EDI AND POSTGRADUATE RESEARCH

Report on the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Review of Postgraduate Research at Middlesex University

15 July 2024

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Executive summary

The Postgraduate Research (PGR) community at Middlesex University is diverse and vibrant. According to 2023 institutional data, it includes 509 postgraduate researchers (PGRs) enrolled in a wide range of programmes, with 63 different nationalities, and its majority being female, part-time, and from the Global Majority and the Global South.

Middlesex University is committed to the development of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) through its policies, strategy and ethos. The University's commitment and range of initiatives are outlined in a [dedicated EDI page on its website](). This EDI Review of PGR at Middlesex aims to extend this commitment to the area of PGRs through a study combining analysis of existing data (institutional and HESA), an anonymous survey, and focus groups conducted independently and confidentially by Advance HE. The aims of this research are to explore the perceptions and experiences of PGRs at Middlesex University in relation to their diversity and protected characteristics, and staff perspectives on EDI considerations in relation to the PGR environment, as well as relevant institutional practices and processes.

Our internal and HESA data shows that:

- The majority of our PGRs are female, with their population being proportionately larger at Middlesex compared to what is observed within the University Alliance and the rest of the UK higher education (HE) sector.

- We have a more ethnically diverse PGR body than the University Alliance group and the wider sector.

- The vast majority of the University's PGRs have no funding (82.2% of the total) compared to 54.1% of University Alliance PGRs and 39.8% of the sector PGRs.

The research for this review shows that:

- The overwhelming majority of PGRs and staff see Middlesex University as a diverse institution in terms of its student make-up. Supervisors are perceived as less diverse. The majority (66.6%) of PGRs are aware of Middlesex's diversity at the point of application and in 20% of the cases it played a role in their decision to apply.

- The lack of support for Global South PGRs is highlighted as a problematic area. This includes tailored financial support, English academic writing skills, and general support for adjustment to university life in the UK.

- Most PGRs feel admission and progression decisions, as well as access to resources and services, are fair.

- Although there are general University policies, there currently is a lack of dedicated policies and processes to embed EDI considerations into PGR.

- The majority of PGRs see the institution as a safe and inclusive environment, but there is no complete clarity on how to report or to deal with (rare) cases of microaggression or discrimination, should they occur.

The recommendations that have emerged from the Review are:

- Provide more support for Global South applicants and PGRs.
- Take targeted actions to encourage PGR community-building in general, and to increase part-time and remote PGRs' feelings of belonging, in specific.
- Standardise, multiply and raise awareness around funding opportunities available to PGRs – both in relation to Postgraduate studentships as well as fieldwork and conference attendance/training support.
- Improve awareness around the various aspects of EDI among staff and PGRs and support supervisors in how to implement EDI in practice.
- Take steps to diversify the supervisory teams and review panels.

All of the above is discussed in more detail in the full report which follows. Overall, the review has highlighted the extent to which PGRs and staff feel that the PGR environment is inclusive and fair. Both groups call for

genuine change, moving away from treating EDI as a 'tick-box' exercise. Instead, what staff and PGRs hope for is real action towards equity, translating into successful experiences and outcomes for all PGRs, regardless of their background and characteristics.

Introduction

In recent years, equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) have become key priorities in the HE sector. Initiatives such as Athena SWAN, the Race Equality Charter or the Stonewall Workplace Equality Index, all of which Middlesex University supports, have signalled a significant shift in the way universities have become more self-reflective and transparent about their own institutional practices. While progress across the sector has been slow, leading to calls for more deliberate action, the commitment to inclusion is more tangible.

Postgraduate research (PGR) has been an area where this commitment to removing barriers has come later than in other areas of higher education, but now a number of initiatives across the UK are explicitly focused on this. UKRI has now embedded strategic EDI objectives in many of its policy documents, most notably its [New Deal for Postgraduate Research](), which calls on institutions to address the challenges faced by racial and ethnic minorities, women (particularly in STEM subjects), neurodivergent and disabled Postgraduate researchers (PGRs), as well as those who are international and have parental and/or caring responsibilities. PGR features prominently in [UKRI's overall EDI strategy](), with a key aim to 'embed equality, diversity and inclusion as a core requirement of our investment in doctoral training, both in terms of recruitment and the environment provided to all funded Postgraduate researchers' ([UKRI, 2023]()).

Across the sector there have been some effective initiatives along these lines. The University of Nottingham, through its Research Academy, has produced an [EDI in PGR Recruitment Guide]() to be used by staff involved in PGR recruitment, highlighting practical suggestions to improve both processes and bias awareness. The [Equity in Doctoral Education through Partnership and Innovation (EDEPI) Initiative](), funded by Research England and the Office for Postgraduate researchers, is a collaboration between Nottingham Trent, Sheffield Hallam and Liverpool John Moores to address inequalities that create barriers to access and participation in PGR. The project, which involved a series of workshops with prospective PGR applicants from minority groups, identified barriers in admission decisions that are heavily weighted towards the applicant's pre-application history, the lack of diversity in supervisors, the reliance on previous awarding institutions to make admission decisions, and the lack of data collection on doctoral applications. Their [competency-based admissions framework]() is

a notable tool for supporting PGR recruitment that is both rigorous and inclusive. Finally, both the University and College Union (UCU) and the UK Council for Graduate Education (UKCGE) have carried out important work outlining the experiences and needs of the PGR population in terms of inclusion and equity.

The EDI review of postgraduate research

In this context, Middlesex University, as an institution committed to improving EDI in all areas of teaching and research, commissioned this review of its practices and processes, which was carried out by a team of internal researchers (Dr Rima Saini and Dr Bianca Stumbitz), led by Nico Pizzolato, in collaboration with Advance HE (in particular Dr Panagiota Sotiropoulou). A wider steering group, including colleagues and PGRs from across the University who are particularly invested in EDI, was consulted twice and contributed to the design of the project.

Middlesex University is a diverse institution and this is reflected in the profile of its staff and PGRs. Its commitment and initiatives in relation to EDI are outlined on a dedicated webpage and are a key aspect of the University's Strategy to 2031. However, there are no specific policies, initiatives or training at Middlesex that address the specificities of EDI issues within PGR, an area with different barriers to undergraduate or master's level of studies. This review arises from the need to begin a journey of self-reflection within the institution, a process of consultation with staff and PGRs, and a plan of incremental change to join the conversation taking place across the sector.

Methodology

This Review was dedicated, in the first instance, to the PGR context within the London Campus. In the future, a similar methodology may be used to investigate the context within our PGR partnerships. As a first step, the PGR population make-up at Middlesex University was compared with that of the University Alliance group as well as with the wider HE sector. The review further included an anonymous survey targeted to staff involved in PGR, and PGRs (n= 132) designed by Dr Nico Pizzolato, Dr Bianca Stumbitz and Dr Rima Saini. Finally, Advance HE (Dr Panagiota Sotiropoulou) was commissioned to conduct four online focus group discussions with staff involved in PGR provisions and PGRs. The focus groups were managed and facilitated solely by Advance HE as an independent, third-party, so as to aid with the protection of the confidentiality and

anonymity of the identities of the individual participants. Specifically, the focus group discussions aimed to shed further light into:

- PGRs' perceptions of and experiences with EDI at Middlesex University;

- Staff perspectives around EDI considerations related to the PGR environment, practices, and processes at Middlesex University.

In terms of our approach to EDI in PGR matters, although the Equality Act 2010 protected characteristics formed our bases, we were aware that we needed to exceed those, should we wanted to get a holistic view of the topic. For this reason, we were open to include issues such as caring responsibilities, work commitments as well as self-funding as issues that intersect with PGR studies to produce differential experiences. We have therefore adopted an intersectional[1] approach to addressing issues of EDI in the PGR community as a key principle that will inform any future action based on this initial review.

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[1] Intersectionality refers to the interconnected nature of social categorisations such as race, class, and gender as they apply to a given individual or group, and the creation of related overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantages (see Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: a black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine. *Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics*, 1, pp. 139–168.

Setting the context – Middlesex PGRs in perspective

According to 2023 institutional data, Middlesex University's London Campus is home to 509 PGRs. This is broadly similar to other post-92 institutions of similar size. However, numbers have fluctuated in recent years, testament to, amongst other, the marked impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and governmental policies related to international student recruitment.

Applications

In regard to PGR applications, the followings trends can be observed:

- In 2023, there was an over-representation of female to male applicants (60.4% to 39.6%). Female applicants have been steadily growing since 2022. There is also a higher proportion of male to female rejections. It is also worth mentioning that we do not have insights regarding non-binary applicants, as there is no relevant data collected.
- The majority of applicants are currently over the age of 30 (71.3%), which largely follows the trend of previous years, except for 2020 when there was an uptick in PGRs aged 21-29.

In regards to PGR applicants' nationality and ethnic profile:

- There has been a decline in the proportion of White British UK-domiciled PGR applicants from 2021 to 2023 (26.2% to 21% of the total PGR cohort). However, they still comprise the largest ethno-national group of the total PGR applicants.
- In 2023, 5% of the PGR applicant cohort identified as East Asian Chinese, an increase compared to the 2.8% in 2022.
- Since 2019, there has been a notable decrease in the proportion of UK Black African applicants (from 7.9% in 2019 to 1% in 2023). It is also worth noting that in 2023 there were no UK British Bangladeshi or Pakistani PGR applicants.

- A quarter of all rejections in 2023 were applicants of Black African (UK or Africa-domiciled) descent.

In regards to PGR applicants' disability profile, in 2023:

- The majority of PGR applicants with a declared disability were White UK-domiciled. 17.6% identified as UK Black Caribbean, and 5.9% as UK Asian Indian.
- 82.4% of those applicants disclosing a disability were over the age of 30, with 60.4% identifying as female.
- The highest proportions of disabled applications came to the Business Studies (33.7%) and Science & Technology (24.8%) faculties.

Current PGRs

As mentioned, in 2023, our London Campus was hosting 509 PGRs, registered in different research degrees, including the PhD, the Professional Doctorates (which are particularly important in Business & Law and Health, Social Care & Education), the PhD and the DProf by Public Works (included in the overall PhD and DProf in the table below), the MA/Msc by Research. The significant importance of professional doctorates (currently making up about one third of our total PGR population) and the growing recruitment in the Doctorates by Public Works is a key characteristic of PGR at MDX.

As mentioned above, Middlesex PGRs' population is highly diverse, both in terms of its UK and international PGRs. Figure 1 below illustrate the different ethnicities and nationalities present in the 2023 PGR cohort.

Figure 1: Middlesex PGRs' domicile at the point of application
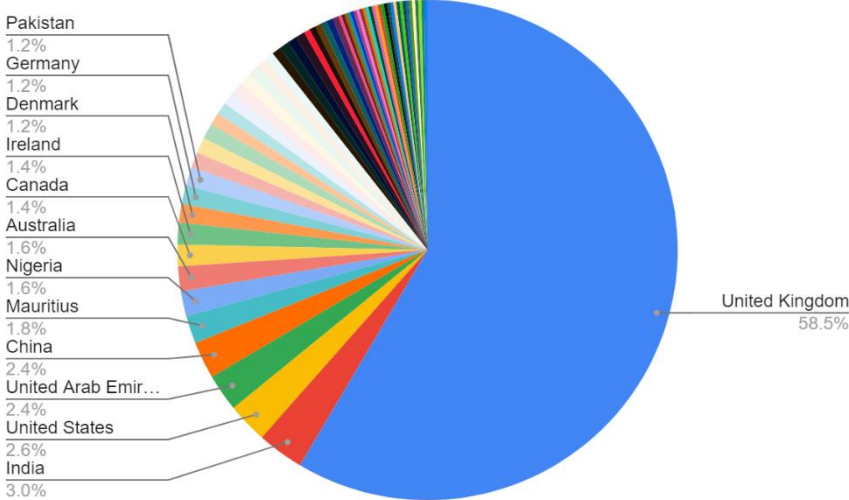
The distribution of PGRs between our different PGR degrees is represented in Figure 2 below:

	MA/MSc by Research	4.6%
	Professional Doctorates	28.5%
	PhD	66.8%
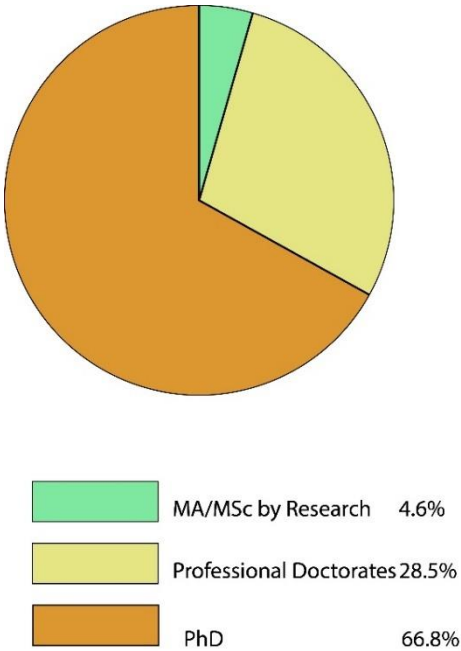
Figure 2: Distribution of PGRs across Middlesex PGR degrees

