

PhD Life: The UK student experience

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Higher Education Policy Institute

HEPI Report 131

The UK PhD Student Experience



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PhD students and their careers

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HEPI Policy Note 25

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Key findings

- Most PhD students (88%) believe their doctorate will positively impact their career prospects.
- PhD students are almost equally more (33%) and less (32%) likely to pursue a research career after they started their PhD than before, with the majority stating academic (67%) research or research within industry (64%) as a probable career path.
- The most commonly given reason for PhD students wanting to stay in academia is greater interest in their subject of study (40%).
- Reasons for wanting to leave academia vary – the most commonly cited reason is a lack of work-life balance (20%).
- PhD students are more confident their degree is preparing them for an academic research career (81%) than one straddling both academia and industry (47%), or a non-research career (33%).
- They feel well trained in analytical (83%), data (82%) and technical (71%) skills, along with presenting to specialist audiences (81%) and writing for peer-reviewed journals (64%).
- They are less confident of their training in managing people (26%), finding career satisfaction (26%), applying for funding (22%) and managing budgets (11%).
- When considering future careers, PhD students are more likely to do their own research (64%) or attend careers workshops (76%) and networking events (60%) than to discuss options with an institutional careers consultant (13%).

July 2020

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Method



*What researchers think
about the culture they work
in*


- Survey of 7,646 researchers at all levels
- Published Jan 2020
- 99% confidence interval 2% margin of error



PhD Survey 2019

- Survey of 6,320 PhD students worldwide
- Published November 2019
- 95% confidence interval 5% margin of error

