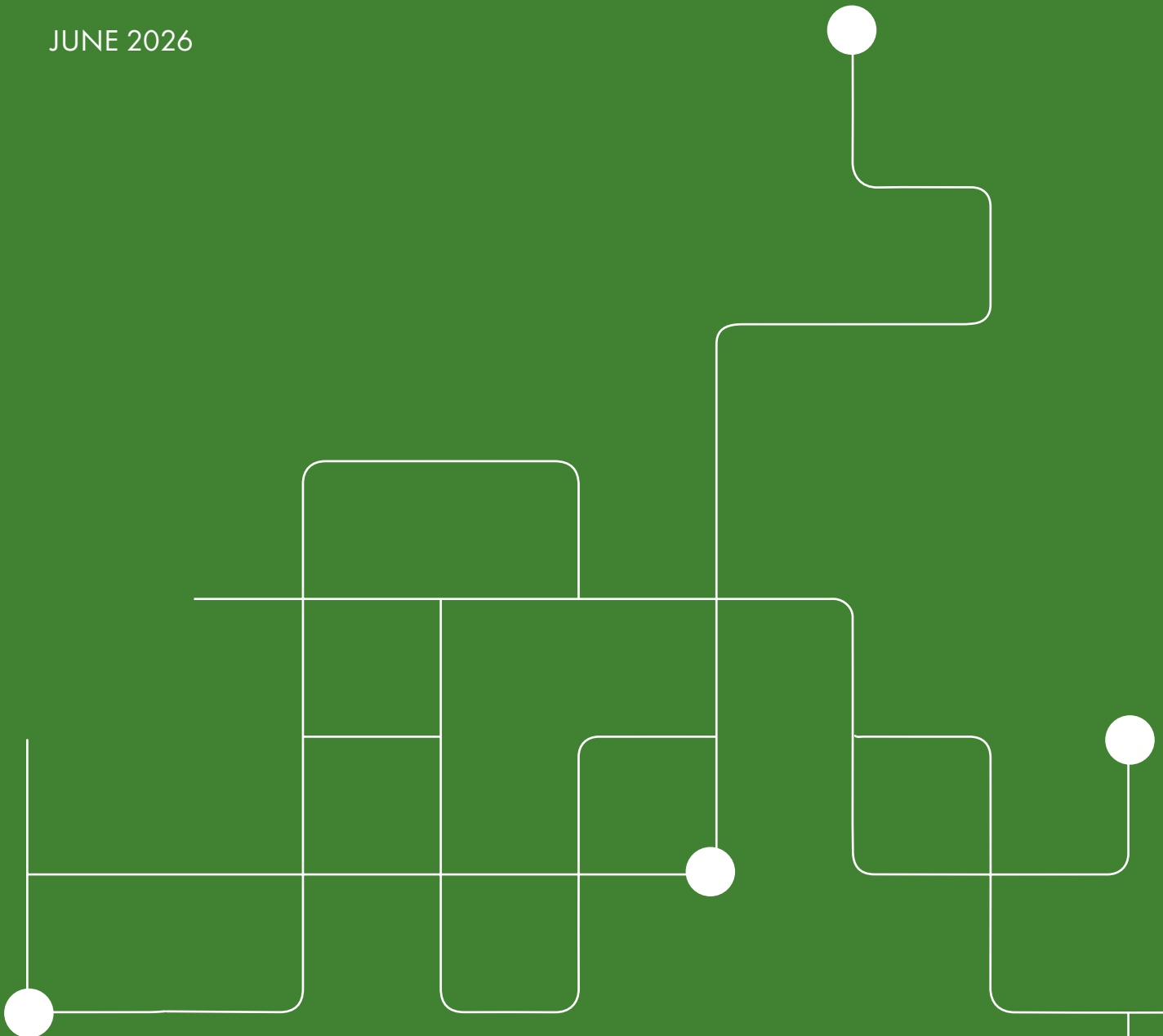


Socioeconomic Status and the Doctoral Experience

Sophie Bird and Cassandra Hugill

JUNE 2026



Our vision is that family income is never a barrier to postgraduate study.

Our mission is to enable and nurture talented individuals from low-socioeconomic backgrounds to thrive within world-leading postgraduate research.

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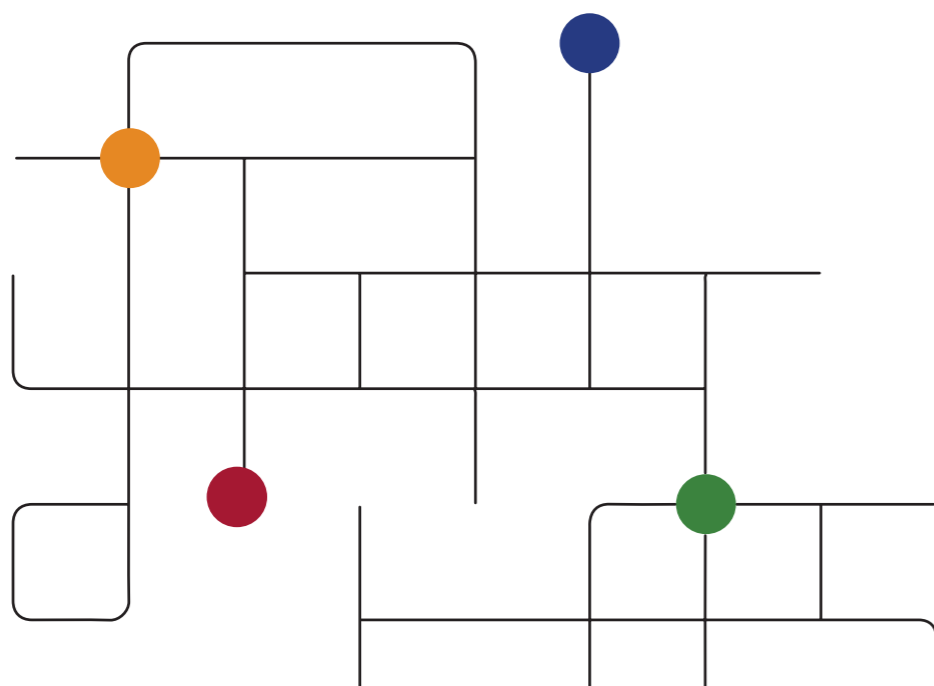
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Glossary and Terms

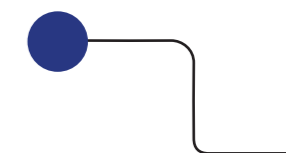
- **Low-socioeconomic status (low-SES)** – When identifying socioeconomic background, Martingale considers a range of indicators including household income (typically under £35,000 for this study), parental occupation, type of school attended, eligibility for Free School Meals, experience of care, and refugee status. Martingale particularly looks at the intersection between income and social class and takes a multifaceted approach to understanding identity, and the various, complex and interrelated factors which impact an individual’s likelihood of undertaking postgraduate study.
- **CDT** – Centre for Doctoral Training
- **DTP** – Doctoral Training Partnership
- **SES** – Socioeconomic Status
- **Participants or respondents** – used to refer to those who took part in a focus group, interview or completed the survey
- **HEI** – Higher Education Institution
- **UKRI** – UK Research and Innovation - a non-departmental public body of the UK government that directs research and innovation funding.