Figure 3: Ethnic background of Middlesex's UK PGRs
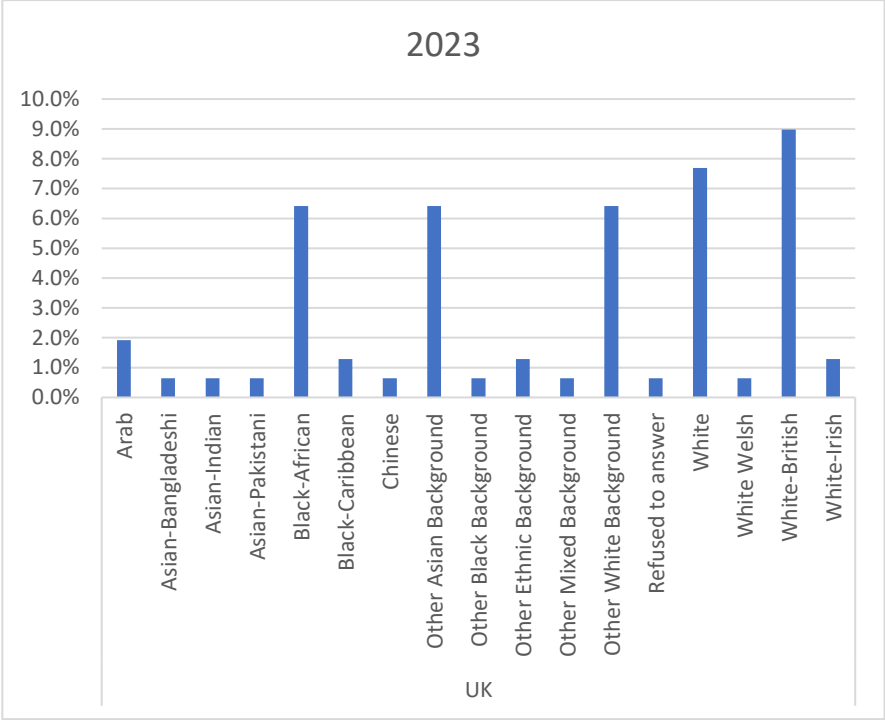
When we look at our current Postgraduate researchers by gender, we notice an upward trend in admission of female applicants (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: Middlesex's current PGR Postgraduate researchers by gender
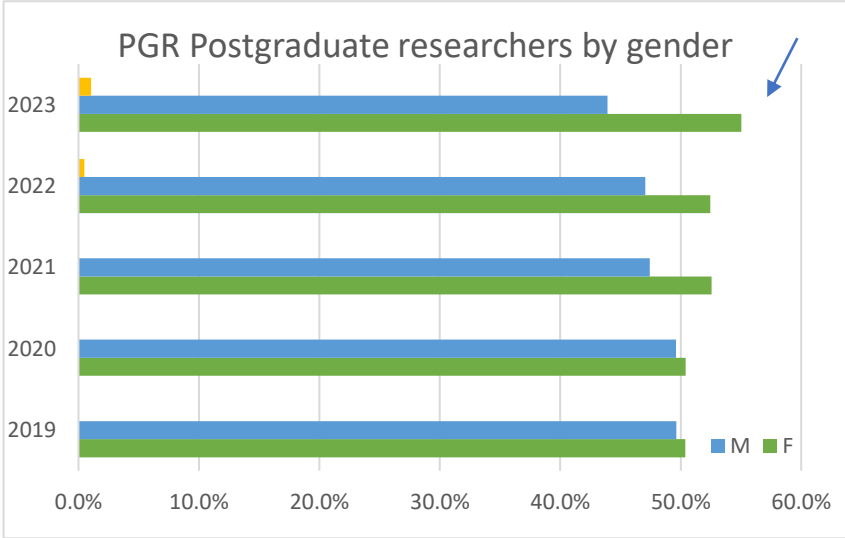
PGR population comparisons between Middlesex University and the wider sector

Important insights can be gained from a comparison of the Middlesex University PGR population make-up with that of the University Alliance group as well as with the wider sector. Table 1 bellow summarises key characteristics of the PGR population across Middlesex, the University Alliance group, and the wider UK sector, using data derived from the 2021/22 HESA student record[2].

Based on the figures presented in Table 1 and figures 5, 6, and 7 below, Middlesex University has:

- **Almost the same average age of PGRs** compared to that of the University Alliance, which is **slightly younger than the sector average**
- **A higher proportion of female PGRs** than the University Alliance group (58.9% versus 53.7% of the total PGR population) and the wider sector (51.3% of the total PGR population).
- **A more ethnically diverse PGR body than the University Alliance group and the wider sector,** with almost one third of its PGRs identifying with one of the ethnicity categories falling under the Black, Asian and minority ethnic grouping, as opposed to a quarter of the University Alliance total PGR population and one fifth of the wider sector's total PGR population. However, in terms of representation of the various minoritised ethnic groups, the pattern is the same between Middlesex and the University Alliance, with Black PGRs forming the majority, followed by Asian and Mixed PGRs, with those identifying as 'Other' forming the smallest group. Conversely, for the sector, the biggest group of minority ethnic Postgraduate researchers is Asian (8.6%), followed by Black, Mixed and those identifying as 'Other' Postgraduate researchers.
- **More PGRs who are non-British nationals, with higher representation from both European Union and international Postgraduate researchers compared to the University Alliance group.** Compared to the sector, Middlesex has a similar proportion of British national PGRs, a slightly higher proportion of Postgraduate researchers from the European Union and a slightly lower proportion of international PGRs.
- **Fewer PGRs declaring a disability (9.2% of the total),** almost six percentage points lower than equivalent proportion of University Alliance PGRs and five percentage points lower than the proportion of the total PGRs in the sector.

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[2] For full details around how each characteristic is measured and a glossary of the terms and acronyms used, please see Appendix 2.

- **Similar proportions of full-time and part-time Postgraduate researchers with those noted in the University Alliance group (majority part-time)**, with slightly lower percentages of Postgraduate researchers in each mode of study. **This is different to the sectoral trend, where the vast majority of PGRs are studying full-time** (75.7% of the total).
- **Its majority PGR population studying STEMM subjects (60.8%), following the sector trend (62.3%), but unlike what happens with the University Alliance PGRs, whose majority are studying SHAPE subjects (55.4%)**.
- **The vast majority of its PGRs having no funding (82.2% of the total) compared to 54.1% of University Alliance PGRs and 39.8% of the sector PGRs in this category**. **It also has much less diverse sources of funding than those found in the University Alliance and the wider sector**.

A more in-depth comparison between Middlesex and the University Alliance group PGRs, including further break-downs by key characteristics can be found in Appendix 2.

Table 1: PGR population overall make-up at Middlesex University, the University Alliance and the UK Sector

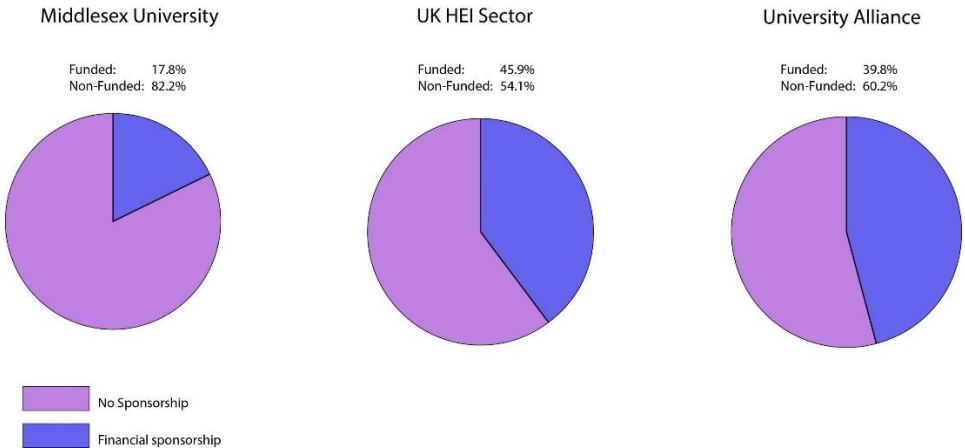|	Middlesex	University Alliance	UK Sector
Age	Average: 41.4 years of age	Average: 41 years of age	Average: 46 years of age
Sex	Female 58.9% Male 41.1%	Female 53.7% Male 46.3%	Female 51.3% Male 48.7%
Ethnicity	White 66.9% Black, Asian and minority ethnic 33.1% (12.7% Black, 11.9% Asian, 4.8% Mixed and 3.8 Other)	White 74.6% Black, Asian and minority ethnic 25.4% (10.4% Black, 8.4% Asian, 4.0% Mixed and 2.7% Other)	White 79.4% Black, Asian and minority ethnic 20.6% (5.0% Black, 8.6% Asian, 4.2% Mixed and 2.7% Other)
Nationality	UK 51.3% European Union 16.8% Non-European Union 31.9%	UK 61.8% European Union 10.9% Non-European Union 27.3%	UK 50.8% European Union 15.1% Non-European Union 34.1%
Disability status	Declared a disability 9.2% No disability declared 90.8%	Declared a disability 15.1% No disability declared 84.9%	Declared a disability 14.1% No disability declared 85.9%
Mode of study	Full-time 33.9% Part-time 66.1%	Full-time 46.9% Part-time 53.1%	Full-time 75.7% Part-time 24.3%
Broad disciplinary area	STEMM 60.8% SHAPE 39.2%	STEMM 44.6% SHAPE 55.4%	STEMM 62.3% SHAPE 37.7%
Source of funding	No award of financial backing 82.2% Other overseas sources 0.4% Provider waiver/award 14.7% UK central government bodies and local authorities 0.2% UK industry/commerce and student's employer 2.5%	No award of financial backing 54.1% Charities and international agencies 0.2% European Commission 0.5% Other overseas sources 1.6% Provider waiver/award 15.8% Research councils and British Academy 1.3% UK central government bodies and local authorities 4.8% UK industry/commerce and student's employer 15.3% UK LEA mandatory/discretionary award 1.9%	No award of financial backing 39.8% Charities and international agencies 2.4% European Commission 0.3% Other overseas sources 6.7% Provider waiver/award 19.6% Research councils and British Academy 13.5% UK central government bodies and local authorities 3.2% UK industry/commerce and student's employer 4.2% UK LEA mandatory/discretionary award 1.0%

Figure 5: Middlesex University's PGRs' study mode in comparative perspective

Middlesex University
FT 33.9%
PT 66.1%

UK HEI Sector
FT 75.7%
PT 24.3%

University Alliance
FT 46.9%
PT 53.1%

■ Full-time
■ Part-time
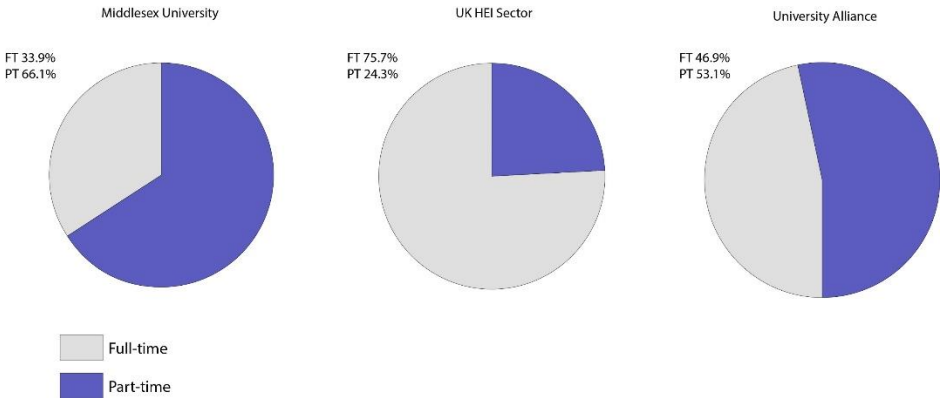
Figure 6: Middlesex University's source of funding for PGRs in comparative perspective

Middlesex University
Funded: 17.8%
Non-Funded: 82.2%

UK HEI Sector
Funded: 45.9%
Non-Funded: 54.1%

University Alliance
Funded: 39.8%
Non-Funded: 60.2%

■ No Sponsorship
■ Financial sponsorship

Figure 7: Middlesex University's BAME PGRs in comparative perspective

Middlesex University
BAME 33.1%
White 66.9%

UK HE Sector
BAME 20.6%
White 79.4%

University Alliance
BAME 25.4%
White 74.6%

■ BAME
■ White

18
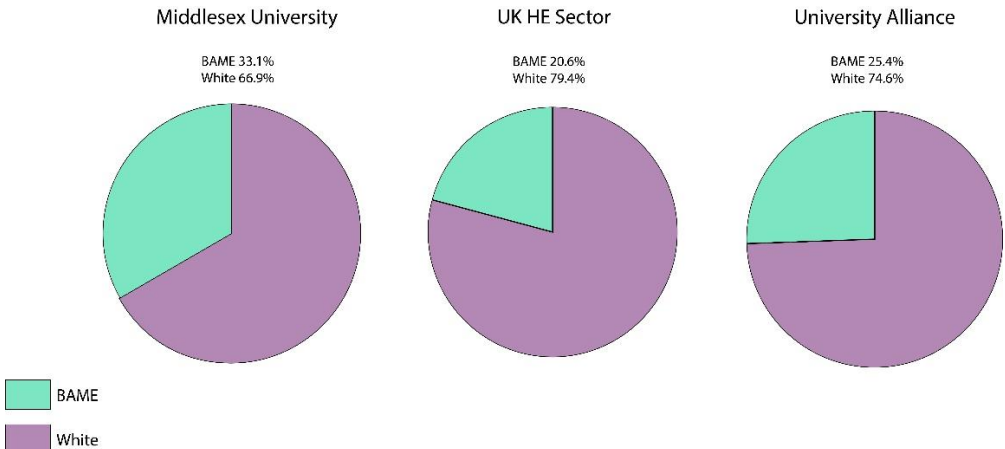
Findings

This section will present key findings from our survey and the focus group discussions with Middlesex staff and PGRs. First, some overarching themes regarding the overall university approach to EDI will be presented to set the scene and present the wider context. Second, findings from the project will be presented to shed light on each of the three distinct stages of the PGR journey: entry, progression and exit.

