

ACCESSIBILITY REVIEW & REPAIR

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List of Terms and Abbreviations

Access:

Access focuses on environments rather than individuals (Michalko 2001). Our study addresses the definition of access under the principles of Universal Design (Hamraie 2013) which considers access as a collective and intersectional engagement, rather than predicated on addressing the needs of the individual (such as specific disabilities, impairments, barriers). By framing access as a direct intervention to current problems, existing routes of accommodation, by comparison, may be deemed overly prescriptive and unfit for purpose (Price 2024).

Accommodation:

Accommodation is a change made to an inaccessible environment for the benefit of one individual. Many faculty or students have needs that are specific to their situation and which may not require large-scale environmental or cultural change. However, arranging accommodations on a case-by-case basis may also mean that the “problem” is seen as an individual one, so that the inaccessible environment does not change, or at best, the problem is addressed only retrospectively (Yergeau et al., 2013).

Northern Bridge Consortium (NBC) and Higher Education Institutions (HEI):

Northern Bridge Consortium is a doctoral partnership facilitated by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), between seven higher education institutions including Durham University, Newcastle University, Northumbria University, Queen’s University Belfast, Sunderland University, Teesside University, and Ulster University.

Responses from survey and interview participants have been considered in their entirety. Some issues mentioned have been related to the University, where others

relate to issues specific to Northern Bridge. As such, the responses detailed here expose a distinct lack of clarity in knowing which organisation bears responsibility for addressing each issue.

Student Cohort:

References to the 'Student Cohort' is inclusive of postgraduate students in receipt of funding from Northern Bridge Consortium. These students may be at any stage of study: from new PhDs, right through to researchers in their fifth and sixth years (if part-time).

Bureaucracy:

In the context of this study, the terminology of 'bureaucracy' reflects how participants have themselves chosen to describe the administration of paperwork relating to, for example, admission into the PhD; Northern Bridge small and large funding grants (up to £750; up to £2,000); requests for leave of absence or interruption in study. This terminology is often used to connote the negative experience of navigating these processes and procedures, reflecting the language used by participants themselves.

Selected Acronyms:

AHRC: Arts and Humanities Research Council

CDA: Collaborative Doctoral Award

DSA: Disability Student Allowance

DTP: Doctoral Training Partnership

EDI: Equality, Diversity, Inclusion

EOM: Equal Opportunities Monitoring Form

HEI: Higher Education Institution

NBC: Northern Bridge Consortium

Executive Summary

Accessibility: Review and Repair is a project which advocates for tailored access support for postgraduate students funded through the Northern Bridge Consortium, a UKRI Doctoral Training Partnership spanning universities in the North East of England and Northern Ireland. The study is comprised of mainly an anonymous survey (n=54) and semi-structured interviews (n=9).

Key Findings:

- **Difficulty obtaining information:** Navigating websites, documents, and administrative processes is challenging.
- **Bureaucratic and financial obstacles:** Complex funding and application processes, along with financial constraints, are major barriers.
- **Depersonalised support systems:** Need for more adaptable NBC and university support (e.g., office hours) for accessibility and financial matters.
- **Time-related difficulties:** Balancing work, programme uncertainties, inflexible schedules, and short notice for events caused barriers.
- **Wellbeing concerns and mental Health Conditions:** Stress, isolation, loneliness, and mental health conditions were prevalent, often linked to other barriers.
- **Intersectional experiences:** Students can be disadvantaged due to several factors at the same time (e.g., disability, mental health, age, low income, gender and LGBTQIA+ backgrounds).
- **‘All or nothing’ in support experiences:** Support was either satisfactory or demonstrably lacking, leading to notable disruption to the course of study.
- **Geographical isolation:** Distance, remote working and a lack of parity in provision between campuses in the North East and Northern Ireland has negatively impacted on opportunities for interdisciplinary networking, accessing resources, and increased travel costs.

- **Ageist biases in academia:** Materials, training, and structures not adequately cater to mature students and their various needs (e.g., caring responsibilities, recognition of their work).

Key Areas for NBC to Investigate:

- **Guidance with information and administration:** The NBC website and documentation, PhD application process, study modes, collaborative doctoral awards.
- **Funding and financial support:** HEI and NBC administrations should investigate routes for additional funding and support for students with caring responsibilities.
- **Placements:** There are particular financial and administrative challenges faced by part-time, international and/or disabled student looking to undertake placement opportunities as part of NBC's commitment to professional development.
- **Inclusivity and intersectionality in representation and support:** accommodations should acknowledge the needs of diverse identities and backgrounds, including age, gender, and ethnicity.
- **Overcoming isolation with a PhD community:** A pervading feeling of loneliness among those surveyed and interviewed as part of the project highlights the need to foster peer-networks across the student cohort.

Key Recommendations:

- **Northern Bridge Website:** Improve navigation, ease accessing information and whom to contact for which issue, improve design for user-friendly experience, add alt-texts and integrate an assistive toolbar for better accessibility.
- **Northern Bridge Documentation:** Enhance clarity and accessibility by step-by-step and easy-to-read documents and consider different media (e.g., workflows, video clips) for better engagement.

- **Funding and Financial Support:** Increase transparency regarding stipends, annual/paternal/sick leaves, expand the concept of grants to assistive subscriptions, resources and supplies, and minimise the need for self-advocacy in grant applications. Financially support home students, particularly disabled students, international students, part-time students, students with caring responsibilities, and disadvantaged backgrounds.
- **Administration and Bureaucracy:** Simplify and streamline the application processes and offer personalised support (e.g., visa) with office hours, consider the individuals' intersectionality of the funding applications. Establish a centralised support system to bridge the gaps between NBC and HEIs.
- **Placements:** Financially support part-time and international students who are disadvantaged due to lesser funding, made documents accessible, and develop remote options for disabled students.
- **Summer Schools, Conferences, and Events:** Ensure accessible and inclusive environments provided through reminding to use microphone, share pronouns, designing flexible seating and moving arrangements in sessions, offering noise-cancelling headphones and fidget toys for neurodiversity, providing accessible option for materials upon request, ensuring ventilation in the room through air purifiers, and offer hybrid formats.
- **Accessibility, Disability, and Neurodiversity Support:** Raise awareness on DSA, create funding opportunities if universities lacking DSA (North Ireland), support disabled students who live far from HEIs, investigate why mature students and male students less likely to identify disabled or ask for accommodations.
- **Inclusivity and Intersectionality (Age):** Review language and structures in materials and training to address diverse age groups, particularly mature students. Reformulate the definition of 'a researcher' with an inclusive emphasis on age groups.
- **Inclusivity and Intersectionality (Gender):** Consider gender aspects of access adjustments (e.g., care responsibilities, paternal leaves, menopause). Support LGBTQIA+ researchers to ensure the sense of security of their research through peer-networks organisations and increase in representation.

- **Inclusivity and Intersectionality (Minority Ethnicities):** Improve Equal Opportunities Monitoring form by including different ethnicity categories (e.g., Welsh, other White background). Investigate the reason of low participation of students of colour and minority ethnics in sharing their accessibility issues in the survey and interviews.
- **Wellbeing and PhD Community:** Raise awareness for taking breaks and foster a hybrid PhD community with additional events conferences, writing retreats, and online platforms where students can communicate with each other (e.g., Microsoft Teams or Discord). Introduce PhDs on the website and organise alumni events for networking.
- **Scenarios:** Develop a more participatory method — scenario planning and writing — for supporting conversations among students, administrators, and directors in NBC and providing better guidance.
- **Training Recommendations:** Implement training on accessibility and inclusivity for students.
- **Access Rider Template:** Promote using access document or rider to help PhDs communicate their access accommodations with their supervisors, CDAs and placements.