About Martingale

Martingale Foundation was created to enable and nurture talented individuals from low-socioeconomic backgrounds to thrive within world-leading postgraduate study. Martingale Foundation works with leading UK universities to ensure that family income is never a barrier to postgraduate study. The Martingale Postgraduate Scholarship is our flagship programme that supports passionate and talented students facing financial barriers to pursue masters and PhDs and excel in them.



Executive Summary



A clear understanding of what doctoral students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds need to thrive is essential if the sector wants to ensure talented researchers are not lost from the pipeline.

The ability to thrive cuts across all areas of a PhD, from finding work meaningful and rewarding, to building good relationships in the research community, to accessing development opportunities. Understanding how doctoral students from low-socioeconomic (SES) backgrounds can achieve and access these aspects of success is vitally important to ensuring they can complete their PhDs and move into successful careers.

Work by organisations such as In2scienceUK (In2research), institutions including the University of Oxford (UNIQ+) and UCL (*Barriers to Doctoral Education, YEAR*), and reports including *Inequality in the Highest Degree* have significantly advanced understanding of who is, and is not, accessing STEM doctoral study. Collectively, this body of work has documented the structural, financial and cultural barriers facing students from low-SES backgrounds. Whilst this research has driven meaningful progress in widening access, considerably less attention has been paid to what happens once students arrive, specifically, how PhD programmes can best support those from low-SES backgrounds to succeed once they are in.

Part of the problem lies in the lack of data on PhD students. Without this data, institutions and sector policymakers cannot design targeted programmes and policies to support PhD students from low-SES backgrounds. This leaves support and opportunity provision to the discretion of individual supervisors and PhD programme leaders, leading to disparities in support.

Recognising this gap, and aware that PhD programme type significantly shapes the structure, funding and support available to students, Martingale Foundation conducted research to understand how those from low-SES backgrounds experience their PhD. The research looked at experiences of different types of PhDs and how experiences differed compared to those not from low-SES backgrounds.

As part of this study, Martingale conducted:

- focus groups and interviews with current and former STEM PhD students from low-SES backgrounds
- focus groups and interviews with STEM PhD programme leaders and supervisors
- a survey with current and recent former STEM PhD students from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds

Key Findings

The analysis of focus groups and survey data returned rich findings across several themes. Some findings pertain to all postgraduate researchers, but the consequences fall hardest on those without a financial safety net or established cultural capital in academic networks.

- Participants identified **a feeling of 'not belonging' as a barrier to participating in networking events**, with many citing being from a low-SES background as a factor that can hinder integration with peers and the broader research environment.
- **Financial constraints shape access to development opportunities.** Limited funding not only restricts what opportunities students can participate in but also shapes which opportunities they prioritise.
- Several students reported that part-time work was frowned upon, with some **unable to openly discuss undertaking part-time work with peers or supervisors**, due to concerns it might be perceived as a lack of commitment to their research. This is despite the financial necessity of part-time work for many PhD students. Participants also recommended access to more than one supervisor, to mitigate any challenges with the primary supervisor.
- **Supporting PhD students holistically**, helping them grow and prepare for careers beyond academia, is important for their long-term career success. Some PhD programme types are better equipped to enable holistic support.
- The **formalised programme structure** of CDTs and DTPs is highly valued by those who undertook this type of PhD. **Community and peer support** were particularly important for those on standard PhDs.
- The majority of PhD students who participated in this study felt that **PhD students should be treated as employees**. While some participants acknowledged the additional protections that come with student status, there was still a strong view that PhD students should be treated as employees or that a hybrid status should be awarded to enable both strong protections and long-term financial security.

The findings from this study will be used to strengthen Martingale's scholar support, as well as Martingale's advocacy and policy engagement. More broadly, they are intended to support institutional decision-making, PhD programme development and act as a catalyst for further research into this area.

Key recommendations

- Higher education institutions should collect more, and higher quality, data about the socioeconomic background of postgraduate researchers and PhD outcomes to inform support, with direction from higher education policymakers. Aggregated and anonymised versions of this data should then be accessible, where appropriate, to researchers and policymakers.
- HEIs and supervisors should consider further support for prospective PhD students to find the best PhD programme type for them to succeed, before they start – a model like the Martingale PhD Navigator Programme.¹
- A lack of adequate financial resources not only limits the ability of some students to engage in career development opportunities but can also affect a student's sense of belonging – institutions and funders should think about what steps they could take ensure equitable access to development opportunities.
- Policymakers, working with HEIs, should consider creating guidance around consistent rights and conditions across institutions and funders.
- HEIs should strengthen complaints procedures, improve how students' rights are communicated and introduce consistent limits on PhD working hours.
- HEIs should consider making it standard practice for PhD students to be able to engage with more than one supervisor, or signpost more clearly to students where additional support can be obtained from the university.
- Programme leaders, supervisors and institutions should consider how they can better aid the professional and personal development of students to ensure they are equipped with the skills they'll need beyond their PhD, recognising that many PhD students will not pursue a career in academic research.

¹ The PhD Navigator Programme is designed to identify, support and fund highpotential candidates by helping them secure a place on a PhD through tailored guidance, networking and application support. It includes an inperson PhD Showcase with partner universities, along with webinars, onetoone support and application proofreading throughout the main application period.

Introduction

In recent years, higher education institutions have recognised the importance of broadening access to postgraduate degrees and have begun to put initiatives in place to address this.

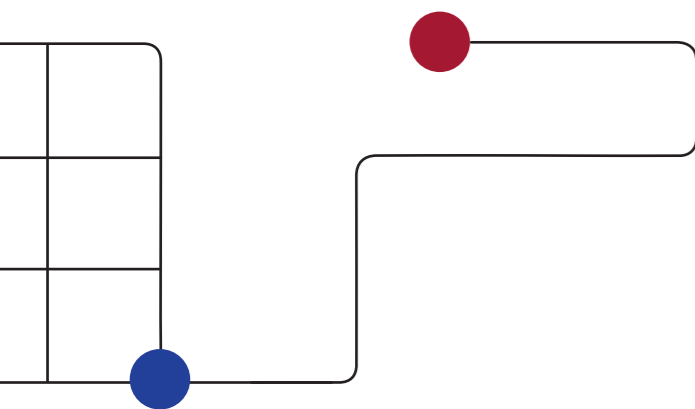
Yet the question of whether PhD programmes adequately support students once they start has received comparatively little focus. It is well established that doctoral study can be deeply demanding, often marked by significant personal and academic challenges. For students from low-socioeconomic (low-SES) backgrounds in particular, challenges can be further intensified - particularly in relation to financial pressures and navigating unfamiliar academic cultures.

For these students, having the right support structures in place throughout their PhD is crucial. Widening access means little if the programme itself is not equipped to support their needs.