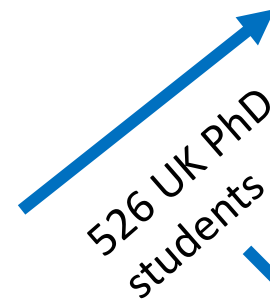
548 UK PhD students



PhD Life: the UK Student experience

- Total sample size 1,069
- 95% confidence interval
- 5% margin of error

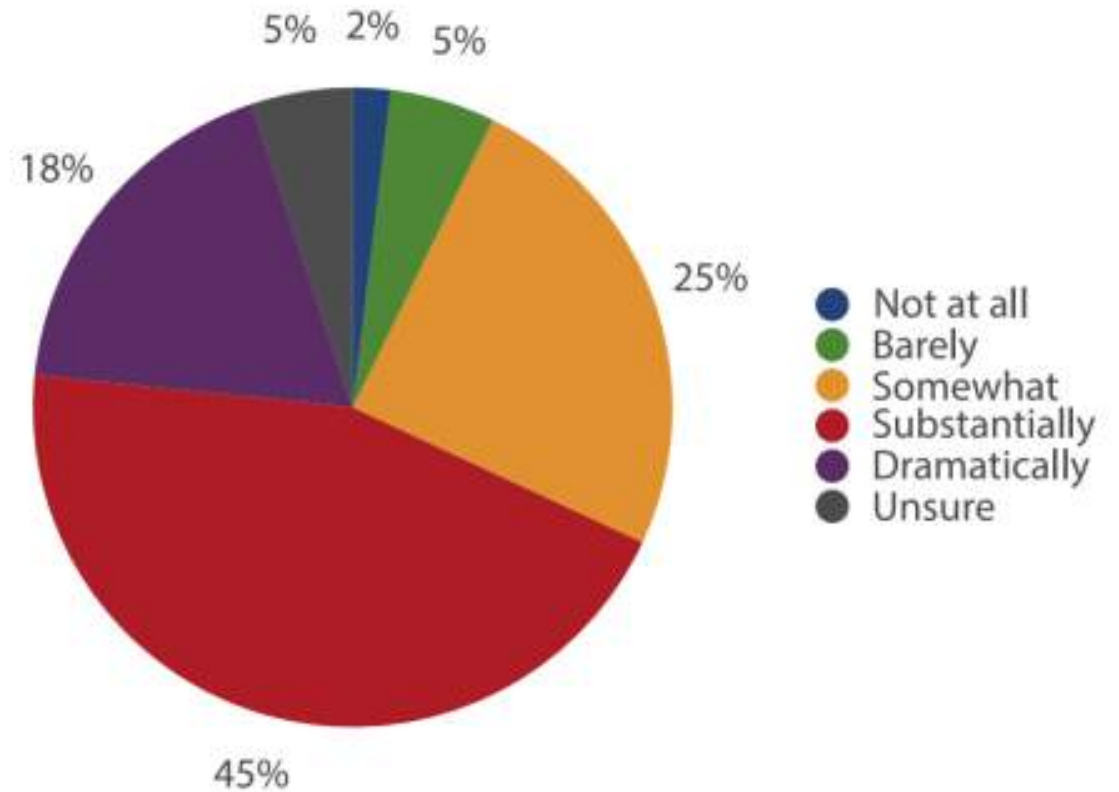
526 UK PhD students



PhD students and their careers

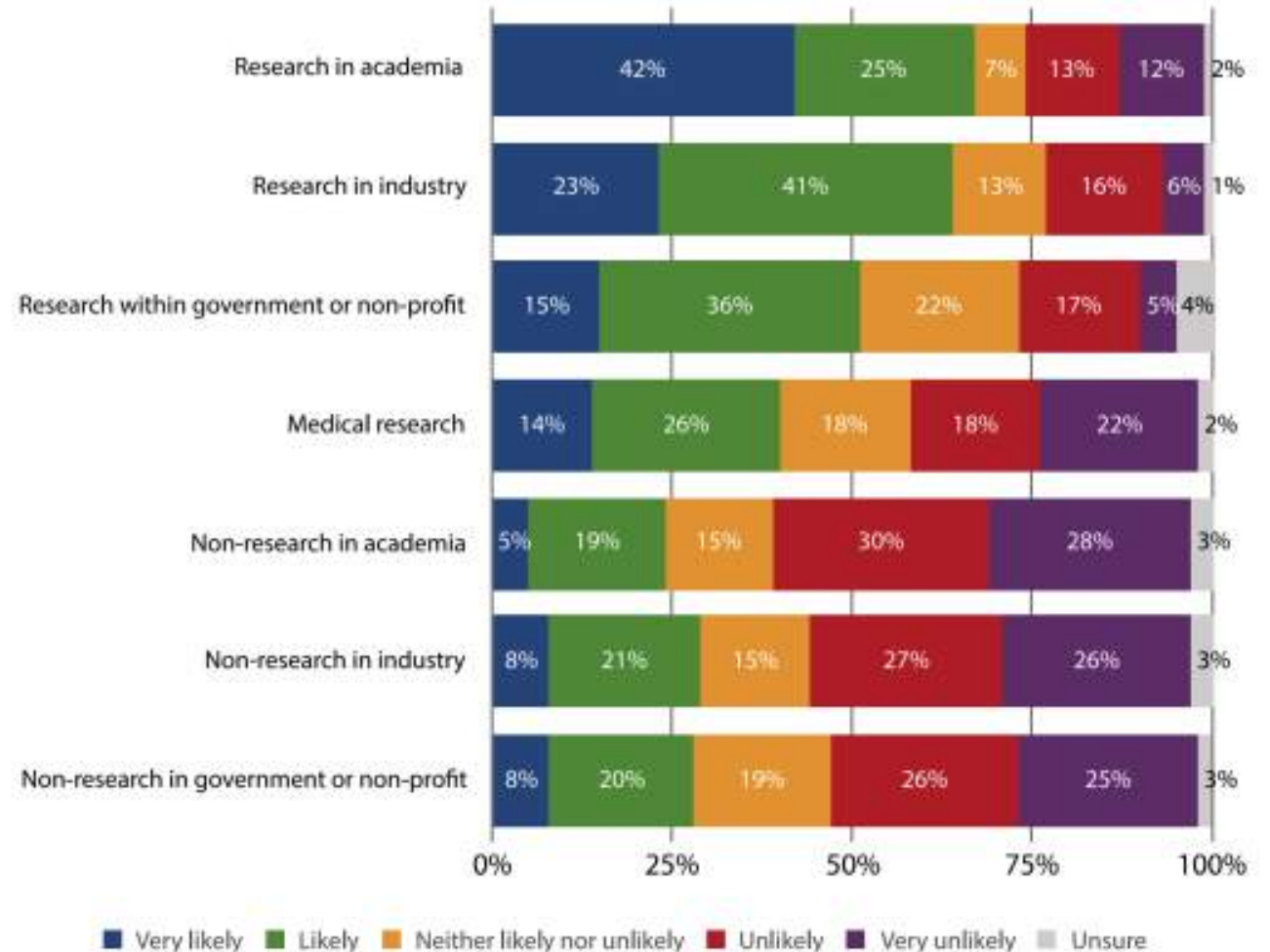
Do PhD students think their degree will improve their career prospects?