General perceptions of and experiences with EDI at Middlesex University

Participants were quick to advocate for Middlesex as a diverse institution, particularly in terms of its student composition. Staff in particular mentioned the importance placed on EDI in the institutional strategy, highlighting this as a manifestation of the institutional commitment to EDI, with Middlesex taking EDI *"very seriously"*.

"From a staff point of view, it's become very apparent that EDI is being focussed on and talked about in a lot in different settings. There is a, for example, diversifying leadership programme that's set up. They're talking about the future of the workforce at Middlesex. In the staff strategy and the University strategy, EDI is referred to a lot." **(Professional and support services staff, Participant 4)**

Although the importance placed on EDI from an institutional perspective was a majority perception for staff, PGRs were often unclear, if not sceptical, in terms of what relevant policies and actions the university is taking to progress EDI (see Box 1). In the survey, the majority (58.6%) of staff involved with PGR had indicated that they had not received any specific training in relation to EDI and PGR processes or supervision. Although the majority of respondents (62.1%), even in the absence of training, attempt to mitigate unconscious bias when selecting doctoral candidates, from an institutional point of view, the lack of training remains a blind spot that warrants further attention.

Box 1: PGR student views on EDI at Middlesex University

"From my experience, when I look at the Postgraduate researchers and the staff, there's a lot of diversity. But I'm not 100% sure about the E and the I. I see the diversity but I don't have enough knowledge about how equality and inclusion are being implemented." (PGR student, Participant 9)

"[…] I'm not sure actually what is being done. I mean, obviously I've found out today some of what is being done. But I'm not aware of it as a – how – I'm not aware of what there is in the PGR system, if you like, for being sensitive to EDI and dealing with it. Have PhD supervisors had particular training around this? […] Yeah, I don't really know what's already there so it's hard for me to say, but, yeah […] the whole thing could be more visible in terms of, what are the – where are the policies on this? What training do staff and Postgraduate researchers get around it? Where are the statistics? Is there any data available on the composition of the PGR Postgraduate researchers and trends in that? Are there differential rates of attrition? I suspect people are looking at that somewhere, but I don't know about it – and I'd be interested to know" (PGR student, Participant 16)

Along the same lines, it became clear that some staff were also sceptical about the university's commitment to EDI beyond the narrative level, i.e. what is on paper. The implementation of EDI considerations when it comes to PGRs was often mentioned to be reliant on individual's will, with no concrete systems and or policies embedding the process. Survey findings showed that 30% of staff thought that admission criteria disadvantaged certain type of candidates and only 18.5% were confident that EDI considerations were embedded in admission process. The most problematic area was identified in relation to international PGRs, highlighting specific challenges arising for non-native English language speakers, who were thought to be either rejected for that reason or accepted, but left without support at the right level. Applicants from the Global South were also perceived to be disadvantaged for financial reasons, as the University offers little financial support and, in any case, as presented in the previous section, the great majority of Middlesex's PGRs are self-funded. The entry criteria and standards to be accepted in the programmes were also deemed to be possibly unclear to Global South applicants. Two staff survey respondents suggested that staff lack of cultural competence has turned off applicants in the past. One of them commented, "I think, generally, PGR admission criteria can be somewhat obfuscatory for international students not familiar with the UK system", and another "It is not necessarily the admissions criteria per se, but a lack of cultural awareness,

hence an inability to read culturally situated behaviours or understand cultural nuances".

In the focus group discussions, staff also pictured the University to be reactive rather than proactive in its offerings, with the onus being placed on the PGRs to come forward and request help (see Box 2).

Box 2: Staff views on EDI at Middlesex University

"What I don't see very much is that EDI is made a very specific agenda beyond the broader one that the University supports. I can't see for instance […] processes, etc. I for instance have […] got involved in trying to make sure we've got student representatives on board of studies and various committees. I haven't come across a kind of agenda to make sure they're diverse. I personally do that and make sure there are – or approach or encourage those Postgraduate researchers who have particular protected characteristics to, "Would you be interested in taking up this role? It would be important to have your voice." But I can't see that there are structural systems in place that do that. I feel like it's often individuals' initiatives who are taking care of that." (Academic staff, Participant 2)

"[…] we only expect Postgraduate researchers to come forward by stating they need support. So, we are not really proactive. We are reactive in that way. […] It needs a lot of the Postgraduate researchers being aware of their needs and proactively reaching out to us." (Professional and support services staff, Participant 1)

"So we're finding things out by accident, which is not how it should be. So, sending a form to a student who has some software to help because of having sight problems, then it didn't work because of the tables that are within a Word form. It's not something then that can be read or filled in […] using the audio software that they've got, and trying to recreate to make it helpful. We're being reactive at the moment, which isn't ideal." (Professional and support services staff, Participant 15)

In fact, staff mentioned that the university system and related support available is predominantly built around undergraduate taught students, thus not being particularly responsive to PGRs' needs.

"[…] *it looks like there is not a lot of structure in terms of supporting them* [the PGRs]. […] *When you try to do things for them, you need to go the extra mile to do that for them because there is a lot of support in place for the undergraduates. So, it's like the focus is on the undergraduate.*" (Academic staff, Participant 3)

Some specific examples that were brought up to showcase this point were related to:

- the way that PGRs are required to pay for their study and accommodation fees;

- how fees still have to be paid, even if a PGR has requested a study break (as fee payment cannot be interrupted immediately, depending on the time the break in study is taken);

- lack of clarity among staff about means of monitoring international PGRs' engagement with their studies.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that some staff and PGRs were able to pinpoint specific groups of PGRs as being particularly disadvantaged at Middlesex. These were the following:

- Disabled PGRs (including those with neurodiversity and mental health issues), because of lack of accessibility considerations or relevant academic support, which could further negatively impact these PGRs' mental health;

- International/Global South PGRs (mainly due to lack of tailored academic support - e.g. lack of support to guide PGRs who come from different educational systems on how to most effectively navigate independent studying, how to structure their academic writing, combining critical perspectives and abilities as well as making use of library resources etc. - which might lead to longer study times and thus higher costs of studying);

- PGRs from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (due to up-front payments required, cost of living, lack of available Postgraduate studentships/funding);

- Part-time, remote PGRs, and those based overseas (due to feelings of isolation, difficulties in accessing resources – e.g. inaccessibility of the Society of College, National and University Libraries [SCONUL] by PGRs based overseas);

- Part-time professional doctorate candidates, as they have to pay higher fees than PhD part-time candidates;

- PGRs who are also Middlesex staff members (e.g., due to the added burden of having to manage two separate email accounts and receiving inappropriate email communications).

Finally, it is worth mentioning that an individual participant's comment also pointed out the lower percentage of LGBTQ+ PGRs studying at Middlesex compared to other universities might be perceived as an indicator that this group might

perceive the institution as exclusive, and thus not choose it to pursue their PGR studies.

Entry stage: admission, induction and settling in

In this section we present our results on why PGRs chose Middlesex to undertake their studies, and participants' experiences of the admission process, arrival at the University (including induction and settling-in), as well as developing a sense of belonging.

Why Middlesex? – The role of diversity

Both focus group and survey data showed that the majority (63.6%) of PGR applicants were at least somewhat aware of Middlesex's diversity when submitting their application. 1 in 5 respondents (21%) stated that Middlesex's diversity played a role in their decision to pursue PGR studies at the University. Diversity played a particularly important role for choosing Middlesex for first generation PGRs (36.4%), those from an ethnic minority background (35%), non-UK PGRs (25%), women (25%) and disabled PGRs (20%).

The admission process

The admission process was described as being rather straightforward and inclusive by focus group participants, particularly by PGRs who had applied in multiple institutions and could offer a comparative perspective. The support type most frequently-mentioned as helpful and inclusive, particularly by PGRs, was the pre-admission support and communications they received from their supervisors. Specifically, online meetings to get to know each other better as well as feedback on their draft proposals were the two types of pre-admission support that, PGRs emphasised as bolstering their confidence and making them feel that Middlesex staff really cared about them and wanted to assist them to pursue their PGR studies (see Box 3). The interview process was also identified as being inclusive and reassuring. Things like arranging for interviews to take place online, and taking into consideration time differences for applicants based abroad when organising those, were some of the good practices mentioned. Staff responses in the survey pointed to the fact that, while the process might be equitable, EDI considerations were not explicitly embedded or designed into the admission processes (only 18.5% felt confident that EDI was embedded in the admission process).

"So, I was still in [country of origin] *at the time and I was shocked that* [my identified supervisors] *wanted to talk to me first. I was like, 'I thought it was going to be just paperwork and you're in and you're out'. […] They wanted to get to know me first, which was the weirdest thing because I've never had a single professor throughout my studies […] who wanted to talk to me. I was like, 'OK, this is like someone actually cares'. […] I gave them my first proposal. They were like, 'This is great. Let me help you make it better'. I almost started crying! I was like, 'You care about me? This is great!'."* (PGR student, Participant 8)

"One thing that was very positive for me after I'd done the open evening on Zoom and then had another Zoom with two professors – who are White, it was fine – they were very keen for me to be involved, and immediately put me in touch with the Student Voice leader, who I could tell was Black from their email. But they didn't say that. Then I arranged to meet the leader for coffee prior to my application, even. The professors were very keen to bring me on board and make me feel welcome by introducing me to this Student Voice leader. Through that coffee, we ended up spending two hours speaking about the process, about how we felt about it. I was sold and signed up [to do a PhD in Middlesex] *immediately."* (PGR student, Participant 7)

Despite the overall positivity surrounding the admission process, it is worth highlighting some instances deviating from this norm. For example, survey participants mentioned lack of understanding of admission processes and procedures for Global majority applicants as a factor creating inequitable application experiences. Moreover, during the focus group discussions, there was one staff member, who implied that there might be some applicants who skip the interview process, despite the fact that interviews are an institutional mandate (See Box 4). Finally, a PGR participant specifically mentioned how they found out about some exclusionary 'screening' practices in relation to how international applications are managed, when interacting with their country's regional office to finalise their admission process (see Box 4).

Box 4: Inconsistencies and inequitable practices in admission processes

"It's interesting from my point of view because of being a PhD student many years ago. I was interviewed because it was a university-funded one, whereas here it's – if we have self-funded PhDs it may be purely that we've had a very talented, good master's student. We've invited them to potentially be a PhD researcher." (Professional and support services staff, Participant 4)

"After I got my unconditional offer from the University, they directed me to […] go through the regional office in my country to do the rest of the formal process. When I reached out to my regional office, they mentioned that the University is not accepting any applications from

my particular state in my country. Well, they mentioned three states, and my state was one of the states that the University was not accepting applications from. It created a lot of anxiety for me because […] they told me that they can't proceed […], even though I have an unconditional offer. Then I had to talk to the research degrees admin team and then they mentioned that they had made an exception just for me because I'm an alumna. […] It's very unfair for other Postgraduate researchers who are from those states that […] the University was not accepting applications. The reason they gave for that is […] that […] the Home Office might not give a student visa […] for Postgraduate researchers from these states, which was […] a very insufficient detail. It is not up to the University to decide whether the student will get visa or not." (PGR student, Participant 9)

Induction and settling in

Induction was also described as an overall positive stage by participants, particularly during the focus group discussions. The presence of existing PGRs at various stages of their journey as well as staff, and the provision of hybrid offerings were some of the elements raised to reflect why induction was perceived as inclusive.

"The induction was good. They organised an induction where they brought in Postgraduate researchers that are at different stages of their PhD to meet us that are new. […] They invited a wide variety of staff members plus my supervisors. […] That made me feel more comfortable and that made me feel, 'OK, yes, they really value me as a student and they value my journey that I'm about to embark on'." (PGR student, Participant 6)

In general, induction seemed to consolidate feelings of inclusion, due to the increased visibility of diversity in the surroundings of the relevant sessions as well as the adaption of inclusive practices, such as the offering of descriptive inductions to enable the inclusion of PGRs with visual impairments.