PhD programme structures vary considerably, offering different models of training, supervision, peer support and professional development. Martingale conducted research to understand what shapes PhD success for students from low-SES backgrounds across different types of doctoral programmes.

Martingale is well placed to investigate this. Working closely with students through its PhD Scholarship Programme, Martingale supports students from low-SES backgrounds to access and thrive in postgraduate research. The experience of supporting Martingale PhD Scholars means Martingale has a deep understanding of the challenges PhD students from low-SES backgrounds can face.

The new insights from this study will not only be used to strengthen the support Martingale offers PhD scholars, including through the PhD Navigator Programme and PhD Leadership Programme,² but they are also intended to support institutional decision-making and STEM PhD programme development at universities across the country. Whilst this research is relatively small in scope, we also hope it acts as a catalyst for further research from the higher education sector.



² Martingale's PhD Navigator Programme supports students applying for a PhD, and once receiving the Martingale PhD Scholarship, scholars will follow the PhD Leadership Programme which is designed to accelerate career development.

Methodology

Four focus groups were held as part of the study, three with PhD students, with each focusing on a different category of PhD programme, and a final focus group with PhD programme leaders, senior HEI leaders, and experienced supervisors. A small number of interviews were conducted alongside the focus groups.

Focus groups and interviews took place from May – June 2025 and were focused around open and broad questions to allow participants to discuss what was most pertinent to them. Survey responses were collected between June – August 2025. The survey enabled quantitative and further qualitative analysis to feed into the themes identified in the focus groups and interviews.

All participants gave informed consent prior to participation, and current/recent PhD students who participated in the focus groups or interviews received a £20 Amazon voucher. Data handling and storage fully complied with UK GDPR regulations.

About the Participants

INTERVIEWS AND FOCUS GROUPS

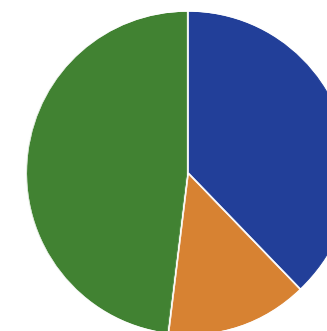
Student Participation

The focus groups and interviews involved 21 current or recently completed PhD students, who self-identified as from a low-SES background, from a range of UK universities.

All PhD student participants had UK Home Fee status with all having completed at least two years of their PhD or were shortly about to begin their third year of PhD study.

Academic Participation

The study involved a focus group and interviews with six PhD programme leaders, senior HEI leaders, and experienced supervisors from across STEM disciplines.



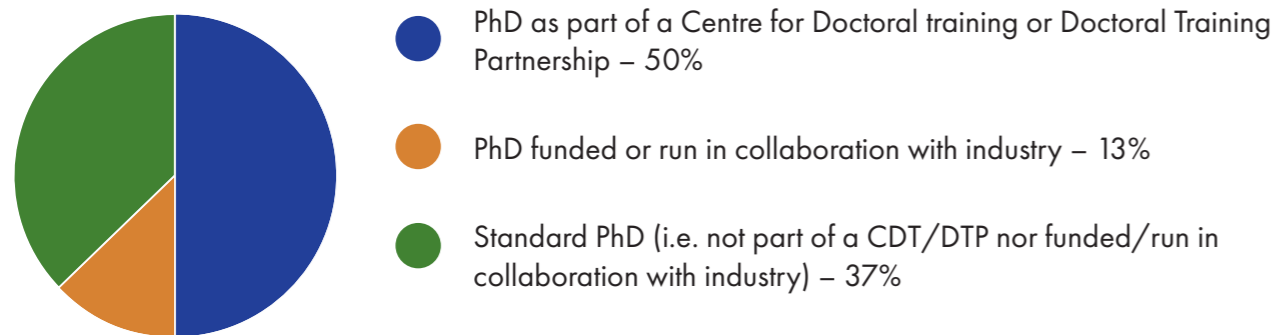
Student participation by PhD programme

- PhD as part of a Centre for Doctoral training or Doctoral Training Partnership – 38%
- PhD funded or run in collaboration with industry – 14%
- Standard PhD (i.e. not part of a CDT/DTP nor funded/run in collaboration with industry) – 48%

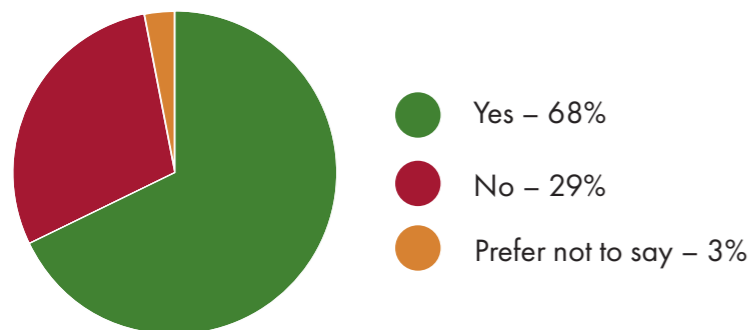
Methodology

Survey

The survey received 38 responses in total with a very small participant overlap with the focus groups. Unlike the focus groups and interviews, participants were drawn from a number of socioeconomic backgrounds, not only low-SES backgrounds.



Do respondents identify as being from a low-SES background:



The vast majority of survey respondents were completing or had completed their PhD on a full-time basis.

Participants from across the focus groups, interviews and survey represented 34 STEM disciplines, including neuroscience, aerospace engineering and pure mathematics.

Socioeconomic classification

The study focused on those who self-identified as being from a low-SES background using the below list as a guide. Participants were not required to meet all or even most of the points below. This was used as a binary measure (do or do not identify) rather than to place participants on a socioeconomic scale.

- A family income that is, or was, £35,000 or less during the PhD programme and/or the three years before the PhD programme
- Eligible for free school meals at any point during primary and secondary education years
- Care-experienced i.e. having spent time in local authority care or living at home under the supervision of the local authority
- Informal carer e.g. unpaid/non-professional carer for a family member, friend or neighbour
- Estrangement from parents or guardians
- Considered statutorily homeless
- Refugee, stateless person or asylum seeker

It is important to note that 'students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds' is a broad category and people who identify themselves under this category have varied preferences and requirements, especially given students' intersecting identities, which, though not explicitly examined, shaped the challenges they faced.

PhD Programme Categories

For this study, PhD programmes were broadly categorised into the following types:

- PhDs as part of a Centre for Doctoral Training (CDT) or Doctoral Training Partnership/Programme (DTP)
- PhDs funded or run in collaboration with industry
- Standard PhDs (i.e. not part of a CDT/DTP nor funded/run in collaboration with industry)

The group types for this study were developed based on the broad similarities in structure, support and funding that a PhD researcher may be expected to receive (e.g. those on a CDT/DTP are likely to be funded via UKRI).

'Standard PhD' structures and support can vary significantly but in the interest of this study's feasibility it was recognised that the standard PhD experience may differ from other structured formats.

Data and Findings

Focus group, interview and survey questions were all centred around exploring and identifying which PhD programme types, or aspects of PhD programmes, best support PhD students from low-SES backgrounds. Questions broadly fell under four categories: project characteristics, supervisors, socioeconomic background and wider research culture.