Overall Conclusion:

Addressing the identified barriers through personalised and concrete accessibility actions within the Northern Bridge Consortium is paramount. By implementing these recommendations, the Northern Bridge Consortium can cultivate a more equitable and inclusive environment designed around the lived experiences of postgraduate students.

1. Introduction

Universities typically address accessibility through strict, hierarchical standards managed by official representatives (Weber, 1984). While these bureaucratic structures provide consistency, they often struggle to accommodate the diverse and unpredictable needs of students. When access measures fall short, individuals must find their own ways to navigate these systems. This creates a paradox: how can universities ensure meaningful inclusion and respond to individual experiences, while maintaining structured policies that represent the student cohort as a whole?

As Tanya Titchkosky (2011) notes, improving bureaucracy does not always eliminate its built-in barriers. Hence, designing actions and policies for accessibility should involve individuals' lived experiences.

In this regard, **Accessibility: Review and Repair** is one of the three projects under EDI Action Award Research Fellowships, designed with volunteer PhD students and DTP Directors in the EDI Together Group, to identify examples of inaccessibility in the public documentation of the AHRC Northern Bridge Consortium (NBC) Doctoral Training Partnership and offer recommendations.

Accessibility: Review and Repair is a multi-phase project involving an **anonymous survey (n=54)** and **semi-structured interviews (n=9)**.

While the survey provided a broad demographic overview of the Northern Bridge Cohort, exploring how accommodation requests intersect with factors such as gender, age, ethnicity, and socio-economic background, the interview questions were designed to capture the nuances of individual experiences.

- Key themes include **access, institutional barriers and differences in lived experience** across factors such as age, gender, disability, and mode of study.
- Our sampling method for the interview phase is **maximum variation or diversity sampling**. This approach seeks to gather as many different stories and experiences as possible and consider the key issues which emerge from them. Maximum variation sampling allowed us to recruit participants and record the nuances in their backgrounds and experience. Where possible, we aimed for balanced participation from across the North East and Northern Ireland.

This project utilises these stories to propose a series of potential solutions, presented as ‘scenarios,’ drawn from the lived experiences of 54 survey respondents and insights from 9 interviewees.

2. Objectives and Questions

The **Accessibility: Review and Repair** project was originally intended to improve the Northern Bridge Consortium website and documentation through user-testing. However, this approach led us to hypothesize at the outset of the project that the student cohort rarely utilized the Northern Bridge Consortium website.

This hypothesis was proven true when 66.7% of respondents to the survey indicated that they did not use the NBC website. Instead, students relied often forms of 'human' support to access information and often, circumvent bureaucratic hurdles.

During a session at the 2024 Northern Bridge Summer School, the student cohort was initially asked, "What is not working in Northern Bridge's current approach to access?" We distributed notecards and invited students to provide handwritten, anonymous responses.

Among the feedback we received, students highlighted barriers such as navigating a diagnosis later in life, articulating and advocating for the disclosure of pronouns, colonial language, and financial challenges.

Recognising this, **Accessibility: Review and Repair** aims to explore how Doctoral Training Partnerships in the UK can develop a more responsive approach to individual access needs. We examined this through three research questions:

1. **How can Northern Bridge and universities collaborate to support the student cohort's varied access needs?** This question directly examines how the infrastructure of DTPs and host universities can be adapted to better

accommodate the evolving circumstances PhD students face throughout their 3–6-year programme.

2. **How is access perceived by disabled people undertaking a PhD, as well as those who may require short-time support or accommodation?** This question engages with the dominant preconception that ‘access support’ is only relevant to students who identify as disabled.
3. **In what areas does the process of requesting and receiving accommodation require improvement?** This question speaks broadly to the methods of engaging support, and concrete recommendations that address the gaps or pitfalls in this process.

3. Methodology

Researchers Betül Gaye Dinç and Rachel Boyd have drawn on insights from **Tanya Titchkosky's** *The Question of Access: Disability, Space, Meaning* (2011) and **Margaret Price's** *Crip Spacetime: Access, Failure and Accountability in Academic Life* (2024) to guide their approach. Notably, Price's concept of the 'accommodation loop,' developed through the *Disabled Academics Study* (2018), and Titchkosky's definition of access played a key role in shaping our methodological approach. In this study, access is used as a critical framework to rethink how procedural changes, known as access accommodations, are measured and implemented.

The link between disability and access does not always extend to other groups who also require support, such as students working part-time, those with caregiving responsibilities, individuals facing financial constraints, or those experiencing discrimination or bias due to their identity or background.

From the outset, our methodological approach sought to acknowledge the emotional labour and personal burden students face in identifying, advocating for, and negotiating accommodations to meet their access needs.

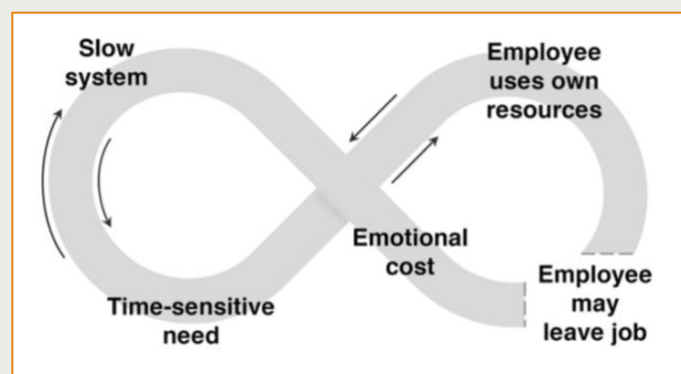


Figure 1: The Accommodation Loop, created by Johnna Keller and Margaret Price (Price 2024, 83).

Our methodological approach benefits from the precedent set by the “Accommodation Loop,” designed by **Johanna Keller and Margaret Price** (Price 2024, 85). This loop represents the ongoing entanglement between two key stakeholders in access support: the individual and the institution. It also reflects the shifting, cyclical nature of how these two stakeholders interact, including the individual’s personal efforts to counteract the slowness of the system, and the increase in the emotional burden with passing of time. This cycle can result in employees in academia leaving work when sufficient support is not provided.

The experience of academic employees, as researched by Keller and Price, is relevant to the progression of PhD students, as their responsibilities and the accommodations they often require closely align with those of academic employees, regardless of whether they have teaching duties.

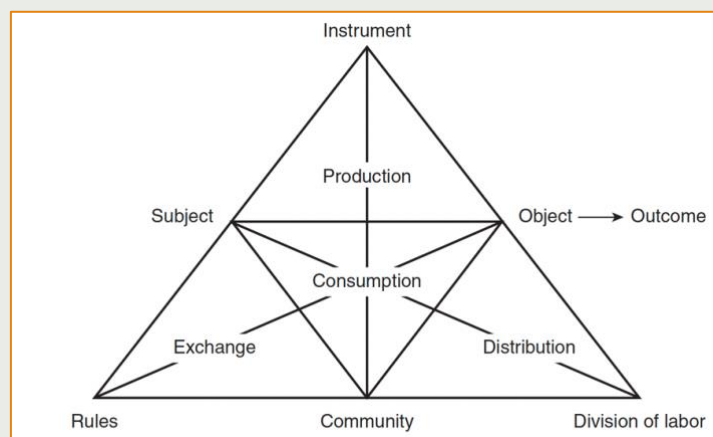


Figure 2: Activity Theory (or the Activity System Model), created by Yrjö Engeström (Engeström 2015, 63).