In terms of supporting settling-in mechanisms, participants raised the PGR student diversity and the PGR communities as relevant examples. More than half of (54%) of the student survey respondents agreed[3] that the diversity of Middlesex impacted positively on their desire to stay at the University. This particularly applied to PGRs from a Black or Black British background (75%), first-generation PGRs (62%), and disabled PGRs (60%). Similarly, 57% agreed that student groups, networks and societies at Middlesex are diverse. However,

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[3] Unless otherwise specified, we have combined 'strongly agree' and 'agree' responses to agree and 'strongly disagree' and 'disagree' to disagree throughout this section for better readability.

while just over half (51%) of student respondents agreed that they felt represented within events and activities organised for PGRs, those that were most likely to disagree were Black or Black British PGRs (29%), first generation (19%), neurodivergent (17%) and non-UK PGRs (15%).

In the focus groups, PGR communities, whether these were relevant societies in the Student Union or social media groups set up at a School/department/or wider level, were considered to be supportive spaces, nurturing feelings of belonging and cohesion. Similarly, PGR offices and gatherings in places beyond the campus were identified as good practices, as they provided well-needed opportunities for socialisation and networking, but also for academic conversations. Buddying opportunities were also mentioned as a useful mechanism to nurture PGR student inclusion and belonging, mitigating things like the lack of diversity in supervisory teams or the inaccessibility of library resources (see Box 5). However, peer support of this kind was only available as an informal initiative, as there were no structured mechanisms in place to ensure that all new PGRs are matched to senior peers who could support them.

Box 5: The importance of informal networking, and buddying opportunities

"I think my colleagues – in fact Participant 10 and I, we go to the same PhD office – and I would say that my peers, they're very supportive. We can talk about certain common issues that we're facing. Or it doesn't have to be just negative talk. It's also positive. We share about any events or workshops that are happening. We invite each other to networking events or to go out to have food, so yeah. I think it's a good space to form friendships." (PGR student, Participant 9)

"In addition to the WhatsApp group, we've been out in the local pub twice and invited everybody in the group. […] Even their [PGRs from STEMM disciplines] insight – which is totally different to my discipline – it's been quite useful in terms of how we're working. We give advice to each other, we've worked together, so I feel the diversity." (PGR student, Participant 7)

"[My supervisors] were very keen to […] make me feel welcome by introducing me to this [Black] Student Voice leader. Although they knew they were white and they hadn't got the staff in order to facilitate my project that I wanted to do, they were very keen to make sure that I had someone – like a buddy – to, not influence me, but just to talk me through their experience, which was a positive experience. […] I [also] got an email out of the blue from my professor last week to say, "[…] you perhaps want to connect with this person, who's a previous Middlesex PhD student who I've worked with. […] Here's their email, here's their LinkedIn. It'll be good for you to talk to them about what you're working on as well. So, although, as I said, they may – they recognise that perhaps there are no, say, Black

professors, they know people to talk to or to advise you, to direct you." (PGR student, Participant 7)

Part-time PGRs and those studying mostly remotely were identified as two specific groups that potentially struggle to settle in and nurture a strong sense of belonging. This is particularly relevant, as the majority of Middlesex PGRs' fall within these two categories, and is an area that requires further attention. As supported by the quote presented in Box 3.6, these PGRs would particularly benefit from a more formalised support system, such as, for example, a buddying scheme, to combat feelings of isolation.

Box 6: The need for specific support for part-time and remote PGRs

"[…] one thing they can improve on is, part-time Postgraduate researchers like myself, we are so isolated it's unbelievable. But I have to take responsibility as well. It's my circumstances, but I just feel like part- time Postgraduate researchers like myself, we are on our own. Even though we have the supervision, but that external inclusion is a bit lacking for part-time Postgraduate researchers. I know part-time Postgraduate researchers mainly – most will not even be in the UK. Some will just come in when there are the major milestones. […] Maybe the University can initiate […] recognising who are the part-time PhD research Postgraduate researchers, where they are despite any part of the world, yeah? Bring us together and form something that will bring us together. Or even pair us up or buddy us up, something like that. But it's not their responsibility to go that far, but initiate something to say, "You're part time. Part-time Postgraduate researchers or PhDs are the loneliest of Postgraduate researchers. Yeah, and these are some of the things that you can do. You can meet once every quarter." or, "This person has progressed on. They can share their part-time journey with you and how they can work," something like that, yes." (PGR student, Participant 6)

PGR life: progression, continuation and wider student experience

Supervisory practices and relationships

Supervisors are recognised as probably the most influential people in defining the PGR journey experience. The survey found that 73% of student respondents agreed that they felt comfortable approaching their supervisory team with little variation between different groups[4]. This was despite some focus group data highlighting the lack of ethnic and racial representation among PGR supervisors.

Box 7: Perceived lack of diversity of supervisory staff

"I would love to be able to say that the supervisors themselves […] are diverse, etc. But that's where we get into a real territory of difficulty because it depends on subject expertise and availability. Often there's not many, etc. So, I think that is a weakness that I can't quite see how it will change unless the staff body is – and it needs to […] become more diverse." *(Academic staff, Participant 2)*

"So, when I went to the supervisor list of the University and the staff, you can see […] it's not very diverse, yeah? It wasn't, because all my supervisors are of Caucasian background and there was really rarely anyone that represents my race in the list of the University staff that I was seeing. So, if I'm judging it based on that, I will say that it's not that diverse." *(PGR student, Participant 6)*

More than two in three PGRs (70%) reported that their supervisory team understood how their personal characteristics, life circumstances of background affected their studies. Three in four PGRs (74%) stated that their supervisors considered how their research project could be more equitable, diverse and inclusive. However, according to the

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[4] PGRs from an ethnic background (82.4% strongly agreed) were feeling more comfortable approaching their supervisory team than white PGRs (65.6% strongly agreed); non-UK PGRs (71.4%) felt more comfortable than UK PGRs (68%); women (89.4%) felt slightly less comfortable than men (100%).

focus group discussions, the extent to which supervisors implemented EDI in their practice at Middlesex was varied. The nature of supervision practices seemed to differ on a case-by-case basis, and could have benefited from a more guided approach (see Box 8). From the supervisors' point of view, the only available provision in place to help them prepare for how to be effective supervisors was the supervisory training series. However, attendance to this training series was not mandatory for supervisors with experience and thus aspiring supervisors were those which tended to predominantly engage with it.

From the PGRs' point of view, good practice was related to providing individualised support, adapting to the PGRs' needs (e.g. English academic writing skills support for international PGRs) and personal circumstances (e.g. extending deadlines due to mental health challenges), as well as giving detailed feedback. Personal contact and raising awareness around development opportunities and/or funding were also mentioned as practices that encouraged a positive supervisory relationship (see Box 8).

Box 8: Variability in supervisory practice and student expectations

"[…] *the supervisors* […] *that's where there can be very varied experiences. There are some supervisors who are very hands on and* […] *others less. There's sometimes also an issue around personalities, etc., what supports people are able or willing to offer, to what degree and level.*" (Academic staff, Participant 2)

"[…] *we get* [progress] *reports in* […] *where someone was like, "We have weekly meetings* […] *on campus", and someone else would be like, "I haven't seen my student for six months." They'd both be doing equally well academically, or not, or something. Or some people are very hands on and some aren't. Some people get on, they don't.* […] *We do like a progression board twice a year. One of the questions is to ask how many times you've seen your supervisor in the last six months or something. Literally just filtering that column is like Wild West! Some of them are because there's an issue like, we – "I haven't seen this student." "OK, do we need to check up on them because they haven't – there's something wrong with them?" Others are just like, "This is just the way we teach." There's no parity across it whatsoever.*" (Professional and support services staff, Participant 14)

"[…] *the one-to-one that I have with my supervisor – which is what I value – it's been amazing, it's been great. They have gone over and beyond. Especially my director of study has gone over and beyond to support me.* […] *Yeah, over and beyond, for example, some supervisors will just keep the communication between Postgraduate researchers to be email only and face-to-face meeting in the approved University style, and that's it. My supervisor has my personal number and they WhatsApp me. So, I think that is extra because that is not the norm* […]. *Also they have encouraged me to write papers and get them published. They've showed me the ways to do it and to be going to conferences. They have gone over and above to help me to get funding for it and approve the funding. They've helped me in the area of well-being as well. There was a time that I considered quitting, you know?* […] *and they were*

like, "You can do it. It's just because of this, this and this." So, they really supported me to continue. Now I'm at the end, so yeah […] that's what they have been doing for me and it's wonderful. Without them, I would not have completed." (PGR student, Participant 6)

Bad practice was related to being overtly formal and not empathetic, to a degree that made any emotional struggle or request for help seem unreasonable; a sign of failure to meet supervisors' high standards.

"The not-so-good part is that they [my supervisors] are extremely professional, which sort of it's hard to break the ice and actually ask for help that I deserve, that I need. I'm a self-funded student and I'm actually paying the University to get the services of the supervisor. But because of their ways of talking it's very hard for me to communicate how I feel to them. So, that is not enabling me to get – make the best use of the supervision. I have to think 100 times, is it OK to ask help, or are they going to help me? Or are they going to judge me? […] They are very well-accomplished. They're like the academic superstars and so there's huge power dynamics here, power imbalance […] if I'm struggling in terms of my PhD, it's hard for me to be vulnerable and actually let them know that this is what I'm struggling with." (PGR student, Participant 9)

Researcher development

Under this theme, several topics were discussed, including research and other training modules available, teaching opportunities, attendance to conferences and relevant funding opportunities for those.

In terms of **researcher training**, the Kickstarter series was brought up as a good practice example by both staff and PGRs. This was thought to be inclusive (due to its hybrid provision and affordance to re-access it, as and when needed), including relevant content and providing information around how to make the most out of the PGR experience.

The researcher training programme was also brought up as a good practice, albeit only by staff members. A possible reason why this was not raised by PGRs could be identified based on a relevant comment that one of them made during the focus group discussions, according to which there seems to be no progression in the offerings available, so as to remain relevant as PGRs progress in their study journey (i.e. most offerings

seemed to be at an introductory level, with no follow-up offerings). Moreover, despite the variety of sessions involved in the programme (e.g. research skills, raising your academic profile through social media, mental health etc.), there was no minimum attendance required for PGRs. In general, there was no minimum hours that PGRs should spent on development opportunities each year of their PGR journey. Having said that, the recent introduction of the submission of the research and development plan at the two review stages was identified by staff as a positive step. This was thought to be useful in terms of standardising engagement with development opportunities and encouraging PGRs to think more holistically about the components that make up the PGR journey, outside of engagement with their supervisors and their project.

"When we were having Postgraduate researchers come up to their registration or transfer panel – […] which we now call review stage one and review stage two – they were just handing in work. Then we didn't really know what else was going on, so we've introduced this [the research and development plan]. *We can't make the* [researcher training programme] *sessions mandatory, but we have introduced this mandatory form which basically says, how many sessions have […] you gone to? Have you thought about them? […] it will embed what they're doing outside of the University and what knowledge they're bringing, and have they thought about their career and things like that? So, it's trying to make it more of a holistic thing so that, yeah, you're trying to get a better sense of the student rather than, "How many times have you seen this student?"."* **(Academic staff, Participant 14)**

The teacher training programme offered by the University was also brought up by both staff and PGRs as a good practice example of the institutional provisions available. However, the fact that there was great variance in the opportunity afforded to PGRs to put this training in practice shadowed the positivity around this offer. In general, it was clear that **teaching opportunities** varied widely across the university, with more of those being available in STEMM disciplines than in SHAPE ones. It would be fair to say though that both staff and PGRs agreed that there were not many teaching opportunities available at Middlesex, especially after Covid. PGRs also made reference to inadequate time to engage with those, as delivering their

project took up the majority of their time. Finally, it is worth mentioning that PGRs mentioned the use of mass emailing lists to circulate relevant teaching and/or research opportunities available as a good practice.

Last but not least, **attendance to conference and relevant funding opportunities to do so** were raised as enhancing elements with regards to their researcher development. However, once again, awareness of and availability of such opportunities varied across the institution, with supervisors being a key agent as to whether or not PGRs were encouraged and supported towards pursuing those.

The annual postgraduate research conference was brought up as a highlight in the institutional offer in this domain. Relevant departmental research showcases were also welcomed as opportunities to both present research work in a friendly environment and foster community-building.

Progression

Two thirds (67.8%) of student survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they were progressing well in their research degree and 66.7% stated that Middlesex was supporting them in achieving their research goals. In general, this leaves a third of PGRs not amply satisfied with their progression, while it is also worth noting that first generation PGRs, non-UK PGRs, disabled PGRs and women appeared less satisfied in terms of how well they were progressing with their studies.

In the survey, only 11.1% of respondents felt confident that diversity and inclusion was taken into account in review and assessment panels, with the majority (44.4%) responding 'somewhat', perhaps reflecting the fact that the University does not currently have a procedure in this regard, but that consideration is given on an informal level by some of the colleagues who convene such panels. Almost half of the respondents indicated that they did not know whether review and assessment panels disadvantaged PGRs with certain characteristics. This is not surprising as no data are collected on the demographic composition of panels.