The results from the focus groups, interviews and survey have been grouped and presented by theme. Key themes that emerged about the factors that could influence PhD success included:

- Training and Development Opportunities
- Culture and Integration
- Supervision
- PhD Students and Employment Status
- Post-PhD Prospects

Each theme is explored in detail in the following sections but before this, two important underlying aspects, course structure and research funding, have been examined to give context to themes referenced above.

Core Underlying Factors: Research Funding and Course Structure

Research funding and course structure were aspects that underpin all the themes above.

Funding and finances emerged as a cross-cutting theme and a central factor influencing success on a PhD programme, particularly for those from low-SES backgrounds. Many participants, especially in the survey, reported financial pressures and a lack of fallback options, which compounded the challenges of pursuing a PhD. It was clear that a student's financial situation affected their ability to integrate with their research community.

Funding gaps towards the end of the PhD had been common amongst those who had already completed their degree and had taken longer to complete than expected. These delays can have a significant impact since funding gaps are likely to disproportionately affect those who rely on a stipend to cover living costs and cannot fall back on family support.

“Being from a low-socioeconomic background means I don't have anything to fall back on [if anything goes wrong with their PhD project]. I can't just pay money to transfer to work on another PhD programme straight away somewhere, nor do I have any rich family members to fall back on or support me financially during any unfunded or less funded working periods. [Yet] A PhD is obligatory for entry into my career.”

Both formal and informal programme structure was immediately highlighted by participants when asked which parts of their PhD programme supported their (or their PhD students') success. What each group focused on was revealing:

- The **standard PhD group** focused on how finding a peer group, and the support they received from this peer group, was important to their success. It was important that others in the department knew what they were working on so they could discuss their projects and have opportunities for informal presentation practice but also have an opportunity to make mistakes and use this as a learning opportunity. Some in the group spoke about how structured community-building was facilitated by the department or institution.
- The **CDT/DTP group** focused on the structure of their programme and how this enabled their success. Participants mentioned that completing rotations early on in their PhD helped them to identify the most suitable project/supervisor to complete their PhD, with one participant stating that picking the right lab determines a PhD student's success. Community was still very important to this group, and there was a broad agreement that there is a shared understanding and motivations with those from the same background.
- The **industry-sponsored group** focused on funding and motivation, with one respondent sharing that the structure of regular check-ins with the industry sponsor and the importance of their work to the company's success helped to motivate them.
- The **supervisor and PhD programme leader group** highlighted the structure of a PhD, including structured rotations, and the role of supervisors as particularly important for student success.

Training and Development Opportunities

KEY FINDINGS:

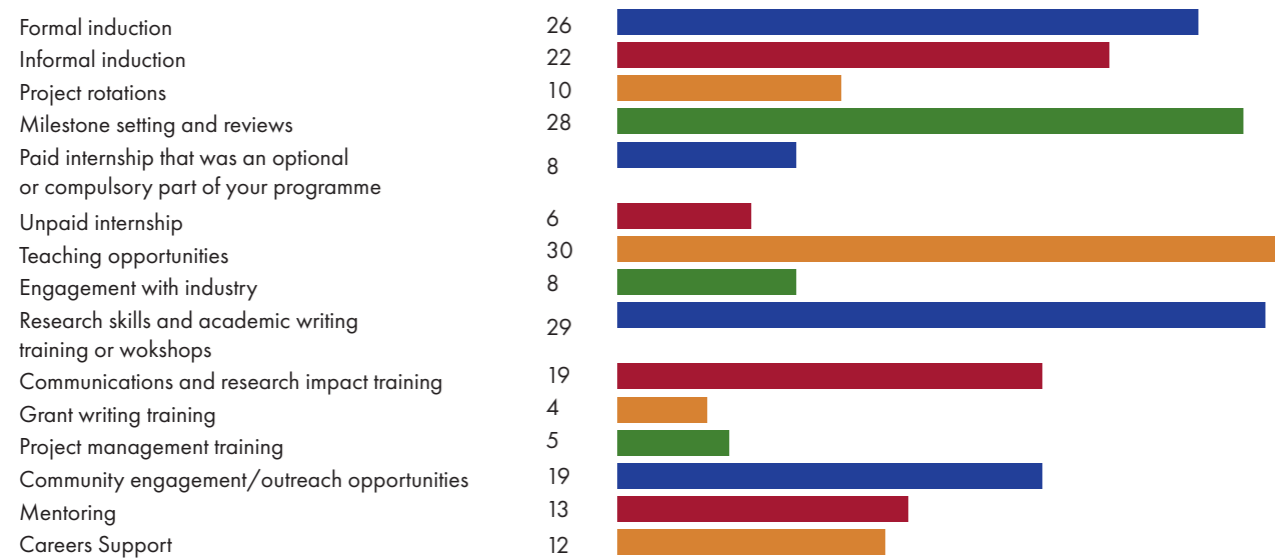
- Access to PhD training and networking is inconsistent across PhD programmes.
- Paid teaching roles were particularly valued by students from a low-SES background, often for both financial reasons and academic development.
- Networking opportunities had a high level of engagement across socioeconomic status, but where there was lack of engagement, two key barriers were financial cost and feeling out of place.

Researcher training and career development opportunities are important for PhD and career success and are key components that should be expected of doctoral training as set out by UK Research and Innovation.³ Part of this study investigated if there was a difference in access to and engagement with training and opportunities across PhD programmes and PhD student socioeconomic status.

Participants across all focus groups identified additional skills and structured opportunities as valuable to their PhD experience. Respondents told us that:

- Teaching and representative roles built leadership and classroom management skills (respondent undertaking a standard PhD)
- Compulsory cross-field internships added breadth (respondent undertaking a PhD in a CDT/DTP)
- Planning and project management skills were rated as equally important as technical mastery (respondent on an industry-sponsored PhD)

Following the varied training and opportunities that were reported by focus group and interview participants, the survey invited respondents to select which of the following training and opportunities they had available to them (see below graphic).



“Confidence, impostor syndrome, class discrimination [prevented me from engaging in networking opportunities].”

It is unsurprising that teaching opportunities, research skills training, and milestone setting and reviews are the most available opportunities, given that these are often compulsory parts of a PhD or strongly encouraged. Yet the least available opportunities (grant writing training, project management training, engagement with industry and internships) are still important skills and opportunities that support wider development of PhD students for careers in academia and industry. Those who did have access to the least available opportunities were overwhelmingly completing their PhD as part of a CDT/DTP, except in the case of engagement with industry, suggesting that PhD students on this programme type have an advantage in their professional development for their future career compared to those from other PhD programme types.

In addition to being one of the most available opportunities, opportunities to teach and mentor were cited as particularly useful, especially by those from a low-SES background. This was both due to the income it gave them (some of whom relied on this), and because it was useful to their research.

“Teaching opportunities meant living in the city was financially viable.”