- 88% of PhD students believe a PhD will improve their career prospects
- One-sixth think this improvement will be 'dramatic'



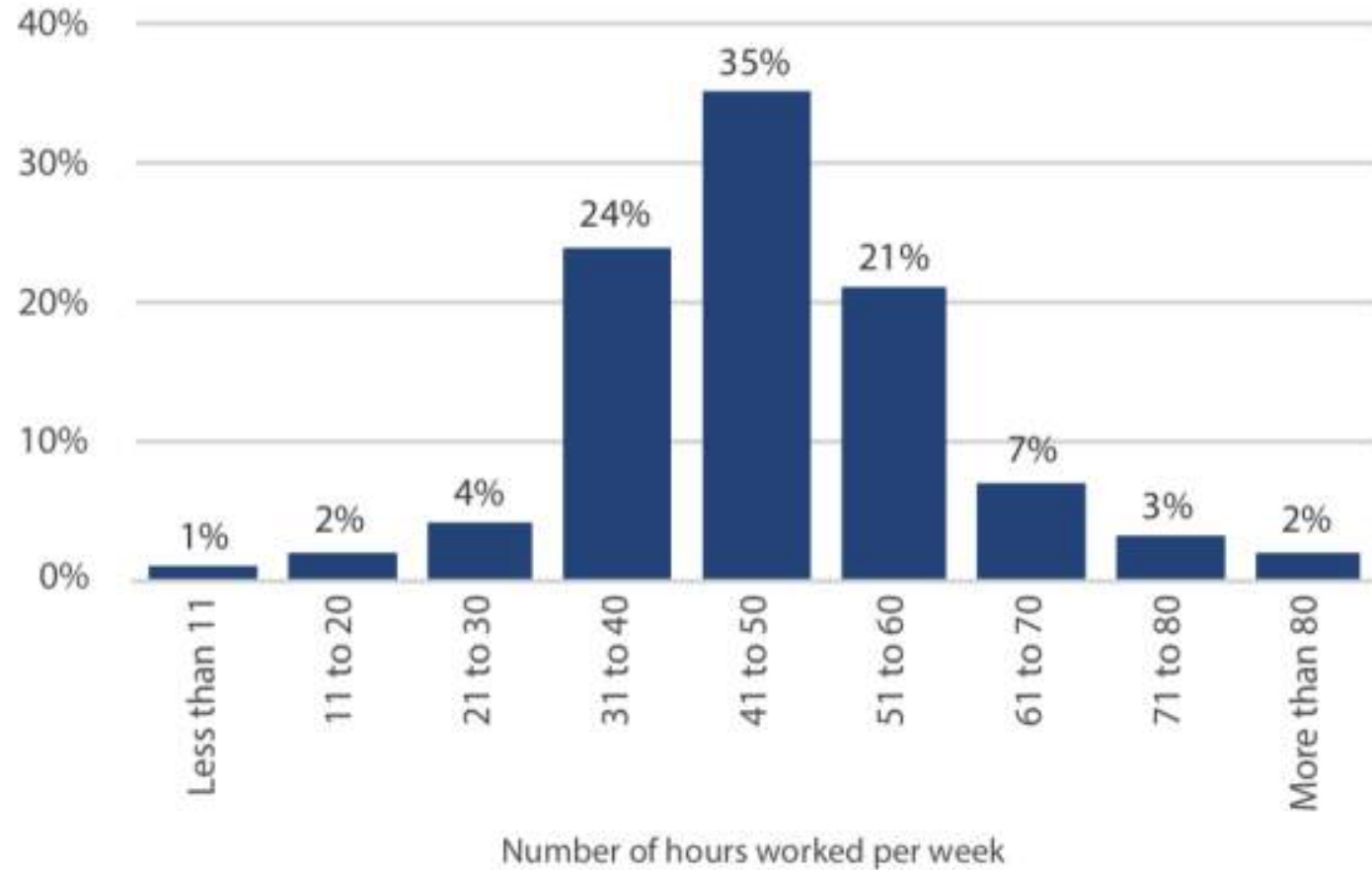
Which career path will PhD students take after graduation?

- The majority want to go into research, most commonly academic research
- PhD students understand their career prospects are uncertain so many paths are seen by them as equally likely



How hard do PhD students work?

- Average PhD student works **47 hours per week**
- 50% more than average full time undergraduate*
- Only 3 hours less per week than average staff member**