Yrjö Engeström’s “Activity Theory” provided another precedent where we could consider the multiple actors, in and outside of the context of the university, contributing to the accommodation loop. This model presents the relationship in the network of multiple actors, including object (goal), instruments (tools), subjects (individuals), rules (policies), community (groups shaping activity), division of labour

(the contributions among individuals) and outcome (desired result), as outlined by Engeström (2015, 63). In addition, this theory is utilised in scenario-based design methodology where different stakeholders (e.g., employees, employers) create narratives to issues. Engeström's approach inspired us to understand this activity as a chain of actions, decisions and negotiations which all impact each other as well as the narrative aspect in the experiences through scenario-based design methodologies.

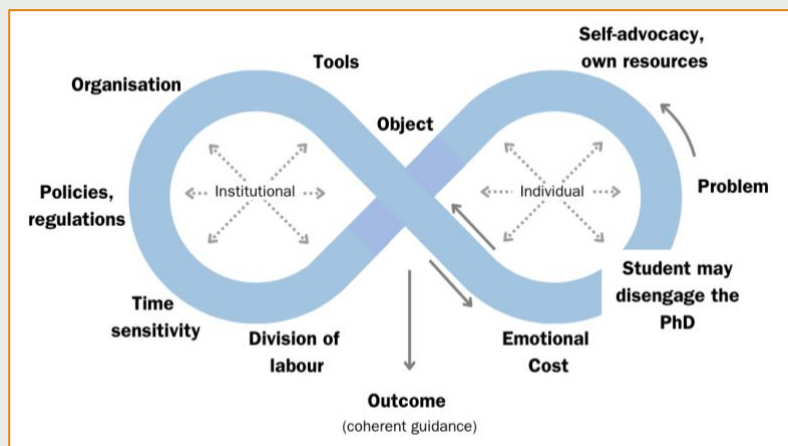


Figure 3: Accessibility Activity Diagram, created by Betül Gaye Dinç and Rachel Boyd, 2025.

Our additions to Keller and Price's model sought to highlight both the provisions made for accommodations and the justifications used to deny them. For instance, the emotional toll, personal resource constraints, or rigid policy requirements can make navigating existing support channels feel insurmountable.

The loop's structure acknowledges that these burdens impact both students and institutions as they strive toward more equitable practices. The most common barriers to access include time constraints, emotional labour, and limits in institutional capacity. The cumulative pressure in these areas can prevent meaningful change, leading to systemic burnout and, in some cases, causing students to leave their PhD programmes altogether.

4. Survey

The first part of the data collection for Accessibility: Review and Repair was an online survey. The survey was hosted via Microsoft Forms and was live for 40 days, from 5 November to 15 December 2024 and produced a total of 54 responses. This section outlines the survey questions, then analyses the responses through the demographic elements.

4.1. Survey Questions

While all survey responses were anonymised, candidates were asked to disclose which age bracket, gender, socio-economic background and ethnicity they belonged.

Additionally, students were asked to rate the current accessibility of Northern Bridge Consortium against a series of statements which covered online documentation, in-person events, complaints and feedback procedures. In the final part of the survey, respondents were asked to identify which accommodations they had received in the past, together with what kinds of support they would find helpful.

4.2. Survey Analysis

The survey results are analysed below according to demographic factors including age, gender, ethnicity, student status (home or international) and whether they identified as disabled. These key areas were identified to better understand the extent to which specific identity markers influenced students' likelihood of requesting adjustments, as well as the types of adjustments they sought.

4.2.1. Age

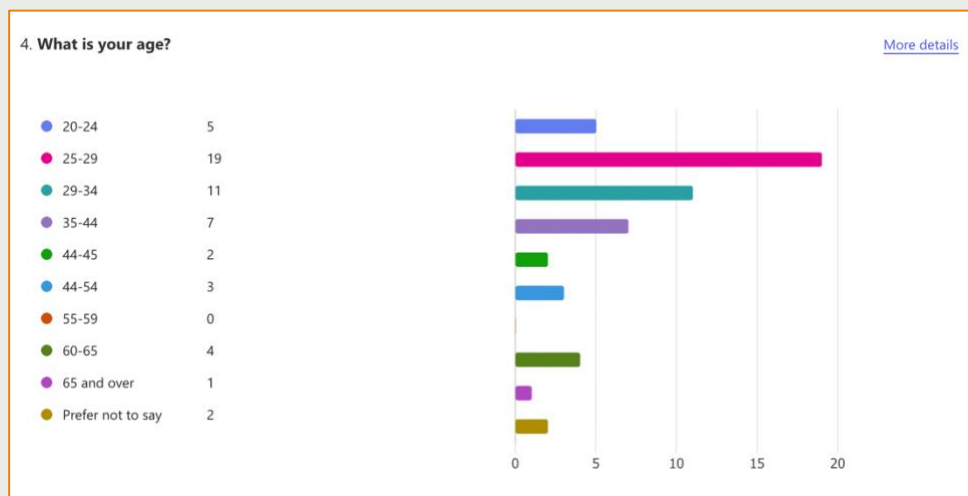


Figure 4: The bar chart for age from the survey.

The student respondents' ages were distributed as follows: 9% were 20-24, 46% were 25-35, 23% were 35-54, and 9% were aged 60 and above.

This majority distribution of students aged 20-35 aligns with the age demographic information of the student cohort according to the NBC equal opportunities monitoring form between 2019 and 2024 (Figure 5) (Carvalho de Mello & Christy 2024, 5). Therefore, the survey sample's age distribution mirrors that of the wider student population.

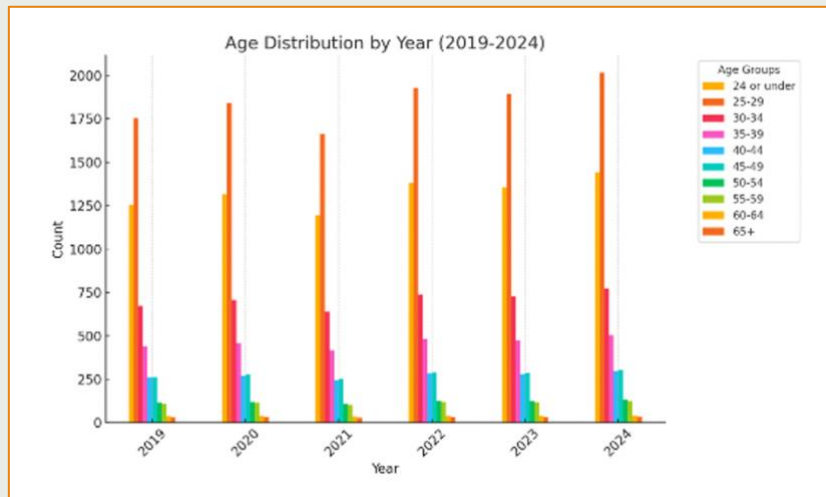


Figure 5: Age distribution of NBC student cohort by years 2019-2024 (Carvalho de Mello & Christy 2024, 5).

PhD Students aged 55 and older comprised only 13% of respondents to the survey. This was compared to those aged 25–34, which accounted for 55% of respondents.

While the age distribution of those who participated in the survey mirrors that of the wider cohort, the minority representation of mature students suggests a demonstrable gap in representation for older members of the cohort.

The age distribution of respondents who identified as disabled were as follows: 8% of disabled respondents were 20-24; 56% of respondents were 25-34; 17% of respondents were 35-45; 0% of respondents were 46-59, and of 8% of respondents were 60 and over.

Comparing the age distribution of all respondents with disabled respondents suggests higher levels of identification and/or diagnosis among younger members of the student cohort, in comparison to the respondents aged 35 and over who

identified as disabled.

4.2.2. Gender

The gender of the survey respondents was distributed as follows: 75% female, 16% male, 4% nonbinary, 2% transgender, and 4% prefer not to say.

This picture is in line with the gender demographic information of the general student cohort (Carvalho de Mello & Christy 2024, 4). Non-binary and transgender identities continue to have minimal representation within the student cohort.