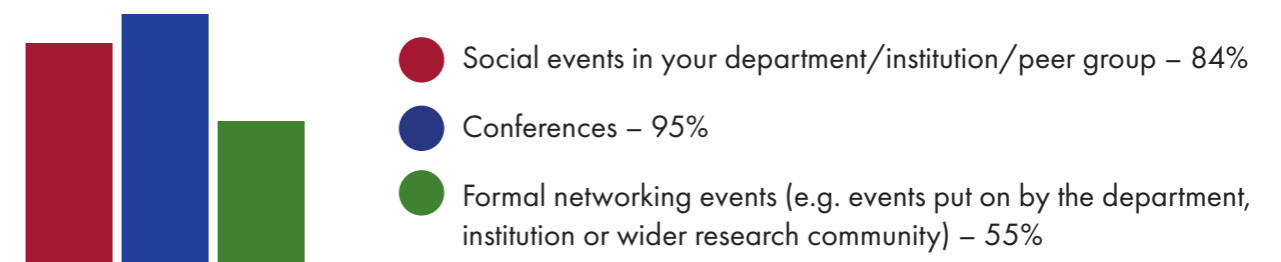
“Mentoring and training other students enhanced my leadership skills which I can leverage when applying to jobs.”

“Teaching is very important for me! This was very fulfilling and helped with understanding the fundamentals of my research.”

“Teaching opportunities - for the incredibly rewarding job and the extra pay.”

NETWORKING OPPORTUNITIES

Did you take part in the following networking opportunities?



Whilst overall engagement in networking opportunities was high, those from low-SES backgrounds were consistently less likely to engage in networking opportunities compared to those who were not from a low-SES background. 50% of those from low-SES backgrounds had engaged in formal networking as opposed to 73% of those not from low-SES backgrounds. The same can be seen with social events (81% vs 100% respectively) and conferences (92% vs 100% respectively). The most common barriers to engagement were financial and respondents feeling like they are out of place and do not fit in. Approximately 80% of those who commented that these were barriers came from respondents who identified as being from a low-SES background.

Culture and Integration

KEY FINDINGS:

- Being from a low-SES background was seen by participants as a factor that can hinder integration with peers and the broader research community.
- The culture around work-life balance and part-time work also emerged as a concern, with inconsistent support and greater strain reported by participants from low-SES backgrounds.

Previous research has shown that integration can be more challenging for those from low-SES backgrounds.⁴ This study delved into this by asking survey respondents to score out of five how much they felt that socioeconomic background affects the ability of a PhD student to integrate with the research community (with five being very much, and one not at all). Participants felt integration was hindered, with 87% of respondents scoring between a three and five.

WORK-LIFE BALANCE & PART-TIME JOBS

Good work-life balance is important to success in doctoral research, but it is not necessarily something all PhD students experience. Respondents reported that the working hours expectations of a supervisor can be shaped by the culture of a department or institution, particularly where practice on the ground differs from university policies.

“There is a lot of talk about having a healthy work-life balance, but I find that whether or not it’s adhered to depends on how much the individual PI agrees with this. If the PI doesn’t separate work life and free time, their labs seem to also have a poor work-life balance.”

“Supervisors expect students to be working on their PhD around the clock, dedicating every waking moment to their research. I have a part-time job alongside my PhD but I would never tell this to my supervisor.”

Part-time work enables students to reduce the impact of financial pressures. However, while part-time work is broadly permitted to an extent (provided it does not impact the PhD or students’ health, and is reduced during the write-up stage), the only work actively encouraged tends to be teaching, tutoring, or research-adjacent roles. This limits students’ options for supplementing their income. Notably, those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds were more likely to report negative institutional attitudes toward their part-time work, or negative personal experiences of how it was perceived. Some participants mentioned that worry about finances meant they had less energy to give to their research and to routinely engage with peers and others in the research community.

Supervision

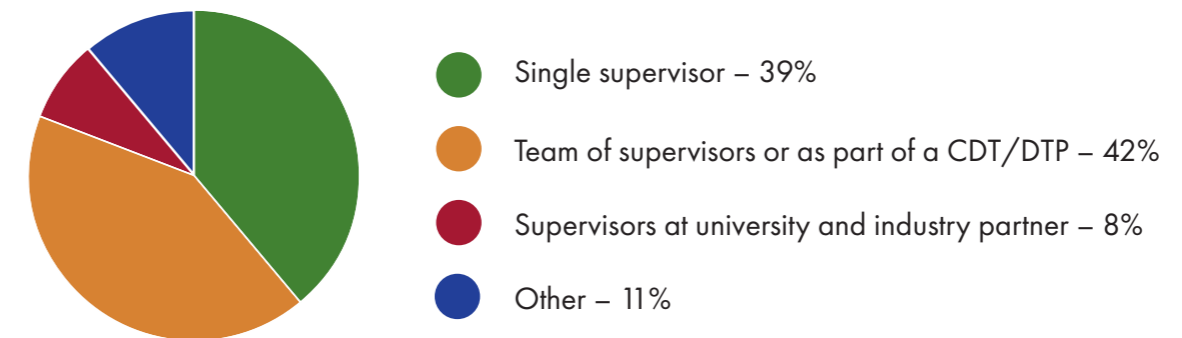
KEY FINDINGS:

- While most survey respondents reported positive supervision experiences, challenges remain around discussing personal issues with supervisors.
- There can be some difficulty accessing support to make the most of the supervisory relationship.

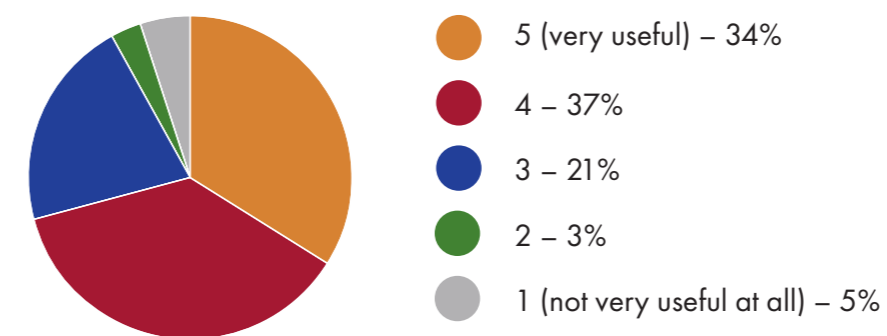
Our research revealed:

- Lack of uniformity in supervisor training – this was particularly highlighted at the PhD programme leaders’ focus group and in the personal experiences of PhD students.
- Supporting students holistically – CDTs and DTPs can extend support beyond direct research deliverables, enabling for broader professional development growth. Most PhD students do not go on to become academics – a good supervisor would help with a student’s growth and life goals.
- Secondary supervisors or supervisory teams can be very helpful in supporting the success of a PhD student, particularly when there are challenges with a primary supervisor or a PhD project spans different areas of knowledge.

A breakdown of the supervisory model experienced by survey respondents:



How useful survey respondents found their supervisory model:



Respondents completing a PhD through a CDT or DTP were more likely to rate their supervisory model as useful: 84% of CDT/DTP PhD students rated the supervisory model highly useful (4 - 5), versus 57% of standard PhD students.