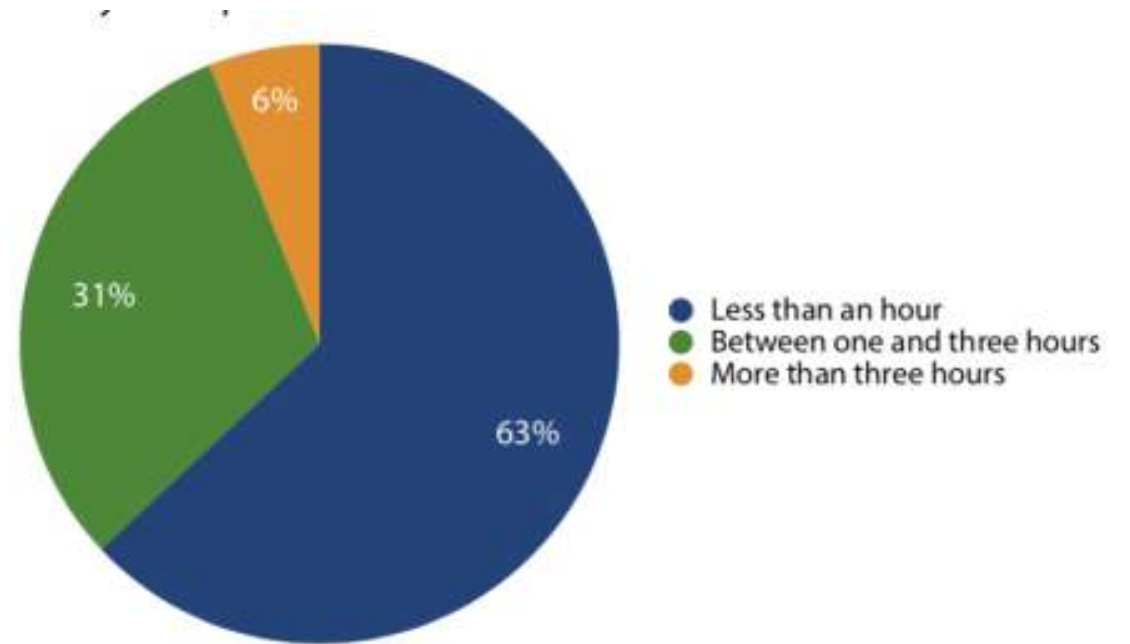


* HEPI and Advanced HE Annual Student Academic Experience Survey

**UCU, Workload Survey, 2016

How much time do PhD students spend with supervisors?

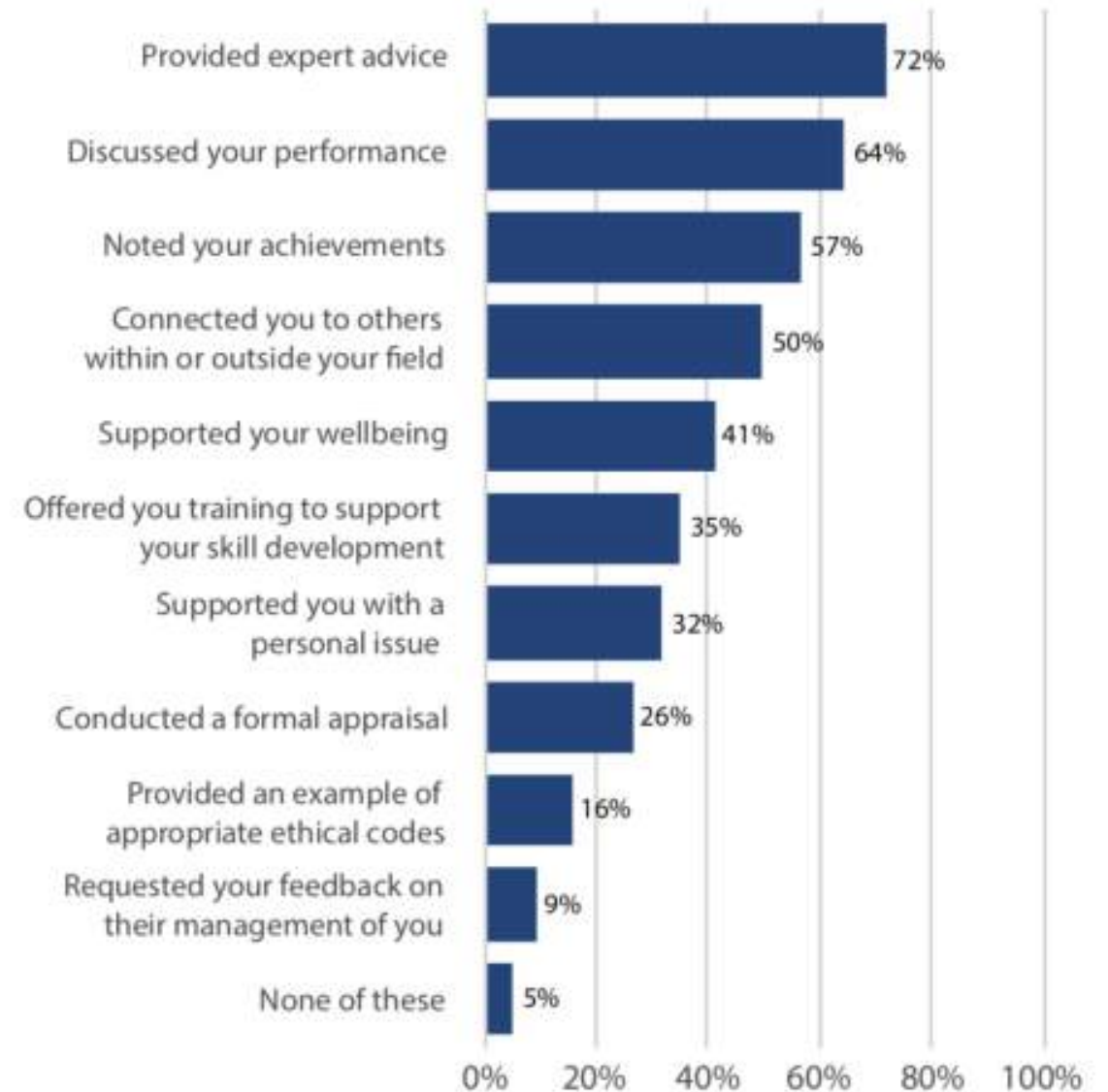
- Supervisors are responsible for guiding PhD students through their research project
- PhD students aren't in cohorts, they work as individuals
- They (or their funders) pay tuition fees for supervision