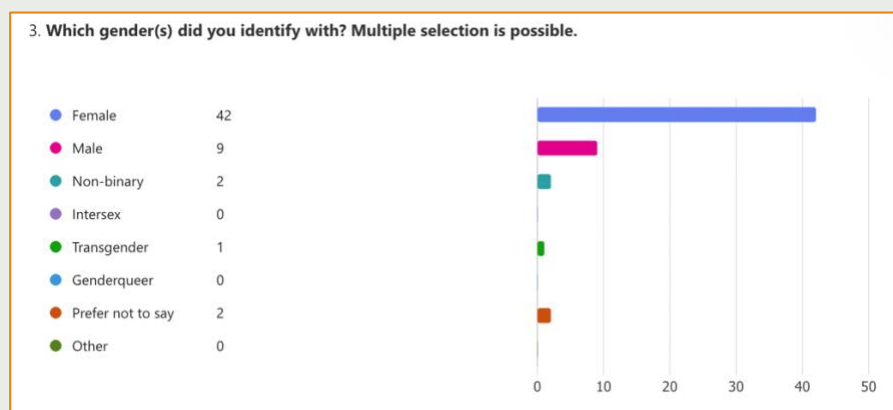


Figure 6: The bar chart for gender from the survey.

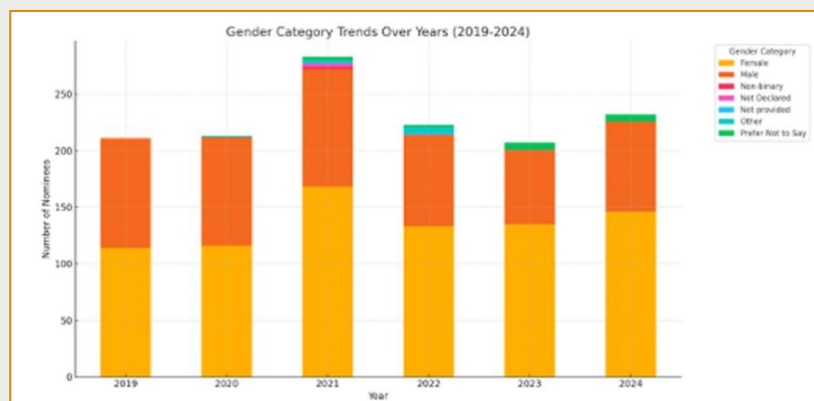


Figure 7: Gender distribution of NBC student cohort by years 2019-2024 (Carvalho de Mello & Christy 2024, 4).

76.9% of total respondents to the survey identified as being White British, Female and aged 25-29. This intersection was least likely to identify as disabled (31.5%), but more likely to identify as being from a low-income background (47.6%).

This correlation suggests that financial hardship is a significant issue within this demographic group, even if disability is less frequently reported compared with to other groups.

PhD students who identified as female were eight times as likely to identify as disabled (85%) than their male counterparts (10%).

This suggests that gender also seems to play a critical part in who of the student cohort identifies as disabled.

There is also a strong correlation between gender, disability identity and the disclosure of individual access needs.

Female, disabled students were also twice as likely to request adjustments specific to the experience of Autism and ADHD, such as quiet spaces, compared to male or non-binary students. The female, disabled students were also more likely to request additional breaks when attending training or workshops, or when undertaking teaching responsibilities.

Those coordinating Northern Bridge Consortium events, summer schools, or other activities should consider diverse movement needs. This includes offering walk-based sessions where students can stand, walk, or move rather than remain seated, accommodating fidgeting and stimming by providing quiet spaces and fidget toys and incorporating additional breaks.

Only 8% of students who identified as disabled were also identified non-binary and transgender; Both nonbinary and/or transgender respondents were more likely to identify as disabled.

This finding should be viewed as a potential indicator of intersectional vulnerabilities and indicator of the importance of being attentive to the experiences of disadvantaged groups, even when their representation in a particular dataset is small.

Survey respondents who identified as male were less likely to identify accommodations that they would find helpful (44.5%). Male respondents were also less likely to identify as disabled (8%).

This information points out the need for further research to explore the underlying reasons including societal expectations around masculinity that may discourage the disclosure of vulnerabilities or the seeking of support, or a lower awareness of what constitutes a disability and available accommodations among men.

4.2.3. Ethnic Background

The ethnic categories in the survey were designed according to the NBC Equal Opportunities Monitoring Form 2024; however, some issues appeared on this categorisation.

The survey initially lacked a “Welsh” category, a point raised by a respondent and subsequently rectified. Also, the survey did not capture the nuances within the broader “Other White Background” category, potentially encompassing European, North American, and South American identities.

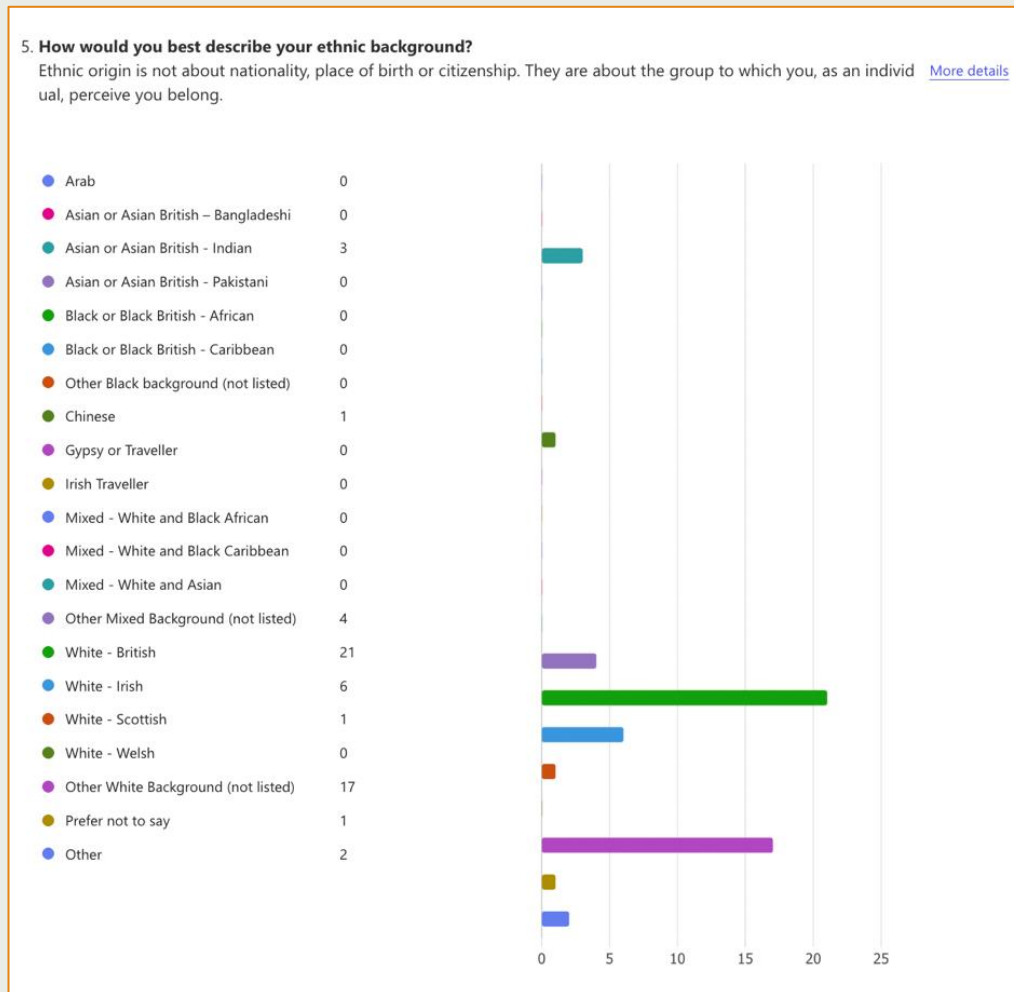


Figure 8: The bar chart for ethnic background from the survey.