Data and Findings

Several respondents spoke highly of the usefulness of having multiple supervisors.

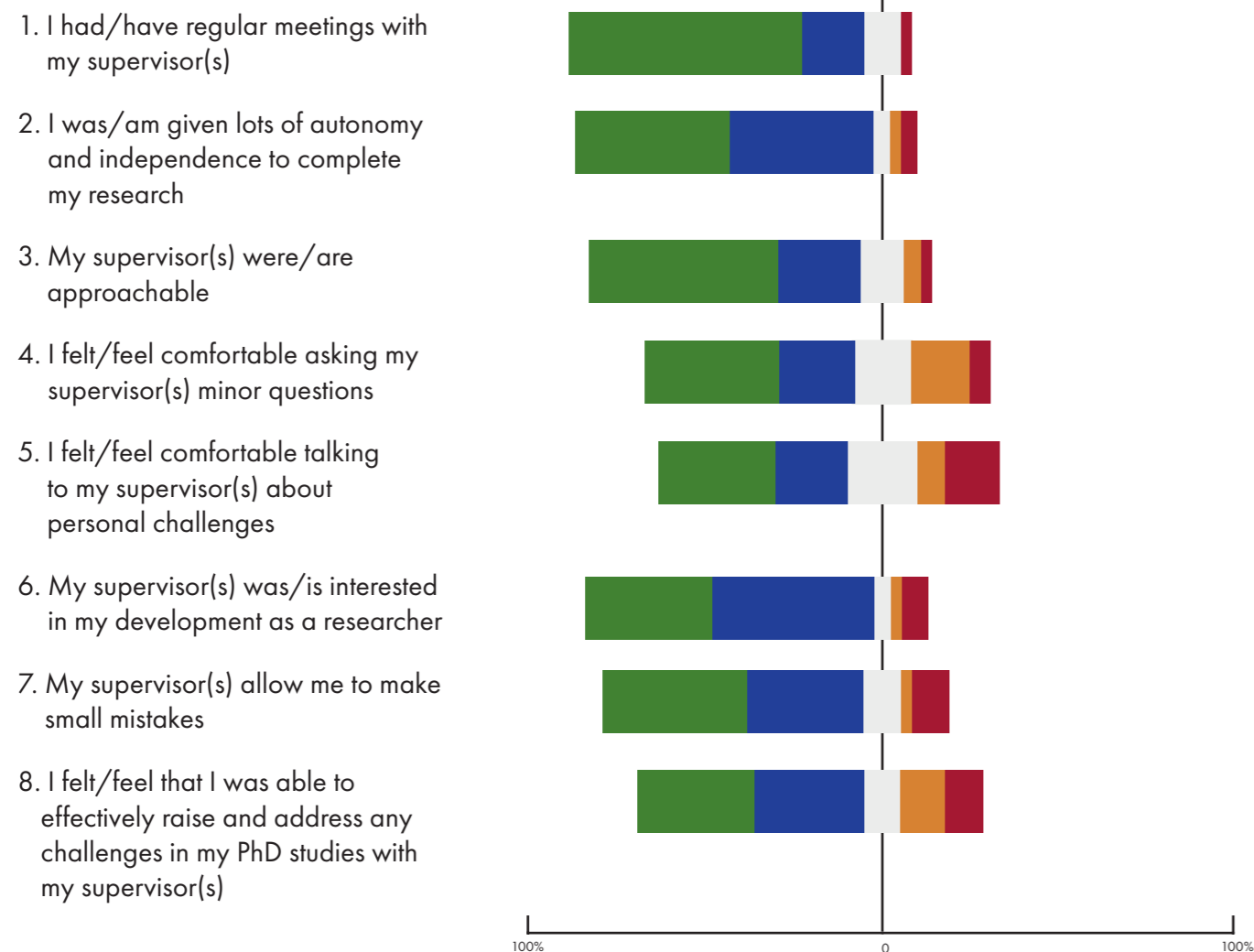
“Overall I’d say having multiple supervisors has been the most effective thing for supporting my success.”

“Having more than one supervisor allowed me to refer to a secondary person if one failed to perform their supervisory role.”

“I think really the projects should be more shared.”

Respondents were also asked to select how much they agreed with a range of statements surrounding supervisors and supervision.

● Strongly agree
 ● Agree
 ● Neither agree or disagree
 ● Disagree
 ● Strongly disagree



The fact that statements 4, 5 and 8 attracted the highest rates of disagreement points to a clear pattern: students are less comfortable navigating personal or sensitive conversations with their supervisors, than routine academic issues. Notably, almost a quarter of respondents did not feel comfortable discussing personal challenges – a concern echoed in interviews and focus groups, which emphasised how important it is for supervisors to show understanding and empathy around a student’s personal circumstances.

The systems and support in place to choose a well-suited supervisor and project, and to get the most out of the supervisory relationship, were also investigated.

- Out of those who were unclear on what project they wanted to undertake, 65% received support or access to resources to help them identify a PhD project and/or supervisor, with slightly more of these respondents on a CDT/DTP compared to other programme types.
- A greater proportion of those on standard PhDs did not receive support or resources from their institution on how to make the most of the student/supervisor relationship (67%) compared to those who are undertaking or who completed a PhD through a CDT or DTP (53%).

There were many instances of good supervisory practice that came from the study:

- Thesis panels
- Research degree handbook with a section on supervisors and expectations, including a checklist of what to discuss when first meeting
- Having a research degrees coordinator
- Access to a secondary supervisor at key milestones, to discuss how the primary relationship is working
- Having a (potentially more junior) secondary supervisor can be helpful to ask minor questions

“In my experience of leading early career networks across the UK for many years, as well as a supervisor and student, one of the more important aspects is: to have a very supportive supervisor. One who can give a good structure and directions to the PhD, especially to begin with. This is more important than, say, the location of the PhD programme.”

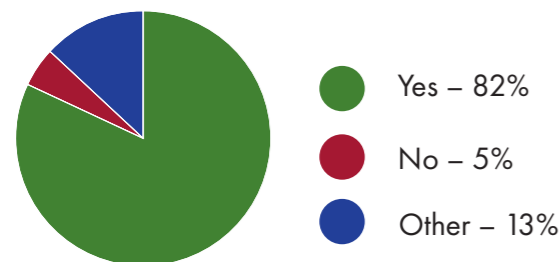
DR ART GOWER, UNIVERSITY OF SHEFFIELD

PhD Students and Employment Status

KEY FINDINGS:

- Former and recent PhD student participants are in favour of being treated as an employee or, at least to have aspects of employee status as part of completing a PhD, driven primarily by financial considerations.
- There was broad acknowledgement that there are benefits to both statuses (student and employee), but there was some concern about financial stability and delaying financial security by being classed as students.

Should PhD student be treated as employees:



The vast majority of survey respondents thought that PhD students should be treated as employees with consistency in this answer across different PhD programme types and socioeconomic background.

Some respondents took a nuanced take that PhD students should have aspects of both being a student and an employee (expectations and benefits), or that those undertaking PhDs should have status akin to apprentices or entry-level employees “not quite independent researchers, but more independent than [taught] students.”