The survey findings further highlighted unequal experiences of progression across different groups of PGRs. Specifically, they showed that PGRs from an ethnic background and disabled PGRs were less likely to report issues with progression than White PGRs and those without a disability. The groups that felt less supported were neurodivergent PGRs (33.4%), PGRs from an ethnic minority background (13.6%), disabled PGRs (11.1%) and non-UK PGRs (9.1%).

When a problem arises: the complaints procedure
When asked about raising incidents of discrimination or micro-aggressions, there was a wide variety of responses from staff who mentioned multiple stakeholders and coping mechanisms, including speaking to the perpetrator, to a colleague, to the PGR Lead (ex RDC), to the Research Lead, to the Head of Department, to the Director of PGR, to Care and Concern services, and more. This suggests that neither supervisors nor PGRs are aware of what the reporting/complaint procedures to be followed are.

An individual comment raised by a survey respondent, who is a PGR supervisor, highlights that this might be a matter of the

relevant policies and processes being too complicated and thus inaccessible. Specifically, they point out that a relevant improvement would be "*making grievance processes and the reporting of discrimination cases accessible, clear, efficient, and less bureaucratic. It's also important to be able to navigate those processes with care, to minimise the harm they might exacerbate, and to act upon the concerns effectively. Significant structural institutional changes are necessary to consider EDI issues on a fundamental and meaningful level. For example, we can't tackle EDI on the level of PGR when the staff demographic is still predominantly white, heterosexual, and 'able', and when leadership and management are fully white, mostly male, heterosexual, and hierarchical.*" This comment chimes with anecdotal evidence from correspondence with the Postgraduate Research administration that points to the necessity of improving communication on policies and procedures, which are publicly available and hyperlinked to handbooks, but in a format often not digestible to staff and PGRs. To address this issue for staff, one recommendation would be to cover this in the supervisory training in a staggered way, in different sessions, rather than providing all this information all at once. For PGRs, communications around policies and procedures should be something that happens outside their initial induction material, which ends up being overwhelming and not easy to retain. This could be achieved, for example, through staggered information sharing, following a staged induction approach and improve signposting to reporting and complaints, with simple posters/intranet campaigns signposting PGRs to why and how they might want to engage with these procedures. For both groups, both the internet and the intranet should contain clearer signposting not only to the policy documents, but to what they contain.

Exit stage: post-PhD insights, future plans and career opportunities

A significant proportion of PGR survey respondents (91.5%) said they would consider a career in academia. The vast majority (90.6%) also felt that they would have the support of their supervisors in their future career aspirations. Those more likely to express doubts about supervisor support were PGRs who were neurodivergent (16.7%), men (15.8%), first-generation (15%), from an ethnic minority background (13.1%) and disabled (16.7%). Over half of all PGR survey respondents were either planning (33.9%) or potentially considering (22%) to

apply for a job in the UK upon completion, and almost half were either planning (22.4%) or potentially considering (25.9%) to apply for a job abroad.

In the focus groups, much of the discussion in this area focused on career conversations and the relevant support offered during the PGR journey. It is fair to say that the general consensus was that this type of support was lacking in terms of standardised provision, with good practice identified only at an individual level - mostly between supervisors and PGRs, who generally already had good and supportive relationships.

On the staff side, the only consistent institutional provision identified was the signposting of PGRs to Career Services for relevant advice. However, as acknowledged by the sector, career services tend to be much more tailored to providing support relevant to undergraduates rather than PGRs (see, for example, The British Academy, 2020).

"[...] *I'm not sure I have any knowledge of what it [our PGR career advice offering] is. I know that we have a careers department. I know that we would direct Postgraduate researchers – PGRs – there. If the question arose, certainly from our team, I'm not sure that beyond their studies we are part of any further discussions for their career development."* (Professional and support services staff, Participant 15)

During the focus group discussions, professional and support services staff participants mentioned that a relevant session on post-doctoral careers used to be offered as part of the Postgraduate Research Development training series, but they had stopped this after receiving feedback that it was not relevant to PGRs funded by their employers. However, as one academic member of staff pointed out, this should not be a reason to stop this provision for all, especially as even PGRs who are pursuing professional doctorates may choose to change careers after their studies.

The PGR focus group participants' views on this issue were polarised, with three out of five mentioning that they received adequate career support (mostly from their supervisors), while the other two mentioned that they received no relevant support, either from their supervisors or from any other part of the university. In terms of individual good practices identified, the following were mentioned:

- Circulating international career opportunities through lab group emailing list;

- Supervisors seeing themselves as mentors both during and after the PGR journey;
- Connection to alumni and/or research networks post-graduation.

In general, it would be a fair reflection to say that staff and PGRs thought that PGR career conversations and relevant preparation for life post-PhD was an area that could be further improved at Middlesex. Career conversations and relevant, tailored advice should become embedded across the PGR journey in Middlesex university. This could be achieved through:

- making career conversations part of the supervisory meetings as well as the progression milestones;

- providing more relevant training and development sessions, showcasing the breadth of career pathways available to PGRs, including options in academia and beyond.

- utilising existing institutional networks and partnerships with employers to assist with the design and planning of a successful career offer, which is embedded throughout the PGR curricula;

- making sure that supervisors know where to signpost PGRs when they enquire about career pathways the former are not familiar with;

- considering how to either upskill the existing career services staff to be able to tailor their guidance to PGRs or to resource a new post, even if this is on a part-time basis, to serve this purpose.

All the above steps are important in trying to secure a more standardised PGR career provision, which can establish robust links between relevant PGR support and opportunities and post-PhD employment. The two success stories provided in Box 9 illustrate how strong supervisory relationships as well as engagement with development opportunities can be key to obtaining post-PhD opportunities.

Box 9: Examples of how developmental and career support for PGRs at Middlesex led to post-PhD employment

"[…] *I remember when I just started, they had the free getting you ready if you want to go into lecturing and teaching. There is a free course. […] Then I took part in the summer conference […] I did a poster presentation of my work, which was good encouragement for me. Then also I have been to […] three conferences […] all of which I have presented papers, [even] a paper that I wrote with […] my supervisor […]. All of those gave me the confidence to finally jump in and just apply for a lecturing position at another university. I got the job because of what I was doing. […] A year later, I was promoted to – now I'm the deputy course leader for my programme. […] [Also] [r]ecently, my supervisor at Middlesex gave me an opportunity [professional and support services related] that I'm doing on the side for the University of Middlesex.*" (PGR student, Participant 6)

"*I'd like to think that I still mentor, and there is a person I supported as a PhD graduate who actually I encouraged to apply for a position in our [professional and support services] team and was successful. So, I see them in an office setting and at work and they're one of my colleagues. It's good to see and I still – during the time of their PhD – was giving them advice, and will happily continue to do so. It's not a formal agreement. I'm not necessarily a formal mentor or coach for them, but I think any senior member of staff – especially the supervisory team – should be there to offer advice and mentor their PhD researchers.*" (Professional and support services staff, Participant 4)

Conclusions and recommendations

The EDI Review of PGR at Middlesex University highlights some of the institution's key strengths in terms of attracting diversity, tackling inequalities and improving inclusion. This is evident in the data on the University's ability to attract female PGRs, PGRs from the Global South; PGRs with family responsibilities and first-generation PGRs. Responses from both staff and PGRs also reveal a general commitment by staff, both supervisors and professional services, to making the doctoral journey fair and equitable, sometimes going the 'extra mile' to ensure this is the case. However, there are some blind spots relating to the lack of structured embedding of EDI considerations in admissions and progression policies and processes, and the lack of structured training on EDI for supervisors and admission tutors.

Key recommendations that emerge from the review are:

1.

Provide more specialised support for international, and particularly Global South, PGR applicants

1. **Provide more specialised support for international, and particularly Global South, PGR applicants**

International PGR applicants from the Global South have been identified as a key population requiring additional support at several stages. Firstly, in supporting them at the pre-application stage, (e.g. understanding the required standards and entry criteria; providing application support to non-native English speakers to develop their English academic writing skills and acquire the "insider knowledge" necessary to submit a competitive application etc.) in order to have equal access to the same opportunities as others. Consideration should also be given to the clarity and inclusivity of the language of marketing and communications to make sure that PGR opportunities are equally accessible to all. Finally, financial and welfare support should be offered to these PGRs, like greater flexibility with fee instalment or payment plans as well as peer support in adjusting to life as a PGR in the UK.

2.

Improve community-building activities among part-time and remote PGRs

2. Improve community-building activities among part-time and remote PGRs

The majority of PGRs at Middlesex are part-time and study away from campus. Regardless of their mode of study and their location, the focus groups have highlighted that all PGRs crave for more opportunities of engagement. Whilst there are many initiatives to engage PGRs remotely and the training and development programme is fully available online, the University needs to put additional formal and informal support measures in place to engage part-time and remote PGRs, focusing where possible on a hybrid approach, so as to meet also the needs of those who can meet in person (those PGRs who can travel to campus specifically mentioned a preference for such in-person opportunities, particularly during the focus group discussions).This requires firstly raising awareness of the existence of these PGRs (i.e. part-time and remote PGRs) within their respective cohorts – making them visible – and finding ways to celebrate their achievements. Another idea might be to offer them the opportunity to buddy up with other part-time and remote PGRs who are further along in their progression, so that they can learn from peers with similar experiences.

3.

Standardise, multiply and raise awareness around PGR funding opportunities available

3. Standardise, multiply and raise awareness around PGR funding opportunities available – both with respect to studentships as well as support for fieldwork

Standardising existing funding opportunities across schools and departments, as well as providing more financial support in terms of Postgraduate studentships as well as sponsoring training opportunities or conference attendance, was an unanimous suggestion from both staff and PGRs when it came to suggestions for improvement. Raising awareness of relevant opportunities in a clear, up-to-date and structured way also falls into this category, with supervisors being a key stakeholder identified by PGRs in terms of who they would expect to provide this information.

4.

Provide tailored developmental and career support for PGRs

4. Provide tailored developmental and career support for PGRs through supervisors, mentors/buddies and the University's Careers Services.

Currently the extent to which career support is provided mostly depends on individual supervisor's capacity, motivation etc. However, career conversations and relevant, tailored advice should become embedded across the PGR journey at Middlesex University. This could be achieved through:

- making career conversations for PGRs who are interested in pursuing a career in academia part of the supervisory meetings as well as the progression milestones. Supervisors could, for instance, advise PGRs with respect to key conferences, publishing, teaching experience etc.

- ensuring that supervisors know where to signpost Postgraduate researchers when they enquire about career pathways that supervisors are not familiar with, considering how to either upskill the existing career services staff to be able to tailor their guidance to PGRs or to resource a new post, even if this is on a part-time basis, to serve this purpose. Existing resources showcasing the variety of careers that PGRs from various disciplines have pursued post-graduation are also a quick win that should be utilised (e.g. see the PhD Careers Blog or the University of Birmingham's PGR Career Explorer dashboard).

- providing more relevant training and development sessions, showcasing the breadth of career pathways available to PGRs, including options in academia and beyond. Utilising MDXWorks and additional existing institutional networks and partnerships with employers could be key to designing and planning a successful offer.

- coaching and mentoring. As a means of more informal support, PGRs could be paired with more advanced PGRs or PGR alumni in a buddying system, as suggested under Item 2. As a formal support measure, PGRs could benefit from the University's growing coaching infrastructure, and be mentored/coached by a faculty member.

5.
Improve awareness and competence among staff and PGRs about different aspects of EDI

5. **Improve awareness and competence among staff and PGRs about different aspects of EDI, and support supervisors in how to implement EDI in practice.**

Both staff and PGRs indicated that more specific training and awareness of PGR EDI issues should be promoted by the University. This could be done by incorporating dedicated EDI sessions into the supervisory training offer, which should be made mandatory for both aspiring and experienced supervisors. Empathic listening and relationship-building should be at the heart of this provision, as PGRs specifically mentioned the need to be validated by their supervisors and to be reassured that the ups and downs of the PGR journey are an experience their supervisors have been through, too. A dedicated EDI session for PGRs would further help to raise awareness of different aspects of the topic, e.g., with respect

to relationships to supervisors, fellow PGRs, their research contexts and practices. Relevant EDI resources could also be curated, so that they are available for download from the intranet.

A further element to be considered to address this recommendation would be the establishment of a PGR supervisor network, as academic staff seemed to particularly value these small-group, peer-learning interactions, where they could share common challenges related to their supervisory role and benefit from existing good practice.

6.

More diversity in supervisory teams and review panels

6. More diversity in supervisory teams and review panels

These two recommendations were identified by more than a third (37% and 39% respectively) of staff and PGR survey respondents as actions to be taken by the university in the future. Although the composition of such teams and panels is primarily a response to the expertise of different individuals, diversity of composition is not currently formally considered, although some members of staff reported informal commitment to addressing this issue. To adopt a more formal approach, relevant considerations need to be embedded in a variety of policies and procedures, ranging from diversifying staff recruitment, providing supervisory training and relevant opportunities to staff members with a variety of protected characteristics, to introducing minimum representation targets and unconscious bias training for review panel members.

Appendix 1 – Methodology

This study had received institutional ethical approval by the Ethics Committee of School of Law. The study comprised three phases:

1) Desk-based research of existing literature on EDI best practice in PGR and review of existing institutional and sectoral aggregate data on PGRs.