Note: Microsoft Forms shows a misalignment between the categories and the bar. Please consider the numbers and colour coding.

Therefore, equal opportunities monitoring (EOM) forms should be revised to explicitly include “Welsh” and other relevant ethnic categories to ensure more accurate and detailed data collection.

While 38.9% of respondents identified as White British, 30% of respondents identified as being from an “Other White Background” (not specified), 11% as being from “White-Irish”, and 2% as being from “White-Scottish.”

These responses make “White British” most common ethnic background while also demonstrating a diverse representation of other ethnic backgrounds within the broader “White” category among the surveyed student cohort.

The minority ethnic backgrounds recorded in the survey include 7% Other Mixed Background, 5% “Asian - Asian British: Indian”, 4% Other, and 2% Chinese.

Students from minority ethnic backgrounds are altogether less prevalent in the survey sample compared to their white counterparts. The absence of responses from postgraduate students identifying as “Black or Black British,” “Asian or Asian British: Pakistani, Bangladeshi,” “Irish Traveller,” and “Gypsy and Traveller” is a significant observation that necessitates exploring why this accessibility survey failed to reach individuals from these backgrounds.

4.2.4. Home and International

70% of all respondents were home students and 30% of international students.

However, a student’s personal identification can diverge from these official classifications as one student explained, “I’m a [European] citizen. I identify as an international student. But the university considers me a ‘home’ student on paper.” Therefore, future data collection on home-international demographics needs to include clear and nuanced definitions of ‘home’ and ‘international’.

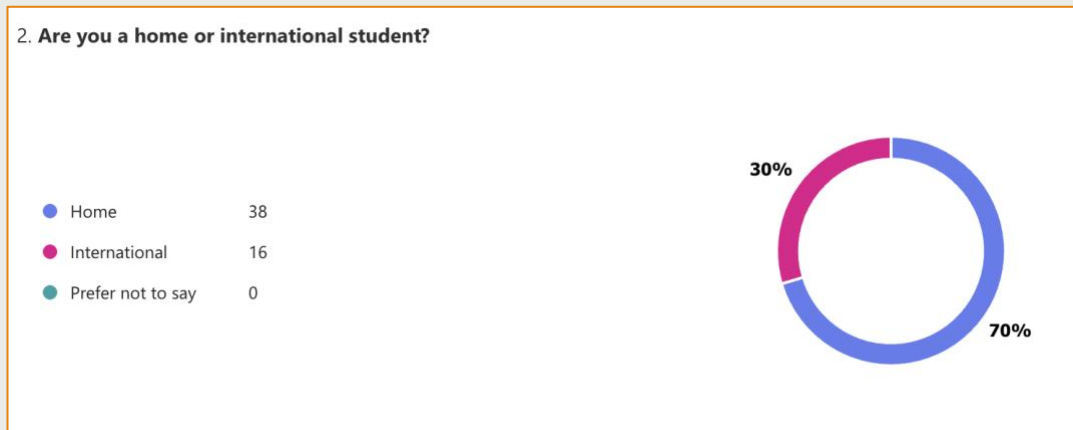


Figure 9: The pie chart for home – international students from the survey.

International respondents to the survey made up a higher proportion of students receiving additional funding (18.8%) compared to home students (10.5%). Moreover, a much larger percentage of international students (56.3%) find financial support helpful compared to home students (26.3%).

This suggests that while a smaller proportion of home students receive additional funding compared to overall home students, a moderate percentage still find financial support helpful. Half of these home students who would find additional funding helpful are identified as disabled. Therefore, home students, including those identified as disabled, need further financial support.

A larger proportion of international students receive additional funding compared to overall student group; however, a significantly higher percentage still find financial support helpful. Thus, international students receive more additional funding but also still needs more additional funding compared to home students. This highlights a potentially greater reliance on and need for financial support among international students compared to their home student counterparts.

Of the accommodations international students had already received, 54.3% of international students had formally requested quiet spaces for working.

International students were more likely to request and receive adjustments relating to the method of study (additional work equipment, alternative modes of assessment, assistive software) and to prioritise the need for workspaces and equipment over home students.

37.5% of international students also remarked that they would find guidance on visa applications helpful.

Equally, 37.5% of international students disclosed that they had already received this guidance and were satisfied with the support they had received.

International students were evenly divided on the efficacy of existing support surrounding student visas. Two nuanced influences can affect this even distribution:

- Some students from **an international background benefit from home status** (and might select 'international' in the survey), meaning they may not face the same visa-related guidance or process challenges as students with international status.
- The information does not reveal **if satisfaction or dissatisfaction is linked to specific HEIs or NBCs**. While some HEIs might provide good guidance, others could fall short.

Although the survey cannot pinpoint the impact of these factors, this even split still suggests that while some international students are well-supported with the visa process, a significant number feel they would benefit from more assistance, indicating a potential inconsistency or gap in the current support system.

3 international students specifically commented on feeling disadvantaged by the lack of support around placements, particularly given that the visa conditions prevent

international students from undertaking placements full-time. One student went on to remark that this unfairly discriminates against international candidates:

“I am mostly missing someone who can give more specified information about placements/sick leave/maternity leave while on a student visa. It seems like the only people who can fully (if at all) enjoy these benefits are home students, and this was never clearly communicated.”

Therefore, these international students feel disadvantaged due to the visa regulations and expects HEIs and NBC to reconsider their regulations on placements and leaves to cater the disadvantage of international students and also provide more guidance.

4.2.5. Disability and Mental Health

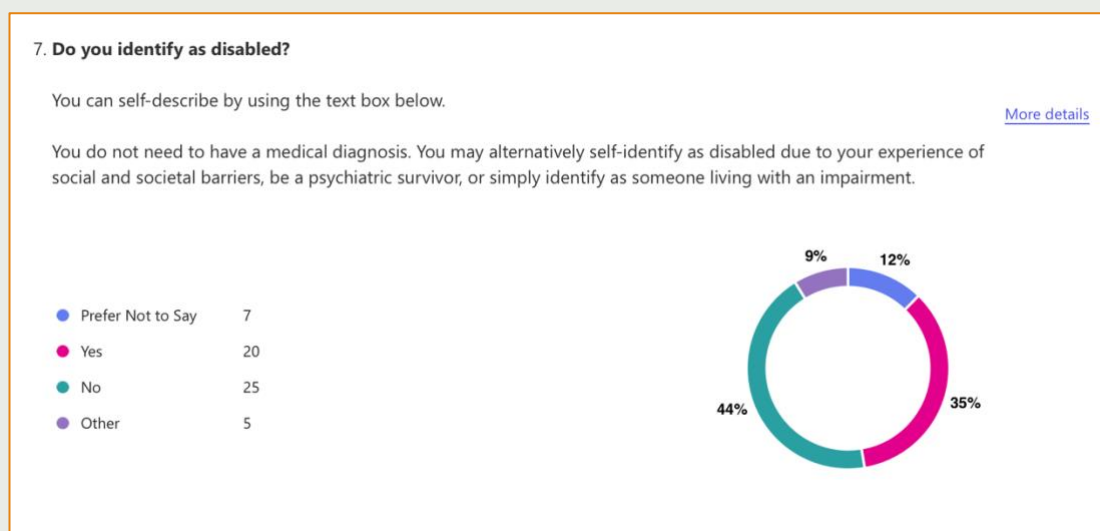


Figure 10: The disability pie chart.