Some participants did highlight benefits of student status:

- It was useful to have the flexibility of being a student, including flexible hours.
- Not feeling like they had a boss.
- Their stipend is not taxed and some other taxes such as council tax do not need to be paid as they are classed as students.
- Being a student reflects that whilst conducting research, they are still learning. There was a concern that this focus on learning could be lost if they were an employee or that the institution would have certain expectations of an employee that would interfere with PhD studies.

There were, however, significant concerns raised by participants regarding being a student rather than an employee:

- Lack of pension contributions during the PhD leading to concerns about financial challenges later in life, especially for those from low-SES backgrounds.
- Difficulty successfully applying for a mortgage due to financial status.
- Lack of financial stability in general which can lead to less time and energy for integrating with their research community.

- Some participants spoke of a lack of structure if a student needed to make a complaint.
- Struggle to maintain work-life balance as a student and a feeling that being an employee would offer stricter boundaries including work hours and annual leave.
- A respondent who was undertaking an industry-sponsored PhD stated that they already felt like an employee in how they related to their research and to the industry-partner.

Questions surrounding the workability of PhD students becoming employees have been raised in the context of UKRI’s New Deal for Postgraduate Research, which highlights concerns about cost implications and fewer students being funded. Broadly speaking, however, there was no clear consensus from respondents to the New Deal consultation with only an agreement that terms and conditions should be improved for postgraduate researchers.⁵

Regardless of the position taken on the status of PhD students, many underlying concerns can be addressed within current structures. HEIs could strengthen complaints procedures, improve how student rights are communicated, and introduce clearer limits on working hours. HEIs could also work with policymakers to improve doctoral students’ financial security, in addition to ensuring more consistent rights and conditions across institutions and funders.

Post-PhD Prospects

KEY FINDINGS:

- Most PhD students felt their doctoral experience positively supported their career goals, particularly through skill development, noting how the PhD is/was vital in order to access their preferred career.
- Some participants felt that limited engagement with industry and unclear pathways to non-academic careers had left them feeling underprepared.

When asked how the PhD had supported them in achieving their post-PhD goals, the majority of survey responses were positive, with many focusing on a PhD being essential for their future career, and/or that the PhD has helped them gain important experience and skills relevant for their career. Others highlighted the opportunities they were able to take part in during their PhD, for example, networking, internships, and how these were important for their career. This tracks clearly with the fact that almost 80% of survey respondents currently work or plan to work in a field related to their PhD.

“I wanted to be a researcher, and so I needed a PhD to do this. I have obtained my dream postdoc due to meeting my now boss at a conference I went to at the end of my PhD.”

A small number of respondents felt that not being able to engage with industry or other opportunities has hindered their career development. Other responses were more negative regarding the attitude of employers towards those with PhDs.

“I feel like there wasn’t enough information on job roles I could go into outside the regular industry or academic route. I am currently pivoting to [a non-research field] since finishing my PhD and I wish I had more information about it earlier like students in the golden triangle.”

⁵ UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) (2023) *New Deal for Postgraduate Research: Analysis of responses to the Call for Input*. Swindon: UKRI. Available at: <https://www.ukri.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/UKRI-020423-New-Deal-for-Postgraduate-Research-Analysis-of-responses-to-Call-for-Input.pdf> (Accessed: 21 April 2026).

Conclusion

This study set out to explore how students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds experience support across different PhD programme types. The findings reveal several consistent themes, each carrying implications for institutions, funders and policymakers.

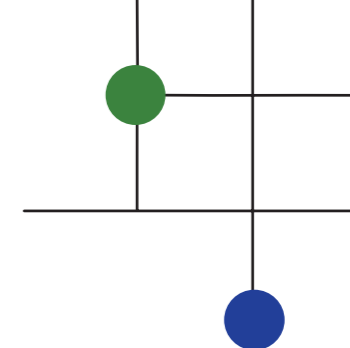
Some findings affect all PhD students, but the impacts of the issues explored, such as access to networking opportunities, often fall hardest on those from low-socioeconomic backgrounds. Many of the potential suggestions for improvement could not only ensure PhD students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds succeed, but lead to a more supportive environment for all postgraduate researchers.

Financial Precarity

Financial precarity cuts across every aspect of the PhD experience and was a central factor shaping outcomes for students from low-SES backgrounds. Financial pressures influenced students' ability to engage in research opportunities and affected their integration into academic culture. Paid teaching roles were particularly valued, not only for income but also for professional development, while lack of financial security often heightened feelings of exclusion or "not belonging". In this context, programme structure becomes especially important, acting as a buffer against unequal access to opportunities.

Research Culture & Integration

The research culture in which PhD students operate can have a significant impact on their ability to succeed. There is increased work around improving research culture, that is improving the "behaviours, values, expectations, attitudes and norms of our research communities",⁶ to expand beyond the focus on pure research outcomes at the expense of everything else. However, the findings from this study show there are still concerns around attitudes and expectations towards work-life balance and part-time work. There is inconsistent support and greater strain reported by participants from low-SES backgrounds, meaning students from this background are put under greater pressure. More generally, being from a low-SES background was seen by participants as a factor that can hinder integration with peers and the broader research community. The research community needs to ensure that undue pressure is not exerted upon those from low-SES backgrounds which is where the implementation of consistent rights and conditions across HEI providers would generate benefits.



Structure

It is evident that programme and support structures play a vital role in supporting success during a PhD, particularly for students from low-SES backgrounds. Whether through formal mechanisms like rotations and structured opportunities that often come with a CDT or DTP, or through consistent supervisory models with regular contact points, structure helps create a more stable and supportive environment. Solid PhD structures can also help safeguard against exploitation and overwork, ensuring that students are protected and empowered throughout their research journey. This is particularly important to those from low-SES backgrounds who often cannot fall back on family support.

PhD Students as Employees

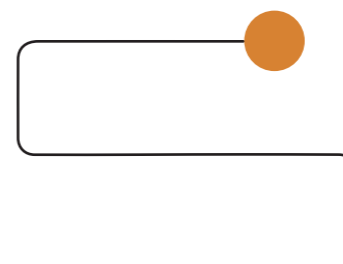
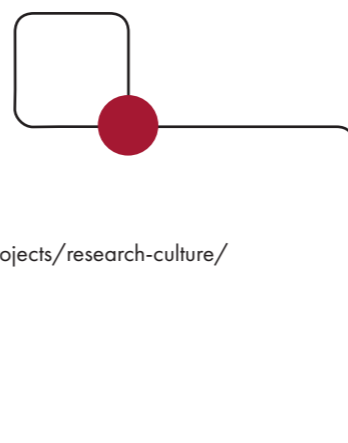
The findings also raise broader questions about how PhD students are positioned within institutions. Many participants expressed a preference for aspects of employee status, driven largely by concerns about financial stability and working conditions. While there was recognition of the benefits associated with student status, the appeal of hybrid models suggests a need for further exploration of employment protections, working hours, and the long-term finances of students (e.g. mortgages and pensions) across the sector. While an important focus for individual HEIs, these findings highlight how policymakers' involvement could support sector-wide changes.