2) An online institutional survey of PGRs and staff (academics and professional services) involved in this area.

Participation in the survey was encouraged through institutional communications, employing relevant PGR and staff channels (e.g. survey questions were part of the Middlesex Online Research Ethics (MORE) application). Survey completion was completely voluntary and anonymous, with all data saved securely and confidentially according to UK GDPR and the Middlesex University data processing and storage policies.

The survey was open to:

- The total PGR student population based in the London campus as of February 2023

- Alumni of all PGR Degrees from the past 5 years;

- Current PGR supervisors, PGR Leads (previously called Research Degrees Coordinators), Research Leads, staff that have received supervision and chair training but not currently supervising; Deputy Deans RKE, Registry Staff, Professional Services staff.

The total number of survey respondents was 136 (46.6% postgraduate researchers; 45.8% staff; 7.6% PGR alumni).

3) Four online focus group discussions facilitated by an Advance HE researcher to further explore staff and PGRs' perceptions of and experiences with the postgraduate research journey through the lens of EDI.

Recruitment to the focus groups was facilitated by online communications distributed by Middlesex University, with information on the EDI review and a dedicated online expression of interest form being distributed to eligible staff and PGRs via targeted as well as general communication channels, so that they could reach participants from across the institution. A relevant pointer to sign up for the focus group discussion was also included in the institutional survey that run before the focus groups were conducted.

Four slots (two for staff and two for Postgraduate researchers) were given to participants between 27 February - 8 March 2024 to choose from based on their availability. PGRs' participation was incentivised with a £20 Amazon voucher.

The call for focus group participation remained open between 1-20 February 2024. In total, 37 staff and PGRs expressed an interest to participate in the focus groups, as follows:

9 academic staff

6 PSS staff

22 PGRs

From those, based on their availability and the capped capacity that we had for each session (up to 8 participants and up to £300 for vouchers), 32 were invited in total:

9 academic staff

6 PSS staff

17 PGRs

Despite the early distribution of the relevant session invites and at least one session reminder circulated to all session participants one day before the actual session date, only half of the invited participants (16 participants) eventually turned up to the sessions, with the relevant breakdown per group as follows:

Table 1: Participant makeup by session

Session	Participants
Staff Focus Group 1, Tuesday, 27 February 2024 – 13:30-15:00pm	3 academic staff, 2 PSS staff
Staff Focus Group 2, Friday, 8 March 2024 – 10:30am-12:00pm	2 academic staff, 4 PSS staff
Student Focus Group 1, Thursday, 29 February 2024 – 15:00-16:30pm	3 PGRs
Student Focus Group 2, Tuesday, 5 March 2024 – 10:30am-12:00pm	2 PGRS

Although 100% of the PSS staff turned up, there was big attrition at the PGR level (29% turn up rate), and to academic staff (55% turn up rate). It is worth highlighting that one of the participants who identified themselves as academic staff (Participant 16) should have enrolled for the PGR sessions, as they were currently undertaking a PhD in Middlesex, while also working as a full-time academic staff.

Looking further into the background characteristics of the resulting 16 participants, Table 2 presents some interesting points per participant group.

Table 2: Key background characteristics by focus group participant group

Participant group	Faculty/Directorate	Sex	Disability	Ethnicity	Nationality
Academic staff	Representation from each faculty, 60% SHAPE disciplines	60% female	100% disclosed no disability	40% identified with one of the options comprising the Black, Asian and minority	60% British, 20% EU, 20% International

				ethnic categorisation	
PSS staff	100% Education and student experience	67% female	67% disclosed no disability	17% identified with one of the options comprising the Black, Asian and minority ethnic categorisation	50% British, 50% EU
PGRs	Representation from each faculty, 80% SHAPE disciplines	100% female	80% disclosed no disability	80% identified with one of the options comprising the Black, Asian and minority ethnic categorisation	80% international, 20% British

The focus groups' discussion guides were created by the lead Advance HE researcher of this part of the EDI review, with additional input from the institutional team in charge of the PGR EDI review at Middlesex University. Discussions lasted roughly 90 minutes each and were conducted and recorded using Microsoft Teams. A dedicated online participant information sheet and a relevant consent form was provided to participants before they engaged with the online discussions. Also, the draft discussion guide was circulated to participants in advance, so that they could be prepared about the topics to be raised.

Focus groups transcripts were anonymised and then analysed thematically. Thematic analysis of the transcribed discussions was carried out using Atlas.ti. The coding process started with getting more familiar with the data, through reading the resulting transcripts twice. After the first time, excerpts were coded inductively, while also using the discussion guides as a lead for the coding scheme. Key areas were then placed into categories so that they could fit the three broad stages of the PGR journey, namely entry, progression and exit.

Appendix 2 – Middlesex University comparison with the University Alliance and the wider sector

Data sourcing information and glossary

All data presented in this benchmarking brief is based on the 2021/22 HESA student record, filtering for postgraduate research level of studies.

Sex: percentages are based only on those who identified as female/male (no one from Middlesex identified as 'other', hence the choice. According to HESA's guidelines, 'other' represents legal sex, with this category applying to international students who come from countries, which legally recognise a third sex).

Ethnicity and nationality: percentages are based only on those who declared this information (ie excluding unknown/not disclosed).

Subject areas

STEMM (STEMM, Technology, Engineering, Medicine and Maths) is used as an umbrella term for the following subjects, representing the HESA 'Science' categorisation:

Agriculture, food and related studies

Architecture, building and planning

Biological and sport sciences

Computing

Engineering and technology

Geography, earth and environmental studies (natural sciences)

Mathematical Sciences

Medicine & dentistry

Physical sciences

Psychology

Subjects allied to medicine

Veterinary sciences

SHAPE (Social Sciences, Humanities and the Arts for People and the Economy) is used as an umbrella term for the following subjects, representing the HESA 'Non-science' categorisation:

Business and management

Combined and general studies

Design, and creating and performing arts

Education and teaching

Geography, earth and environmental studies (social sciences)

Historical, philosophical and religious studies

Language and area studies

Law

Media, journalism and communications

Social sciences

Major source of tuition fees: percentages are calculated based only on those students with known sources (ie excluding unknown/not disclosed)

Overall description of PGR make-up

Table 1: PGR population overall make-up at Middlesex University, the University Alliance and the UK sector

	Middlesex	University Alliance	Sector
Age	Average: 41.4 years of age	Average: 41 years of age	Average: 46 years of age
Sex	Female 58.9% Male 41.1%	Female 53.7% Male 46.3%	Female 51.3% Male 48.7%
Ethnicity	White 66.9% Black, Asian and minority ethnic 33.1% (12.7% Black, 11.9% Asian, 4.8% Mixed and 3.8 Other)	White 74.6% Black, Asian and minority ethnic 25.4% (10.4% Black, 8.4% Asian, 4.0% Mixed and 2.7% Other)	White 79.4% Black, Asian and minority ethnic 20.6% (5.0% Black, 8.6% Asian, 4.2% Mixed and 2.7% Other)
Nationality	UK 51.3% European Union 16.8% Non-European Union 31.9%	UK 61.8% European Union 10.9% Non-European Union 27.3%	UK 50.8% European Union 15.1% Non-European Union 34.1%
Disability status	Declared a disability 9.2% No disability declared 90.8%	Declared a disability 15.1% No disability declared 84.9%	Declared a disability 14.1% No disability declared 85.9%
Mode of study	Full-time 33.9% Part-time 66.1%	Full-time 46.9% Part-time 53.1%	Full-time 75.7% Part-time 24.3%
Year of study	Year 1 46.1% Year 2 18.2% Year 3 15.9% Year 4 8.9% Year 5 7.2% Year 6+ 3.7%	Year 1 25.9% Year 2 25.4% Year 3 22.0% Year 4 14.8% Year 5 6.3% Year 6+ 5.6%	Year 1 33.5% Year 2 25.8% Year 3 26.5% Year 4 8.9% Year 5 2.9% Year 6+ 2.3%
Broad disciplinary area	STEMM 60.8% SHAPE 39.2%	STEMM 44.6% SHAPE 55.4%	STEMM 62.3% SHAPE 37.7%
Major source of tuition fees	No award of financial backing 82.2% Other overseas sources 0.4%	No award of financial backing 54.1% Charities and international agencies 0.2%	No award of financial backing 39.8% Charities and international agencies 2.4%

	Provider waiver/award 14.7% UK central government bodies and local authorities 0.2% UK industry/commerce and student's employer 2.5%	European Commission 0.5% Other overseas sources 1.6% Provider waiver/award 15.8% Research councils and British Academy 1.3% UK central government bodies and local authorities 4.8% UK industry/commerce and student's employer 15.3% UK LEA mandatory/discretionary award 1.9%	European Commission 0.3% Other overseas sources 6.7% Provider waiver/award 19.6% Research councils and British Academy 13.5% UK central government bodies and local authorities 3.2% UK industry/commerce and student's employer 4.2% UK LEA mandatory/discretionary award 1.0%

Based on the figures presented in Table 1, Middlesex university has:

- almost the same average age of PGRs with that of University Alliance, which is slightly younger than the sector average;

- **a higher proportion of female PGRs** than the University Alliance group (58.9% versus 53.7% of the total PGR population) and the wider sector (51.3% of the total PGR population);

- **a more ethnically diverse PGR student body than the University Alliance group and the wider sector, with almost one third of its PGRs identifying with one of the ethnicity categories falling under the Black, Asian and minority ethnic grouping as opposed to a quarter of the University Alliance total PGR population and one fifth of the wider sector's total PGR population**. However, in terms of representation of the various minoritised ethnic groups, the pattern is the same between Middlesex and the University Alliance, with Black PGRs forming the majority, followed by Asian and Mixed PGRs, with those identifying as 'Other' forming the smallest group. Conversely, for the sector, the biggest group of minority ethnic students is Asian (8.6%), followed by Black, Mixed and those identifying as 'Other' students;

- **more PGRs who are non-British nationals, with higher representation from both European Union and international students compared to the University Alliance group. Compared to the sector, Middlesex has a similar proportion of British national PGRs, a slightly higher proportion of students from the European Union and a slightly lower proportion of international PGRs;**

- **fewer PGRs declaring a disability (9.2% of the total), almost six percentage points lower than equivalent proportion of University Alliance PGRs and five percentage points lower than the proportion of the total PGRs in the sector**;

- **a higher proportion of part-time students than those noted in the University Alliance group (majority part-time)**, with slightly lower percentages of students in each mode of study. **There is also a stark difference to the sectoral trend, where the vast majority of PGRs are studying full-time** (75.7% of the total). (Note that for this figures, HESA data has been supplemented by Middlesex Registry data).

- a high proportion of first year PGRs, which is higher than the one noted in the wider sector (33.5% of the total) and almost double the proportion of first year PGRs within the University Alliance.

- its majority PGR population studying STEMM subjects (60.8%), following the sector trend (62.3%), but unlike what happens with the University Alliance PGRs, whose majority are studying SHAPE subjects (55.4%).

- the vast majority of its PGRs having no funding (82.2% of the total) compared to 54.1% of University Alliance PGRs and 39.8% of the sector PGRs in this category. It also has much less diverse sources of funding than those found in the University Alliance and the wider sector.