35% of all students in the survey are identified as disabled, 9% as “other” to explain their disabilities, 44% as not disabled, and 12% as prefer not to say.

Although the number of non-disabled students exceeded disabled students in the NBC student cohorts (Carvalho de Mello & Christy 2024, 17), the responses in our survey indicate a slightly different picture, with almost neck-and-neck percentages. This picture can signify that the survey attracted disabled students more in the overall student cohort, thereby signalling the greater need of disabled students for access accommodations.

According to the disabled students who shared further information, their disabilities include **one or multiple** of the following: **physical conditions and long-term illnesses, neurodivergence (autism, ADHD, unspecified), and mental health conditions (depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety).**

This emphasises the need for the HEIs and NBC to be aware of the diverse range of disabilities of their students to develop flexible, individualised, and accessible support services.

Among the disabled students, 43% heard of Disabled Student Allowance (DSA) but do not receive it, 30% have never heard of DSA, and 13% is in receipt of DSA.

This information reflects that many disabled students are either unaware of or unable to access DSA. There underlines a need to investigate why disabled students cannot access financial support, whether due to a lack of information about applications, difficulties managing the administrative requirements, inaccessibility of DSA at their universities or where they live, inability to afford or access assessments, or ineligibility upon application.

One respondent, who preferred not to disclose their disability status, remarked that conferences and presentations featuring loud music and bright lighting were a barrier to understanding the content of the research:

“Presentations based on music are interesting but not suitable for those who have issues dealing with loud music, especially when they can’t control volume. Some advance warning would be useful, or the option of another activity at the same time for those presentations that involve very bright lighting or loud sounds.”

Organisers and presenters should give advance notice about elements of a presentation or a room which might be deemed inaccessible to, for example, disabled students who might live with epilepsy, be hearing or visually impaired.

The access accommodations that majority of disabled students are currently receiving or would find them helpful, which can be catered by NBC and/or HEI:

- Robust information and guidance on the NBC website
- Additional funding (particularly towards the end of the studies)
- More information on DSA framework
- Accessibility supports tailored for PhD level
- Mental health support
- Supervisor relationship guidance and additional sessions
- Recovery time from attendance of events
- A quiet space for PGRs to study and/or a standing desk
- Natural lighting in study place and events

- Extended time to complete work
- Virtual attendance
- Modified work schedule

9% of all respondents, whether disabled or not, mentioned having experience with a mental health condition.

One respondent articulated that they would have felt better supported had Northern Bridge been clearer about their own duty of care onto students, as these responsibilities are often deferred onto the responsibility of host universities:

“I would have appreciated knowing I could get help with issues such as mental health support (through pandemic) and supervisory dilemmas for example, from Northern Bridge, rather than the host university.”

As a result, further guidance is necessary for them to understand the nature and availability of any NBC support systems.

Survey respondents that reported that they would find mental health support helpful were more likely to already be in receipt of additional time to complete work, or a modified work schedule. Therefore, there appears to be a strong connection between mental health issues and time-related access adjustments.

4.2.6. Funding and Finances

35% of all respondents to the survey mentioned they would find additional financial support helpful. While 13% of respondents have received this support, 51% have not received this accommodation.

This reveals a significant gap between the perceived need for additional financial support (35%) and the actual receipt of it (13%), indicating that a substantial portion of students are experiencing financial strain. The largest group (51%) has not received this support – this could mean either unmet requests from students who applied, or that students are satisfied with their current funding situation.

40% of respondents reported that they were “neutral” about the statement: “I am able to find clear information regarding the stipend and funding in the Northern Bridge documentation”. By contrast, 31.5% of respondents disagreed with this statement.

This combination of neutrality and disagreement may demonstrate an ambivalence within the student cohort around the kinds of financial support which may be available to them during the PhD process.

One of the students' remarks was on this issue:

“Make stipends each year clear, sending them to students. I have to ask what my stipend is each year, which makes it tricky to budget and adds a lot of stress.”

The lack of clarity around the provision of funding has had a proven impact on this student's personal life, impacting their mental health.

Moreover, funding exacerbates anxiety in undertaking paid leave, as eligibility criteria often reproduces structural inequalities already present in academia. One respondent explained their experience on paternal leave as it follows:

“There is essentially no paid paternal leave. Buried deep in the documentation there is two weeks for new fathers. But you cannot even put in the paperwork for an interruption if the interruption is less than four weeks, so there is no functional paternity leave.

While there is the option for a year unpaid, it is literally impossible to support a young family with unpaid leave...especially as university research is supposed to be at the vanguard of progressive thought, one of the biggest barriers to gender equality is a gendered division in parental leave.”

This response underscores the necessity of funding for carers, given that overlooking this need contributes to gender inequality. Information around parental leave might represent the responsibility of HEI regulation, as opposed NBC. However, this is a significant issue that NBC needs to be aware of, as the need for reasonable adjustments may also intersect with caring responsibilities or changes in circumstance which affect, for example, new parents.

Ambiguity around funding also intersected with students who faced barriers to continuing the PhD, such as bereavement, illness or poor mental health:

“I took periods of interruption which were funded as sick leave due to the challenges I have experienced, I am not sure if this counts as extra time to produce work or financial assistance.

I have been unable to access any support for disability/caring responsibilities/mental health/executive function, my institution’s disability services were hugely time consuming to access and then when I finally had one short meeting with them had no understanding of the requirements of a PhD and offered me no support. I am uncertain about how to access support from Northern Bridge, there seems to be no centralised support system in place.”

The respondent’s statement points to multiple issues: unclear guidance on leave policies and their academic consequences; inadequate support from the HEI accessibility services; and the overall difficulty of navigating NBC's decentralized support system.

4.2.7. PhD Students' Views on NBC

Responses to 12 statements regarding NBC generally show positive and neutral feedback across many areas except a few areas of disagreement (Figure 11).

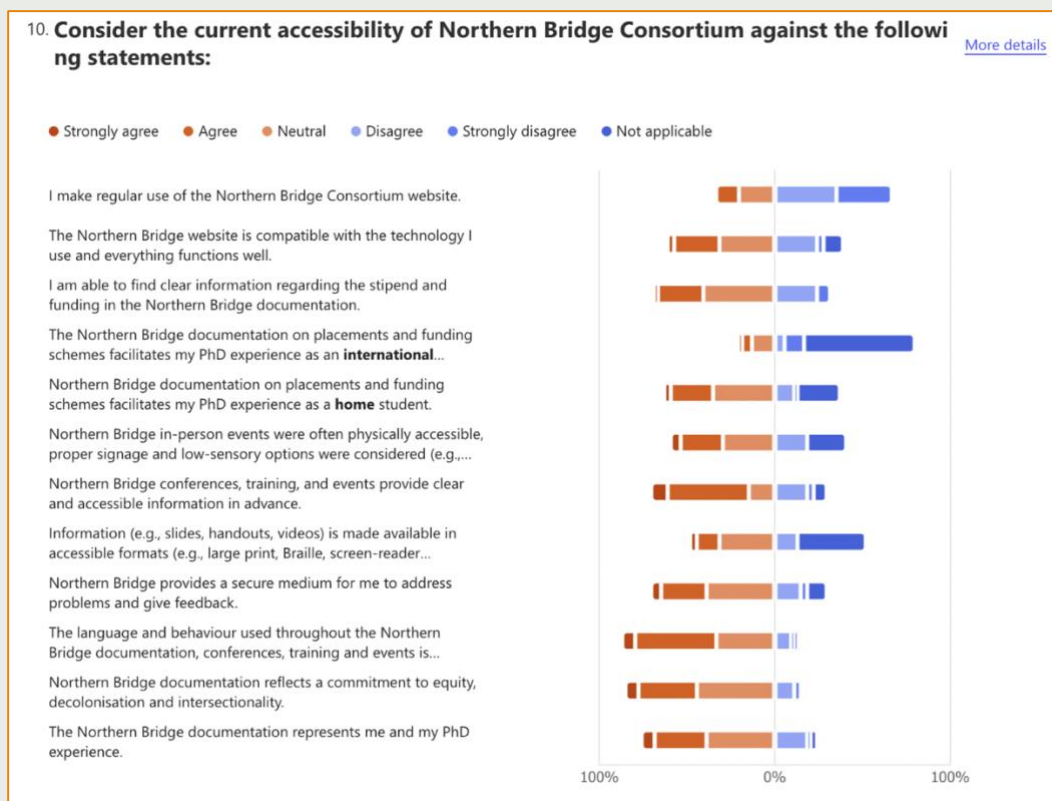


Figure 11: The bar chart on NBC's accessibility statements from the survey.