What do supervisors do?

- Supervisors can be the only point of contact for PhD students, who generally work alone
- Most give technical advice
- Some provide wellbeing support
- Some offer broader advice around careers and development

Has your supervisor, principal investigator or manager done any of the following within the last 12 months?



Does the PhD affect wellbeing?

What is your experience of academia?

Being very isolated. Being treated like a student who doesn't know what they're doing whilst simultaneously being expected to behave like a member of staff in terms of working hours, commitment and taking on administrative/support roles that are beyond my studies.

Have you ever sought help for anxiety or depression caused by PhD study?

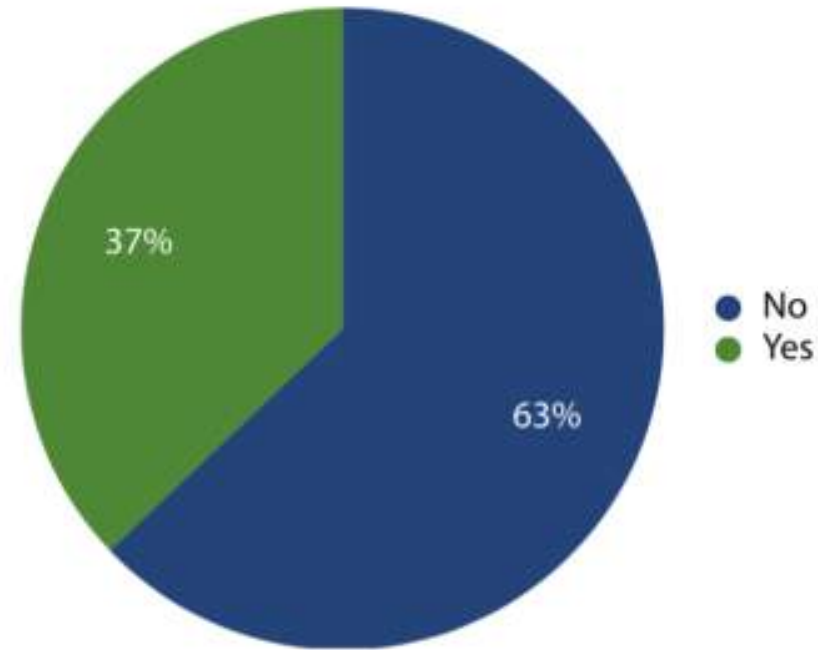
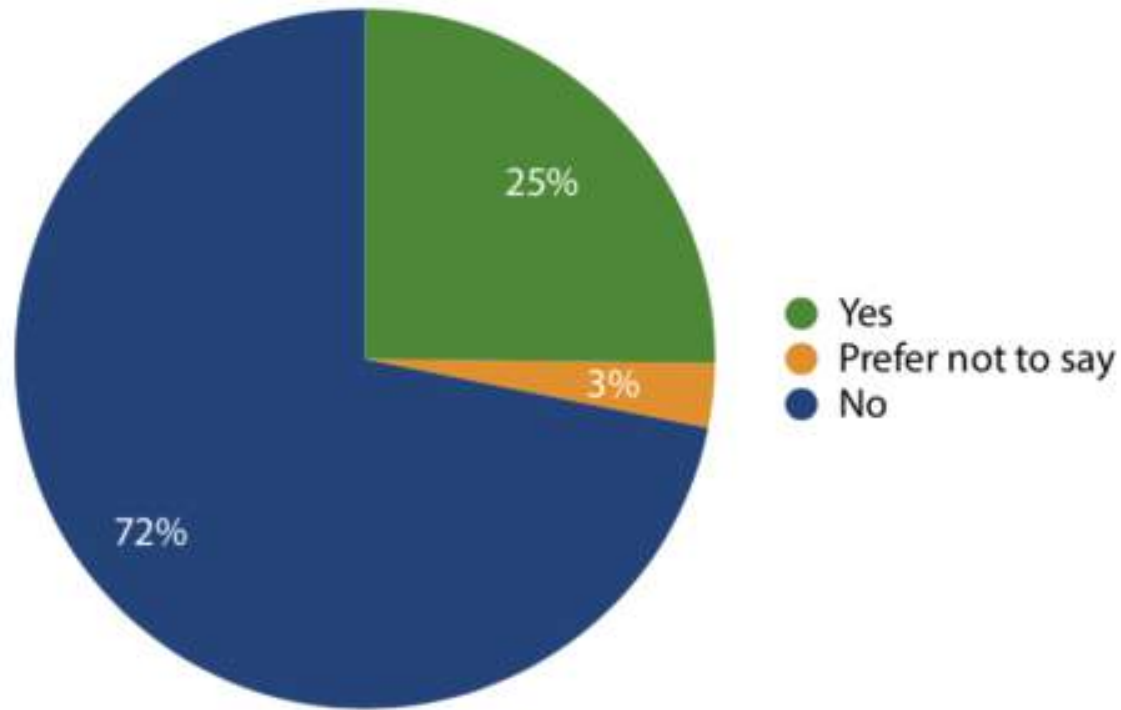