Further PGR data break-downs, including intersectional considerations

Ethnicity

Table 2: PGRs by ethnicity and sex
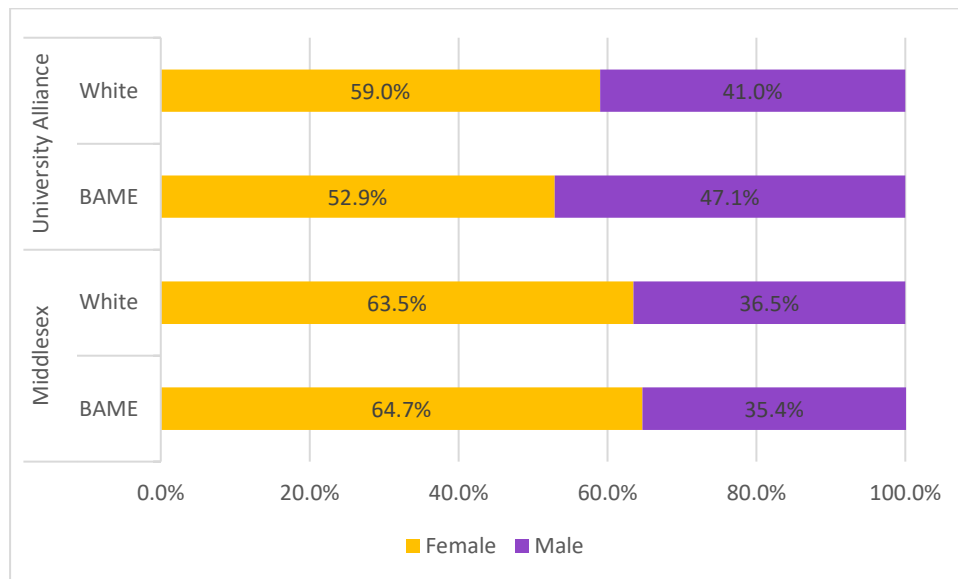
Middlesex has a similar sex representation among both its White and Black, Asian and minority ethnic PGRs, with females forming the majority in both (63.5% and 64.7% respectively). Although the female majority among both ethnic groups is a trend noted within the University Alliance PGR population, this is more pronounced across the White PGRs (59%), with male representation increasing among the Black, Asian and minority ethnic PGRs (52.9% females among the University Alliance Black, Asian and minority ethnic PGRs). Table 3: Middlesex University PGRs' major source of tuition fees by ethnicity[5]
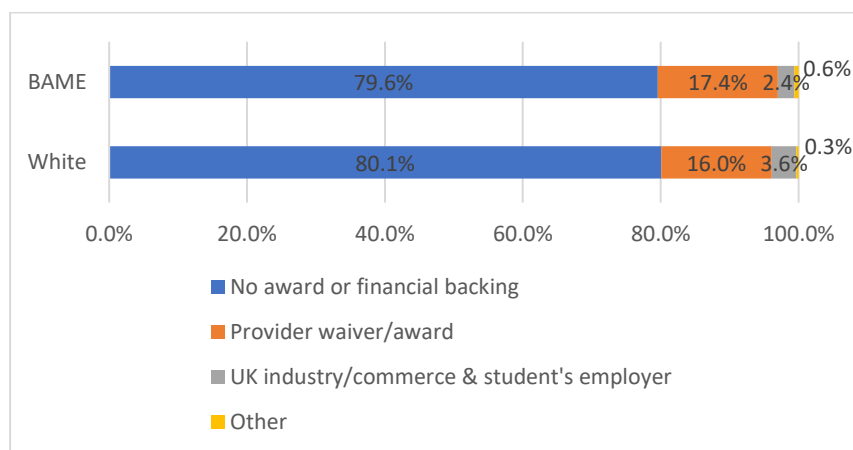
There are almost no differences in the proportion of White and BAME students that receive no funding at Middlesex University. Specifically, 79.6% of BAME PGRs were unfunded compared to 80.1% of White. In fact, a slightly higher proportion of BAME students received an institutional waiver/award compared to White PGRs (17.4% compared to 16.0%).

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[5] Other includes: Charities and international agencies, European commission, other overseas sources, Research Councils and British Academy, UK central government bodies and local authorities, and UK LEA mandatory/discretionary awards.

Table 4: University Alliance PGRs' major source of tuition fees by ethnicity
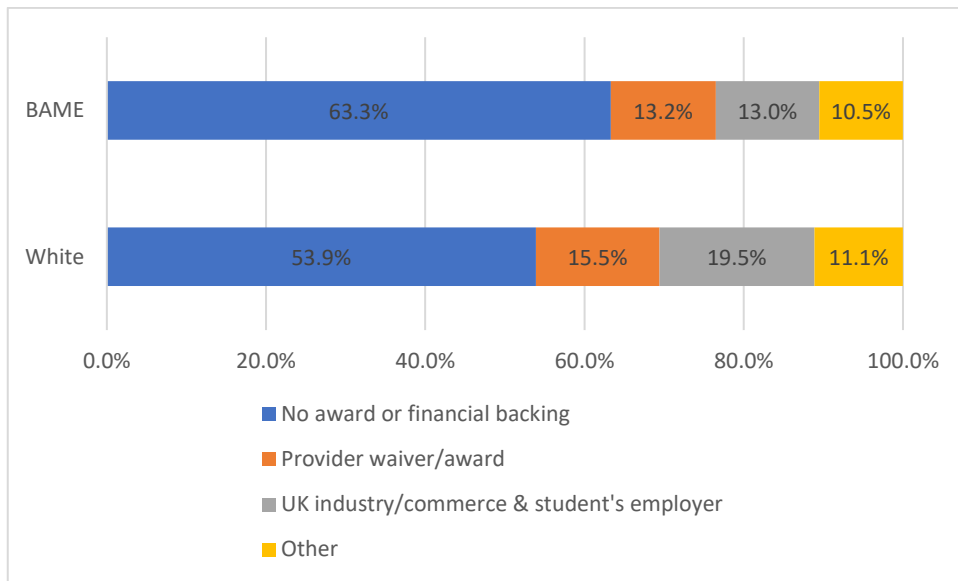

Across University Alliance PGRs, a higher proportion of BAME students had no funding compared to White PGRs (63.3% compared to 53.9%) and also a higher proportion of White students received an institutional waiver or award (15.5% compared to 13.2%).

Table 5: PGRs' ethnicity by broad disciplinary area
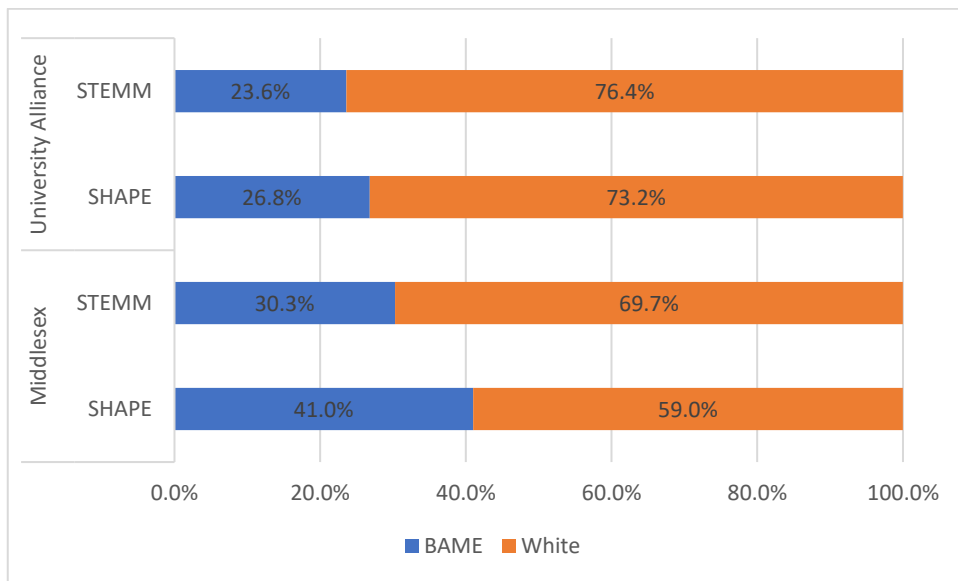
Whereas the proportion of BAME students is similar in STEMM and SHAPE subject across the University Alliance Group members (23.6% and 26.8% respectively), the proportion is different in Middlesex, with the proportion of BAME students being more than ten percentage points higher in SHAPE subjects compared to STEMM subjects (41.0% and 30.3% respectively).

Table 6: PGRs' ethnicity by nationality
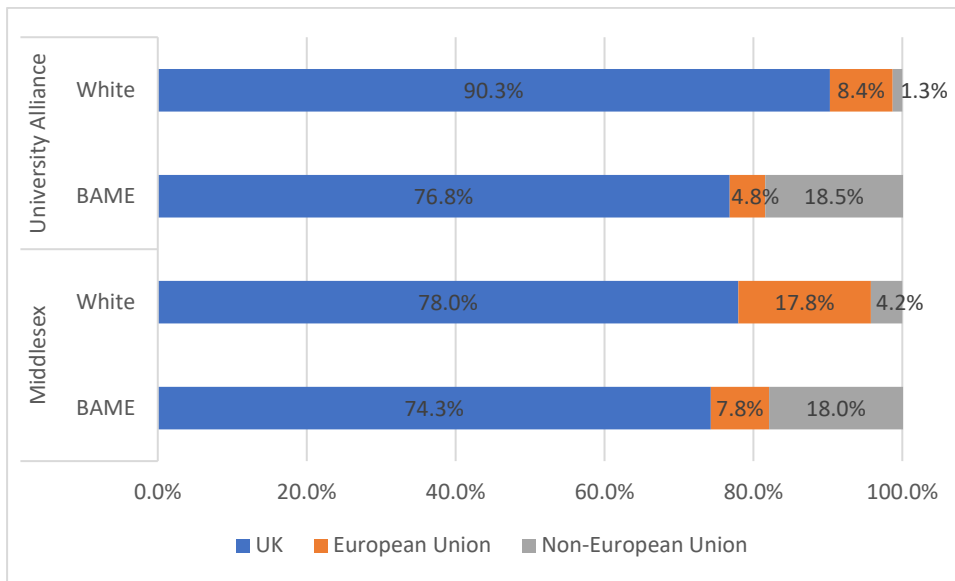
Although the representation of the three different nationality categories is roughly the same among Black, Asian and minority ethnic PGRs in Middlesex University and University Alliance (with Middlesex having a higher representation of European BAME students than University Alliance by three percentage points), this is different to the pattern that we see amongst White students' nationalities. Specifically, the proportion of European White PGRs in Middlesex University is more than double that of University Alliance, and the representation of non-European White students almost triple.

Sex

Table 7: PGRs' sex by broad disciplinary area
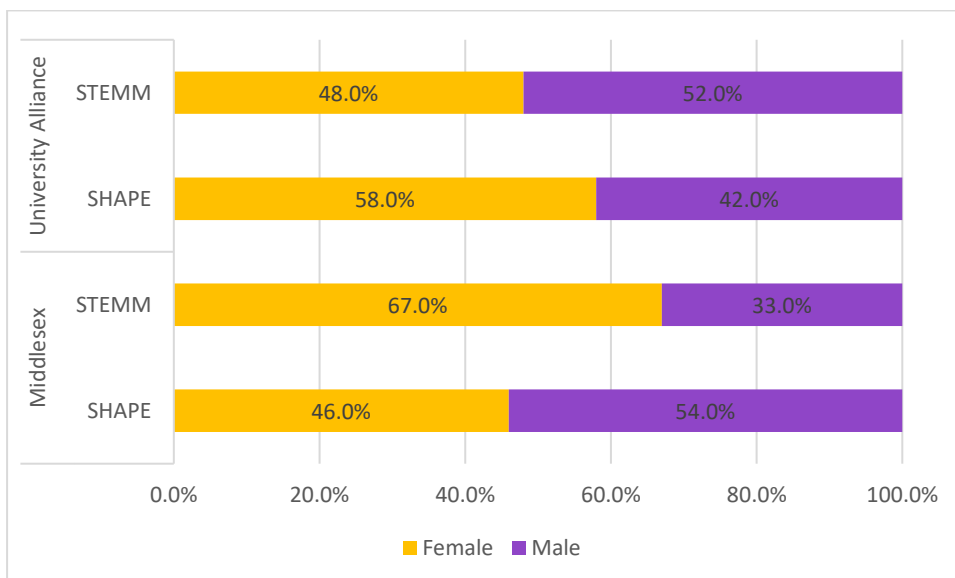
Middlesex university deviates from the University Alliance and sectoral pattern, according to which females form the minority of PGR STEMM students and the majority of SHAPE students. In Middlesex University, females form the majority of STEMM PGRs (67%) and males the majority of SHAPE PGRs (54%).

Table 8: PGRs' disability by sex
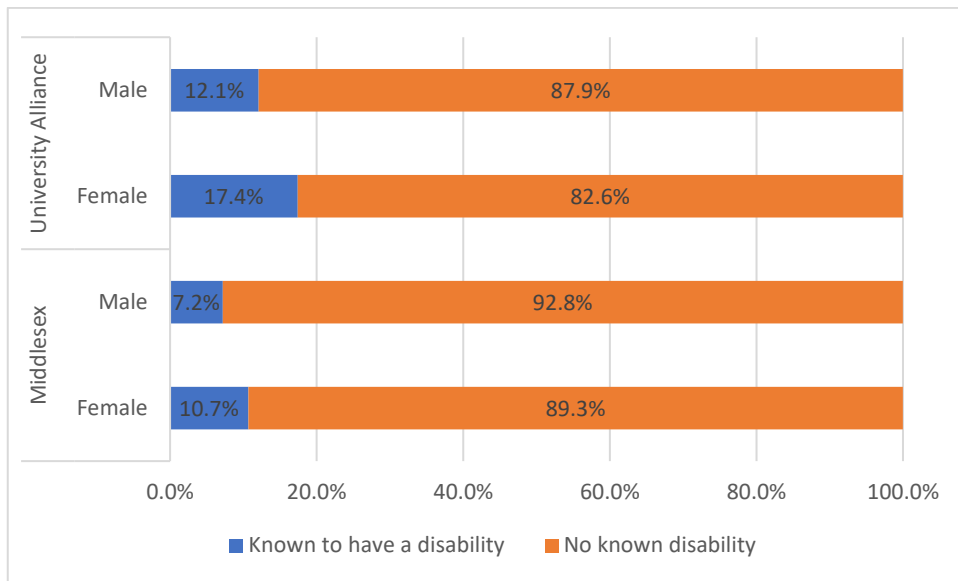
The proportion of female PGRs who disclosed a disability was slightly higher than that of male PGRs (10.7% compared to 7.2%) at Middlesex University. The pattern was the same across the University Alliance PGRs, although the proportions were higher (17.4% of female and 12.1% of male).
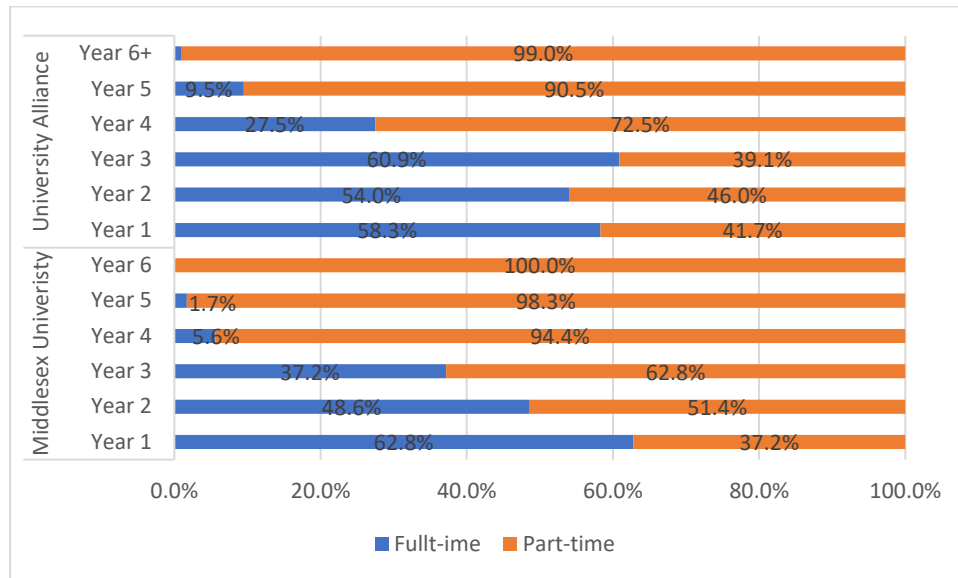
Mode of study