In terms of positive feedback, some respondents remark, **“Northern Bridge is overall doing good”** and **“[redacted] University and the NB Director have been entirely supportive and helpful with accommodations”**.

These testimonials indicate positive experiences with support from people based within Northern Bridge Consortium, particularly concerning individual needs.

However, responses to the NBC website stands out for their opposing claims. 66.7% of students claim they do not use the NBC website, and 27.8% reporting incompatibility with their devices or functional issues.

This combined feedback points to a need to critically evaluate the NBC website to encourage not only a user-friendly experience in consultation with the student cohort, but to actively invest in its continued maintenance over time. It is not just a matter of people choosing not to use it; a substantial portion are actively hindered by its technical or functional limitations.

20.4% of overall respondents disagree or strongly disagree the statement of “the Northern Bridge documentation represents me and my PhD experience”.

Among these respondents who did not feel represented, the notable demographic details are as follow: international students (54.5%), different ethnicities, such as large number of “Other White Background” (54.5%), and other minority ethnic groups – “Other Mixed Background” and “Asian - Asian British: Indian” –, disabled (45.4%), and low-income background (36.3%).

This demographic data highlights specific areas – international student status, different ethnic backgrounds, disabilities and low-income background – where NBC can enhance inclusive representation. However, feedback on the general inclusivity and respect statement paints a much more positive overall picture.

53.7% of respondents agreed with the statement, “The language and behaviour used throughout the Northern Bridge documentation, conferences, training and events is inclusive and respectful of different needs and backgrounds”. 33.3% thinks neutral about it and 11.2% disagrees or strongly disagrees this statement.

This indicates a highly positive reception of NBC's commitment to fostering meaningful change while the neutral and negative views suggest room for improvement. The fact that a large majority (83%) within the small disagree/strongly disagree group are disabled students underscores a clear demand for greater inclusivity with respect to the disabled respondents.

Regarding the statement “Northern Bridge documentation reflects a commitment to equity, decolonisation and intersectionality,” survey results indicate that 40.7% of students agree or strongly agree, 44.4% feel neutral, and 14.8% disagree or strongly disagree.

We asked these terms, “equity, decolonisation and intersectionality”, in purpose as feedback from the NBC summer school 2024 pointed out these terms specifically so that we can compare this with inclusivity and respect.

Responses regarding the representation of “equity, decolonisation, and intersectionality” in NBC documentation are generally neutral or positive. Where 44.4% of students feel selected ‘neutral’ against this statement exposes tensions in how EDI is perceived – in particular, exposing preconceptions around who EDI is “for”. Many students may not personally identify with the issues the terms represent. Others may feel ambivalent around how concepts like equity, decolonisation and intersectionality are currently represented by NBC.

The marked combination of neutrality and positivity conveys that DTPs need to approach EDI as a shared aim that is universal benefit to the whole student body, as opposed a singular mission, solely designed to platform perceived minority groups.

5. Interviews

The second part of the data collection for Accessibility: Review and Repair was 9 interviews with Northern Bridge Consortium PhD students (January 2025). This section outlines the interview context and questions, then analyses their responses through the challenges they identified.

5.1. Interview Context and Questions

In November 2024, Northern Bridge Consortium administrators circulated a call to recruit interviewees across seven universities. Students were recruited by expressing interest via the survey and were compensated for their time with a £10 National Book Token.

The call for interviewees encouraged a broad analysis of access needs against a variety of diverse experiences, regardless of whether individuals identified as disabled (Titchkosky 2011, 13). Further detail on this definition can be found under 'Access' in the [List of Terms and Abbreviations](#). All applicants were accepted, and interviews proceeded with the available participants.

The participants' backgrounds varied across ability, age, gender, sexual orientation, PhD stage, study module, and university. The majority of participants identified as disabled under the Equality Act. However, the sample exhibited limitations:

- All the participants were from white backgrounds, reflecting the dominance of this ethnic group among the survey sample.
- None of the participants identified English as a foreign language.

This study retains sharing further demographic information on the participants to preserve their anonymity.

Before the interviews, participants received five questions that were crafted to understand their lived experience. These questions were given in advance to give interviewees the ability to prepare their answers, and an indication of what to expect from the interview process.

1. Tell us about yourself, your experience and challenges you faced so far during your PhD.
2. Are there challenges during your PhD that you feel are often overlooked?
3. Tell us about the last time you needed to engage external support in response to a problem or barrier. Who did you go to (e.g., institutions, peer networks, local community)? Was the support effective?
4. Have you ever used Northern Bridge documentation? Do you find them helpful? What would be your suggestions to improve what currently exists?
5. Can you please describe an accessible PhD for you? What kinds of support might it include that you do not already have access to?

Participants' responses revealed support needs, background-related barriers, and recommendations for system improvements.

5.2. Interview Analysis

31 themes are identified during transcript analysis and interview observations.

Categorising these lived experiences presents two difficulties:

- Some themes are broad in scope, such as “Northern Bridge Consortium Organisation,” encompassing various aspects of the NBC from policies to summer schools and trainings
- Themes are interconnected, e.g., information, funding and bureaucracy are overlapping.

Nevertheless, these themes help in identifying areas of challenges in the participants’ experiences.

Next, the themes are ranked by mention frequency from 0 to 4 (0 = not mentioned, 1 = implied or indirectly effective, 2 = one-two times mentioned, 3 = moderately mentioned, 4 = often mentioned). However, this approach has limitations:

- limited participant diversity may misrepresent issue importance; low rankings do not mean less significance;
- interconnected themes, such as financial hardship (cause) and additional workload (consequence), all received high rankings;
- it focuses only on challenges, not positive responses;
- Northern Bridge-specific context may shadow university support.

	Total	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9
Information	31	4	4	3	4	4	4	4	0	4
Bureaucracy and paperwork	31	4	4	4	4	3	4	4	0	4
NBC Organisation	30	4	4	3	4	4	4	4	0	3
Wellbeing and mental health	27	2	1	4	4	2	4	4	4	2
Time and planning	26	2	1	2	3	4	3	4	4	3
Disability	24	4	0	4	4	0	4	4	4	0
Funding and financial support	23	0	1	0	4	4	4	4	2	4
University support	22	4	4	4	2	0	4	4	0	0
Additional workload	20	3	0	4	3	4	4	1	1	0
Placement	19	3	4	0	3	4	1	0	4	0
Study Mode	18	0	1	4	4	4	0	2	3	0
PhD Application	15	0	4	4	0	0	3	0	0	4
Resources	12	0	0	0	4	0	4	4	0	0
Assessment	10	0	0	0	3	3	2	0	0	2
Collaborative doctoral award	7	0	0	0	0	4	0	0	0	3
Visa and immigration	7	3	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Practice and arts-based PhD	7	0	0	3	0	0	4	0	0	0
Teaching responsibilities	5	3	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0
Supervisor communication	3	0	0	3	0	0	0	0	0	0

Figure 12: The heat map of themes depicts how often participants mentioned a barrier.