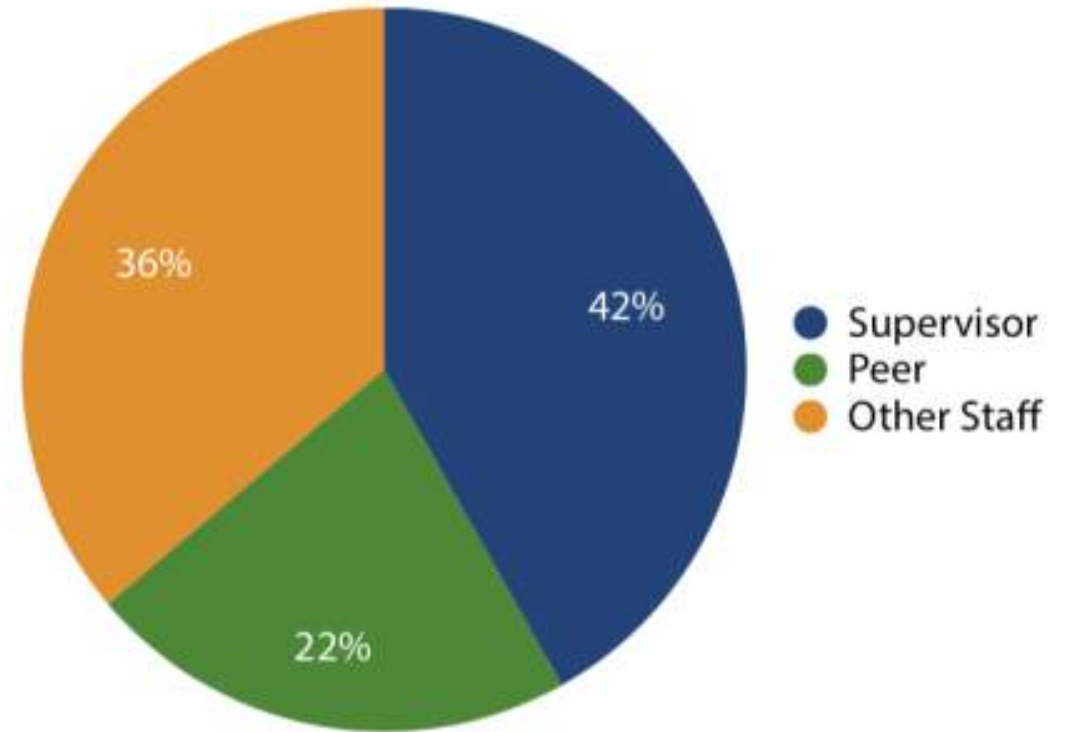
Figure 12: Base: 523/526 Nature respondents.

Reports of Bullying and Harassment

Have you experienced bullying during your PhD?