Table 9: PGRs by broad disciplinary area and mode of study
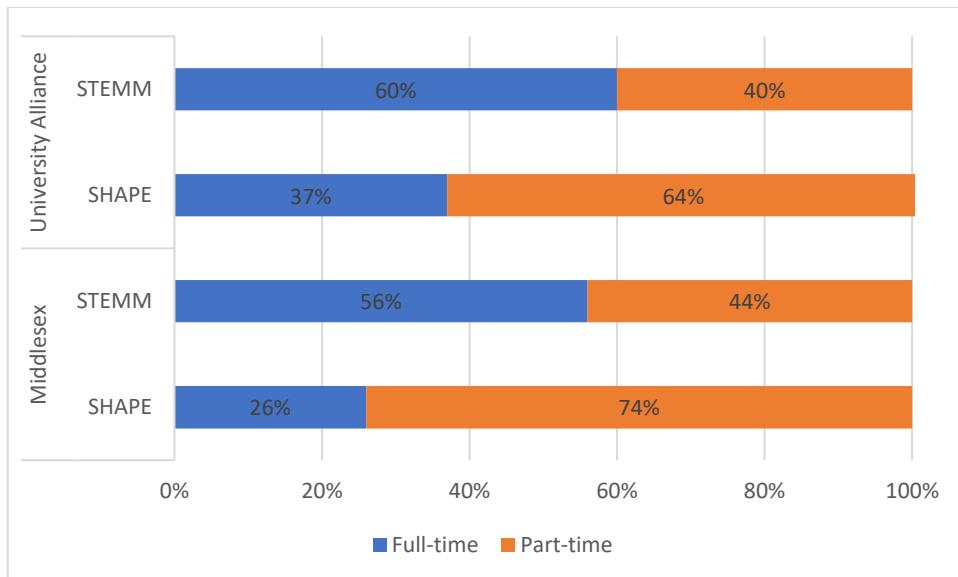
Middlesex PGRs follow the trend noted across the University Alliance group and the sector, with the majority of STEMM PGRs studying full-time and the majority of SHAPE PGRs studying part-time. However, the proportion of STEMM PGRs studying full time is smaller than the one of University Alliance STEMM PGRs (56% compared to 60%) and the proportion of SHAPE PGRs studying part-time is noticeably bigger than that of University Alliance SHAPE PGRs (74% compared to 64%).

Table 10: PGRs' year of course by mode of study

Middlesex seems to have much better completion rates, with less full-time students exceeding their 3 year of PGR studies than in the University Alliance group.

Table 11: PGRs' mode of study by year on course
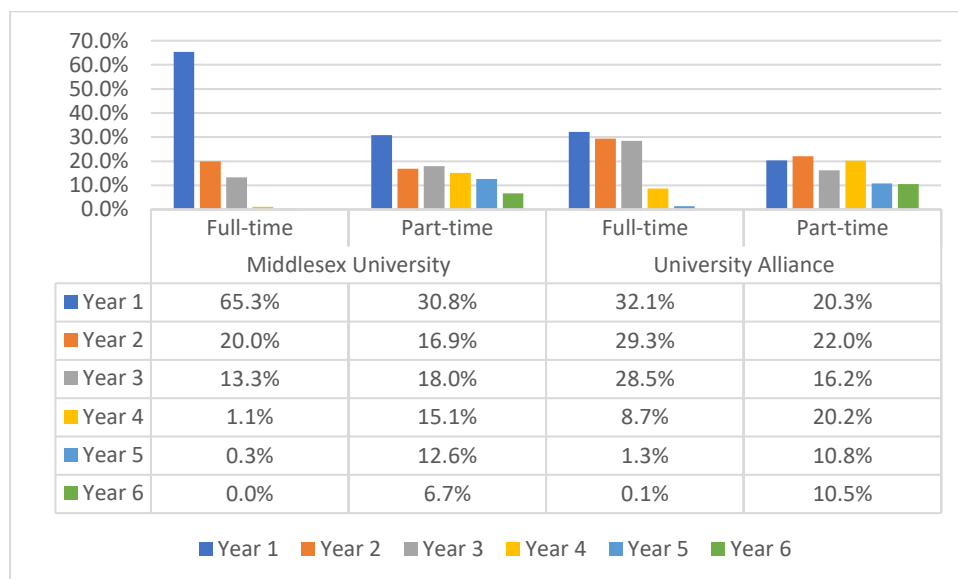
Also, the vast majority of full-time students are in their first year of studies at Middlesex University (65.3%), whereas part-time students are more equally spread across years of course, despite the majority still being 1st year students (30.8% of the total part-time students). In general, Middlesex seems to have a higher proportion of its full-time PGRs being in their first year of studies (more than double that of the University Alliance group) and similarly for part-time students, although with much smaller percentage difference (30.8% of part-time students in their first year of studies at Middlesex compared to 20.3% of University Alliance part-time students in their first year of studies).
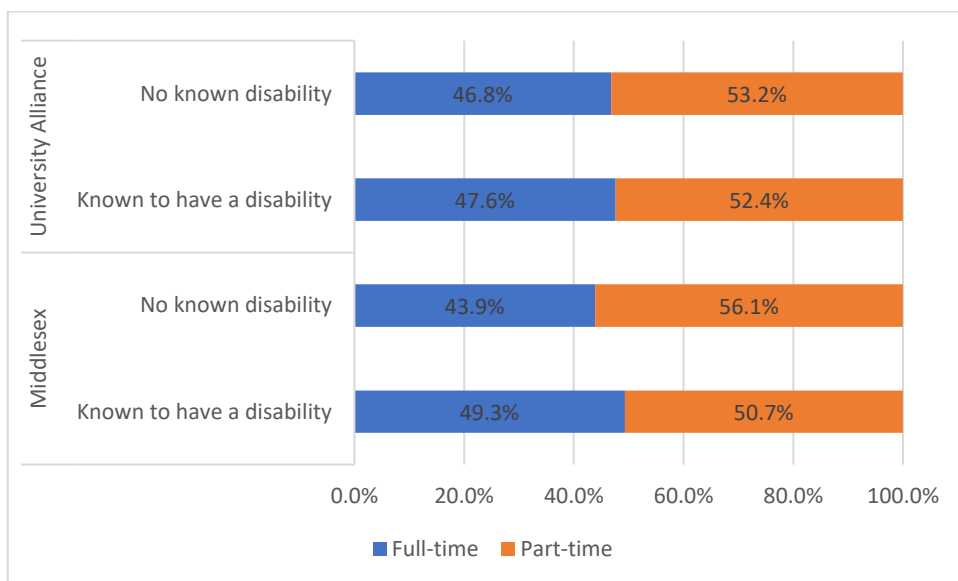
Broad disciplinary area

Table 12: PGRs' major source of tuition fees by broad disciplinary area
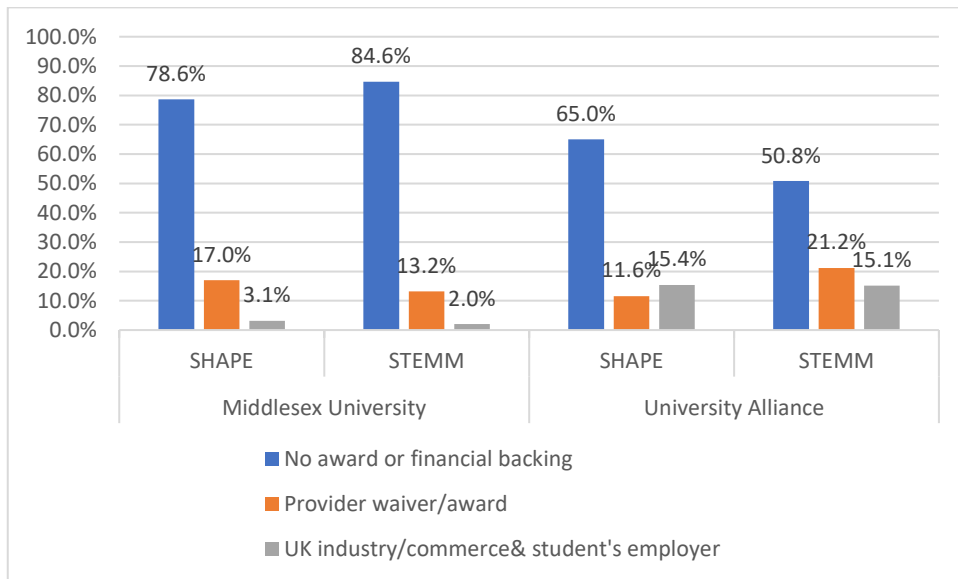
Middlesex university deviates from the norm noted in the University Alliance and the wider sector, where more SHAPE PGRs have no source of funding.

Disability

Table 13: PGRs' disability status by mode of study

Out of those Middlesex PGRs who have disclosed a disability, almost equal proportions are studying full-time and part-time (49.3% of disabled PGRs study full-time and 50.7% part-time). The difference in proportions of full-time and part-time students is higher across University Alliance PGRs, where 47.6% of disabled PGRs study full-time compared to 52.4% studying part-time.

Conversely, out of those disclosing no disability, a higher proportion studies part-time (56.1%) than full-time (43.9%) both in Middlesex University and across the University Alliance group (56.1% compared to 43.9% for Middlesex University and 46.8% compared to 53.2% for the University Alliance).

Table 14: PGRs' disability by broad disciplinary area
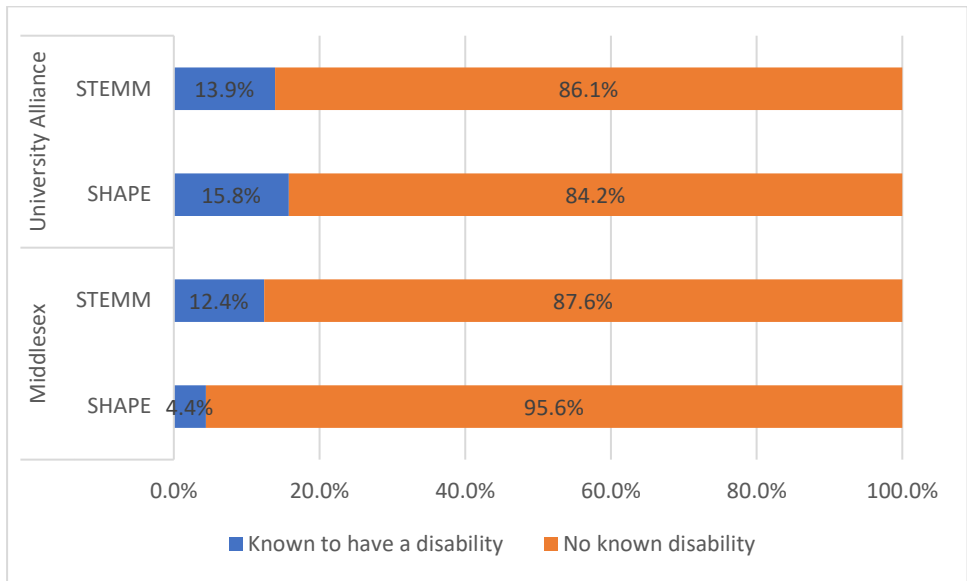
The proportion of disabled PGRs in STEMM subject areas is triple that of disabled PGRs in SHAPE disciplinary areas at Middlesex University (4.4% compared to 12.4%). Conversely, across the University Alliance PGRs, the proportion of disabled PGRs is slightly higher among SHAPE PGRs compared to those in STEMM disciplinary areas (15.8% compared to 13.9%).