Post-PhD Prospects

Greater attention should also be paid to post-PhD trajectories, particularly for students from low-SES backgrounds, ensuring they are supported not only to complete their PhDs, but to transition into secure and fulfilling careers beyond them.

Data Collection

A major barrier remains: institutions do not routinely collect socioeconomic data on their PhD students. This limits the ability of institutions and researchers in this space to gain deeper insights into the experiences of PhD students from different socioeconomic backgrounds and on different programme types, and therefore to support the creation of conditions for success. Addressing this gap is essential if inequalities in PhD experiences and outcomes are to be meaningfully reduced.



Conclusion

Looking Ahead

At Martingale, we have seen firsthand how financial support and structured opportunities, such as the PhD Leadership Programme and other training and engagement opportunities, can make a significant difference in the confidence and success of postgraduate students. Ensuring that talented scholars have the assistance, funding and structure to take up these opportunities is essential. This research reinforces the importance of structured, well-resourced support, particularly for those without access to family or financial safety nets. Looking ahead, Martingale will continue to fund and support opportunities for Martingale Scholars to develop skills that can support them in a variety of careers, such as networking opportunities, project management skills, and public speaking; but we also move forward with a greater understanding of what aspects of PhD programme types best support those from low-socioeconomic backgrounds.

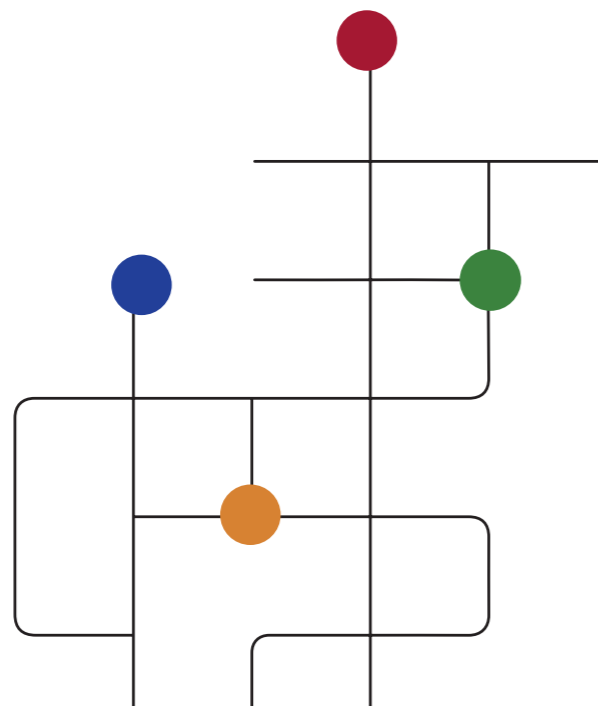
This research sits within Martingale's growing policy and advocacy work to address structural barriers shaping access to, and success within, postgraduate study.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to all participants for generously giving up their time and engaging with the study. Their insights and willingness to be candid about their experiences as PhD students, PhD programme leaders and supervisors led to fruitful discussion in the focus groups and revealing experiences from the survey.

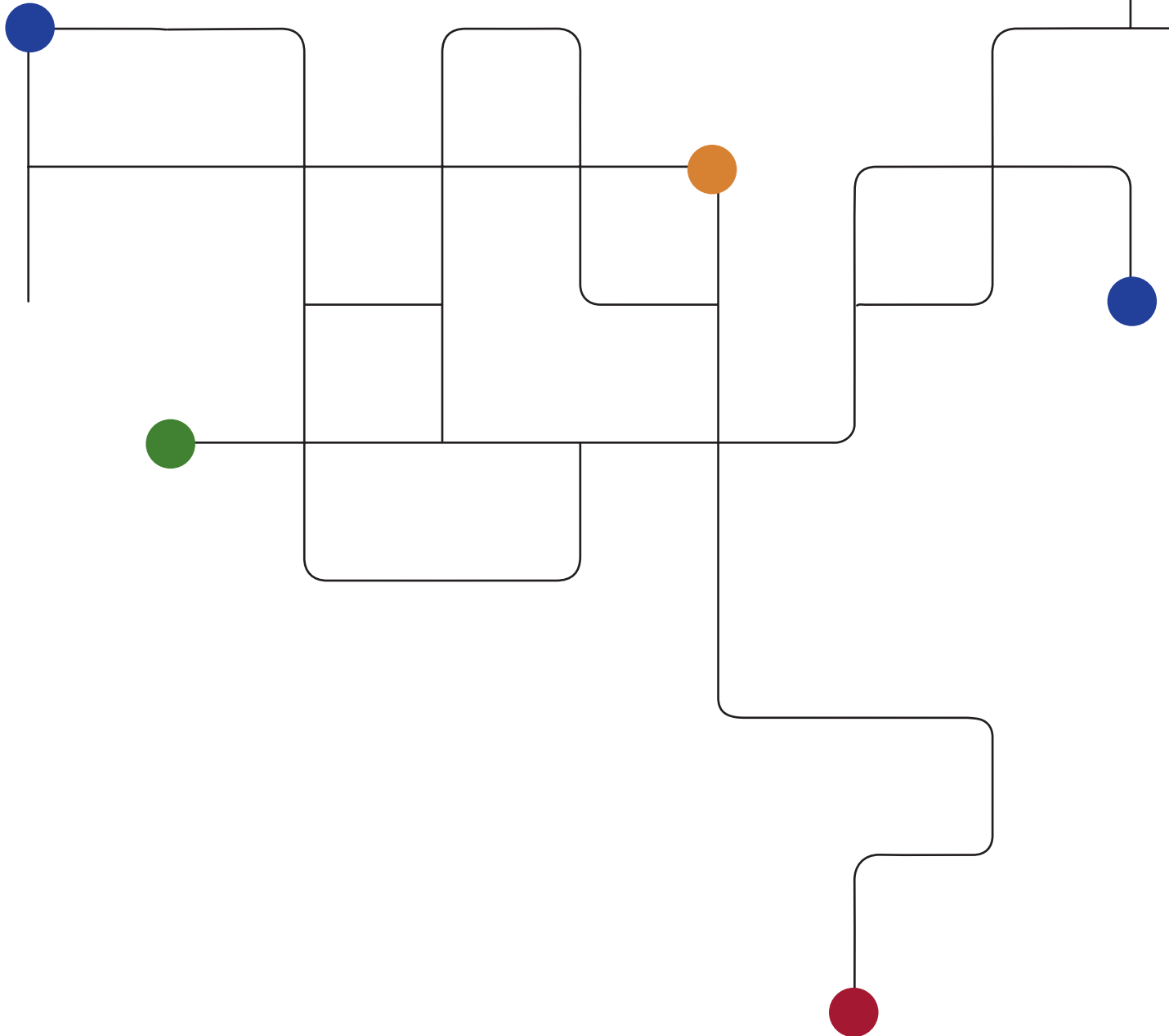
Thank you to everyone who helped promote this study - whether by sharing participant call-outs or connecting us with potential participants.

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