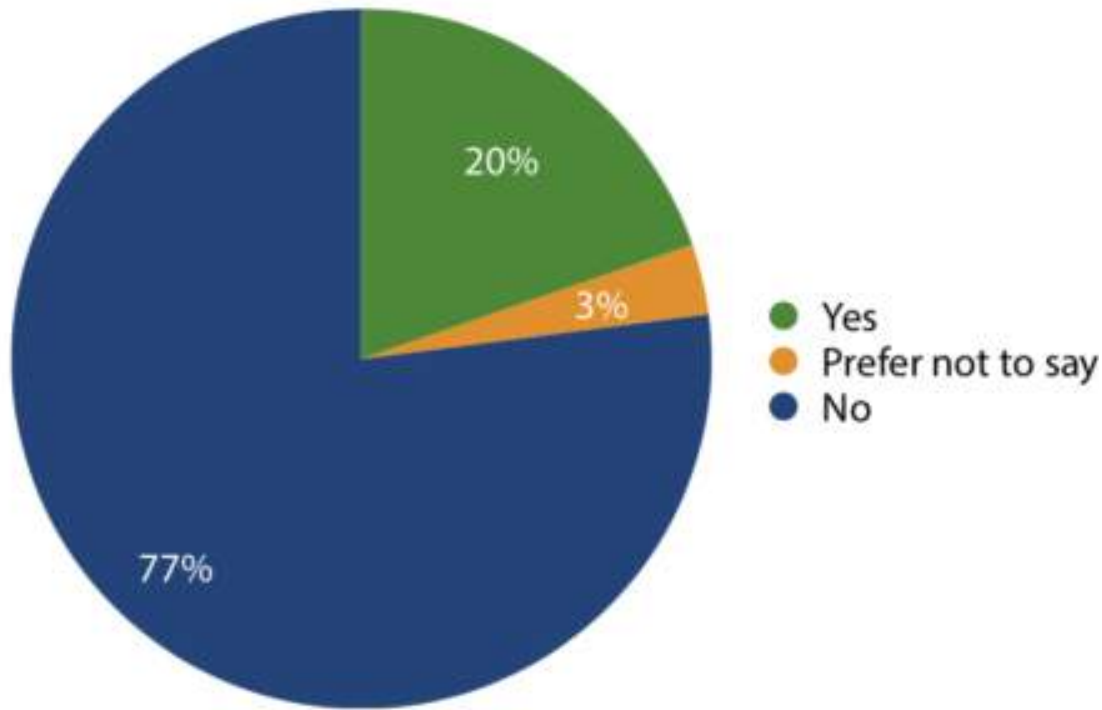


Who bullied you?

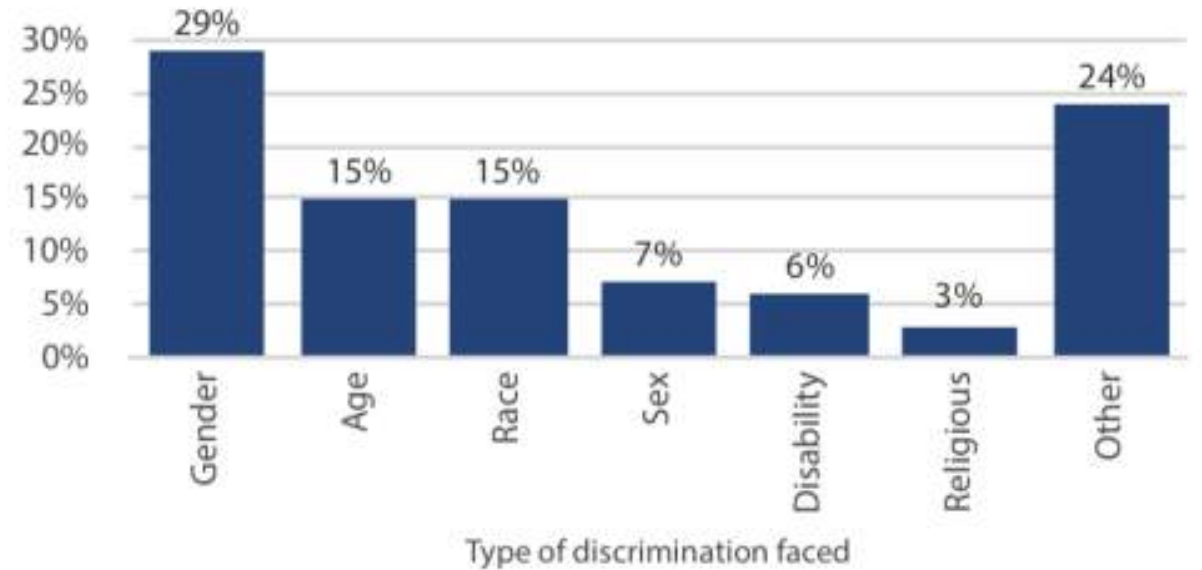


Reports of Discrimination

Have you faced discrimination?



