in team-based science: PGRs as key part of the research team, and if it goes wrong...
  - The PhD and academic identity: strong views, interpersonal vital for supervision

The background consists of several overlapping, curved, semi-circular shapes. On the left side, there are three shades of blue, ranging from a very dark navy blue at the bottom to a medium blue at the top. On the right side, there are three shades of red, ranging from a light salmon red at the top to a bright, vibrant red at the bottom. The shapes overlap, creating a sense of depth and movement.

**Questions?**

# References

- Kent, J. D., & McCarthy, M. T. (2016). *Holistic review in graduate admissions*. Council of Graduate Schools. [https://cgsnet.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/CGS\\_HolisticReview\\_final\\_web.pdf](https://cgsnet.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/CGS_HolisticReview_final_web.pdf)
- Mantai, L. and Marrone, M. (2022), “Identifying skills, qualifications, and attributes expected to do a PhD”, *Studies in Higher Education*, Vol. 47 No. 11, pp. 2273-2286, doi: 10.1080/03075079.2022.2061444.
- Miller, C.W., Zwickl, B.M., Posselt, J.R., Silvestrini, R.T. and Hodapp, T. (2019), “Typical physics PhD admissions criteria limit access to underrepresented groups but fail to predict doctoral completion”, *Science Advances*, Vol. 5 No. 1, p. eaat7550.
- Oyinloye, B. and Wakeling, P.B.J. (2026), "British supervisors' conceptions of ideal and successful PhD attributes and their implications for equity in doctoral candidate selection". *Studies in Graduate and Postdoctoral Education*, Vol. 17 No. 1 pp. 38–53, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1108/SGPE-11-2023-0105>
- Posselt, J.R. (2016), *Inside Graduate Admissions: Merit, Diversity and Faculty Gatekeeping*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA.
- Posselt, J.R. (2020), “Equity in science: representation, culture and the dynamics of change in higher education”.
- Smith McGloin, R., Russell, L., Gower, O., Sheldon, J. and Khan, B. (2024), *Postgraduate Research Admissions Report*, Equity in Doctoral Education through Partnership and Innovation/Nottingham Trent University, Nottingham, available at: [www.ntu.ac.uk/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0026/2318930/EDEPI-Postgraduate-Researcher-Admissions-Report.pdf](http://www.ntu.ac.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0026/2318930/EDEPI-Postgraduate-Researcher-Admissions-Report.pdf)