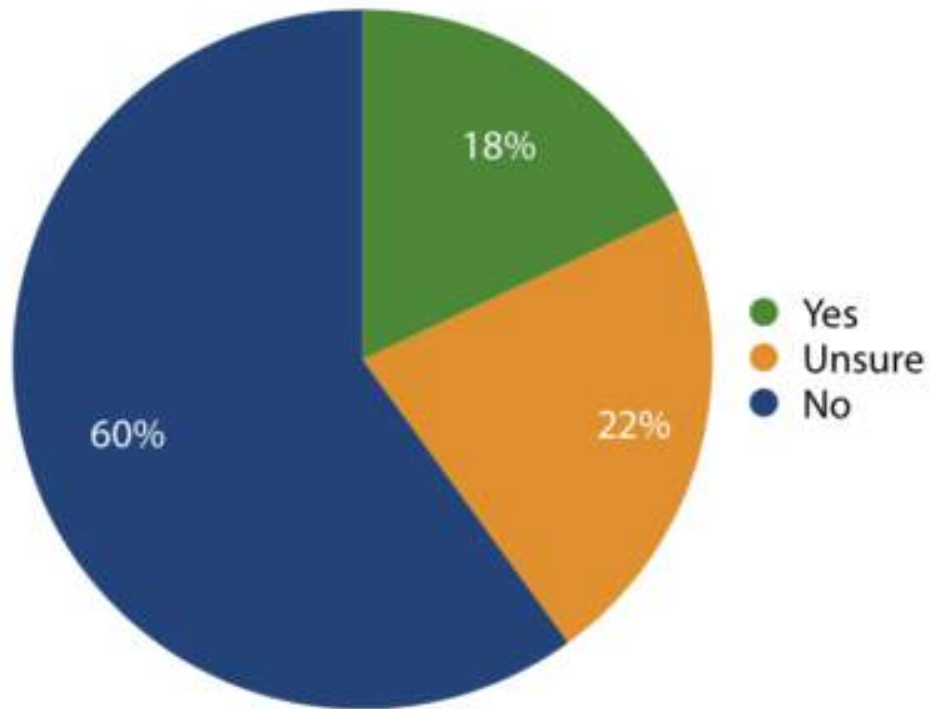
Type of discrimination faced by PhD students



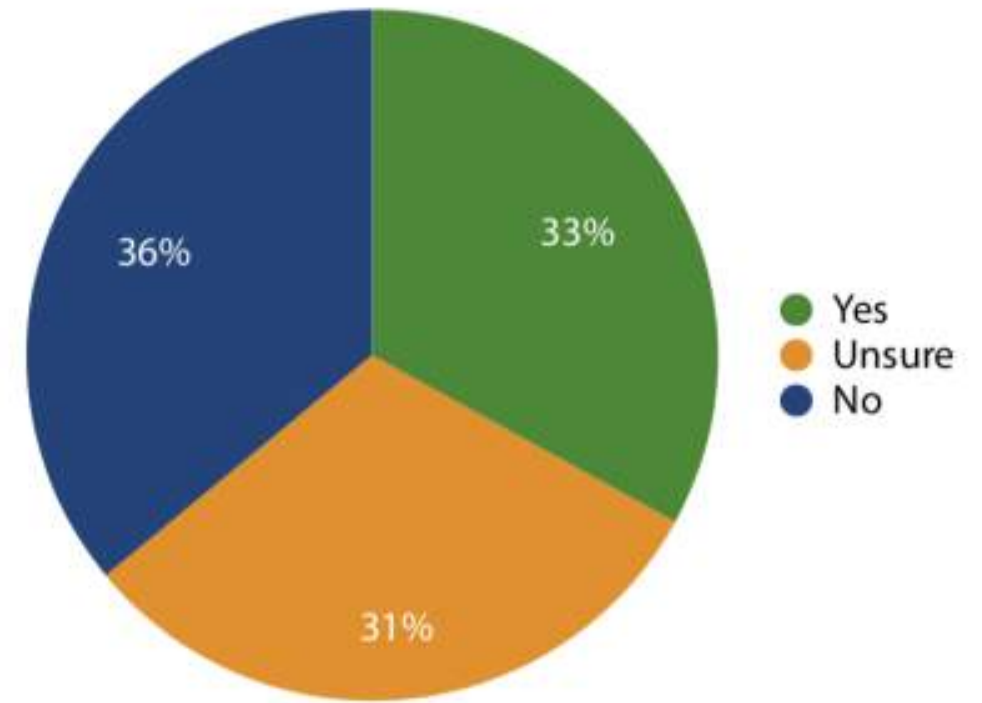
Do PhD students feel they can speak out about bad experiences?

Do you feel able to speak about your experiences without negative personal consequences?

A. Just those who have been bullied



B. Including those who have not been bullied



Policy recommendations

1. PhD students earning a stipend should be included in NEST, the government - backed workplace pension scheme
2. Institutions should provide supervisors with appropriate and regular leadership training and training on giving careers advice.
3. Institutions should do more to ensure PhD students feel empowered to speak out about challenging issues, either as individuals or as cohorts, where there is a more systemic problem.
4. Funders should do more to ensure that their PhD students are given the opportunity to raise concerns about bullying, harassment or discrimination in a neutral environment, where claims can be investigated impartially.
5. HESA should include careers information relevant to PhD students in its Graduate outcomes data e.g. academic research as a career destination

Concluding Reflections