The first heat map (Figure 12) exhibits that the participants frequently mentioned the following barriers:

- **Difficulty obtaining information:** Participants highlighted the challenge of navigating websites, documentation, and administrative processes to find necessary information.

- **Bureaucratic and financial obstacles:** Bureaucracy, particularly related to funding and the PhD application process, and financial issues were both frequently cited as a significant barrier.
- **Depersonalised support systems:** Participants expressed a need for Northern Bridge and university support systems and regulations to be developed, facilitating bespoke support and guidance with accessibility and financial matters.
- **Time-related difficulties:** Working extra hours, uncertainties about the programme of study, inflexible schedules, and being notified about events at short notice were also frequently mentioned as major challenges.
- **Wellbeing concerns:** Stress, feelings of isolation and loneliness, and mental health issues were identified as wellbeing challenges, often exacerbated by the other aforementioned barriers.

	Total	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9
Mental health conditions	20	0	0	4	4	0	4	4	4	0
Neurodivergence	16	4	0	0	0	0	4	4	4	0
Distance, working from home	16	0	0	4	4	0	4	4	0	0
Aging and agism	16	0	0	4	4	1	3	4	0	0
Long term illness and medical conditions	12	0	0	4	4	0	0	4	0	0
Connecting to Northern UK from Northern Ireland	8	0	0	0	4	0	0	4	0	0
Gender and LGBTQI+	8	0	0	0	0	0	4	4	0	0
Visa and immigration	7	3	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Low-income background	6	0	0	0	2	3	4	3	0	0
Caring responsibilities	4	0	0	0	0	4	0	0	0	0
Blind, visually impairment support	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	4	0	0
Hearing Impairment support	2	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0

Figure 13: The heat map illustrates how often backgrounds and responsibilities were linked to barriers in receiving support.

The second heat map (Figure 13) displays that how often the participants with certain backgrounds and responsibilities encounter a challenge:

- **Experiences are intersectional:** Disabled participants may encounter barriers outside of their diagnosis, e.g. poor mental health, aging, low income, gender identity.
- **‘All or nothing’ in support experiences:** Ranking between 0 and 3-4 suggests that challenges are “all or nothing”: either non-existent or escalating to the point of completely disrupting the PhD experience.
- **Mental health issues:** Many participants are affected by different mental health conditions which can be comorbid with existing diagnoses.
- **Geographical isolation:** Distance, whether through remote living or connecting from Northern Ireland to other universities in the UK, negatively affects students’ sense of belonging, networking, and resource access, while also increasing transportation expenses.
- **Ageist biases in academia:** Universities’ and Northern Bridge’ materials, trainings, and structures, in their language and design, need to be improved to cater to the needs of mature students with caring responsibilities and varied career aspirations.

To provide a more nuanced reading of this data with a focus on participants’ lived experiences, we detected areas that NBC can investigate those issues and beyond them in detail. These areas are:

- **Guidance with information and administration:** experiences in relation to the NBC website and documentation, PhD application process, study modes, collaborative doctoral awards.
- **Funding and financial support:** experiences in relation to bureaucracy in HEI and NBC administrations, caring responsibilities and small grants.

- **Placements:** experiences in relation to undertaking placements as a part-time, international and/or disabled student.
- **Inclusivity and intersectionality in representation and support:** experiences in relation to diverse identities and backgrounds, including abilities, age, gender, and ethnicities.
- **Overcoming isolation with a PhD community:** experiences in relation to loneliness and the need for fostering peer-networking in NBC.

Thus, the next section will examine these areas and issues in relation to them in detail.

5.2.1. Guidance with Information and Administration

8 out of 9 participants frequently mentioned difficulties finding information on the Northern Bridge website and documents.

This section examines issues in obtaining information in Northern Bridge website and documentation, barriers in the PhD application process and terminology, study modes, and Collaborative Doctoral Awards (CDA).

a. Northern Bridge Consortium (NBC) Website and Documentation

6 participants reported significant challenges in finding clear information on stipends, small grants, and placements in Northern Bridge documentation, website, or administration.

Many participants described the Northern Bridge website and documentation lengthy and confusing. Some described the website as “almost non-existent”, noting Google

searches were more effective at providing general clarification around milestones and expectations of the PhD process.

2 dyslexic participants highlighted that dense texts often conceal crucial application details.

This led to missed information, without clear and visual structure. Another participant, with experience of visual impairment, suggested improvements to the website, such as implementing coloured backgrounds and larger fonts. Their responses emphasise the need for improving a user-friendly interface for the website.

3 participants mentioned the need for transparency around stipends.

P9 claimed that information relating to the stipend was non-existent during their application and enrolment. They had to reach out to their supervisor and identify the relevant administrator themselves. This lack of transparency and the challenge of discussing finances formed a significant barrier to their initial PhD experience.

2 participants did not know how much to expect from correct monthly payment due this lack of information. This has resulted in both candidates being overpaid, only to later go months without payment.

Administrative errors around finances have created undue financial hardship and stress. Therefore, monthly salary information needs to be made clear to the student prior to them commencing the course of study.

b. PhD Application Process and Terminology

4 participants found the NBC application difficult due to insufficient guidance, lengthy documents, and confusing terminology.

Participants who are neurodivergent or unfamiliar with university systems within the UK can experience barriers in understanding terminology which is specific to the HEI systems within the UK. These differences in process and terminology, e.g. (“research objectives”) are often implicit and are currently unacknowledged by NBC during the onboarding process for international students. Interviewees from having to undertake self-guided research to make sense of a system which unfairly discriminates against their lack of prior knowledge or experience of UK HEI systems.

To counteract this, 3 participants navigated the application process with the support of their prospective supervisors, often referencing successful proposals belonging to previous applications.

Showcasing PhD profiles on the NBC website and fostering cohort peer networks would provide efficient support for the application process.

c. Study Mode: Part-time, 0.2 FTE, and Flexibility

4 participants indicated that the administrative system, language and academic planning were wholly focussed on provision for full-time students.

Part-time students felt disadvantaged in balancing their research, sourcing potential avenues to undertake a placement, and managing domestic responsibilities.

Among issues raised was the issue of tracking what year they are in, causing part-time students to attend events with different cohorts. Part-time study not only forecloses any possibility of consistency, but creates discrepancies in the assessment dates (e.g., delivery of an annual report).

Additionally, interviewees who were undertaking their PhDs part-time noted their stress and anxiety around attendance at NBC conferences and events. They were often informed at short notice if at all, furthering a sense of alienation from the rest of the cohort.

A participant noted that NBC Administration supported them to explore their options around different them about modes of study. However, information on shifting between different study modes is not available in NBC documentation and required extensive research and inquiry between institutions. Even if the available option around part-time study differs between HEI, this still points to a broader lack of information and clarity in differentiating and delegating the roles of HEIs and NBC. Therefore, detailed guidance on study modes is required.

d. Collaborative Doctoral Awards (CDA)

1 participant mentioned that more clarity is needed on the required workload of the PhDs with Collaborative Doctoral Awards (CDA), and specifically, guidance on how to manage their time in working with the partner institution.

PhDs with CDAs experience high expectations from the collaborative partners, and in some cases will be regarded as a full-time employee. Although the institutions may be very supportive, uncertainties around their roles can creates additional workload and stress.

Furthermore, PhDs with caring responsibilities may face access issues and discrimination when the partner institutions are not welcoming. They need explicit guidance on whom to contact in case of these issues, and how these communications might be handled.

5.2.2. Funding and Financial Support

7 out of 9 participants mention challenges and suggestions for improvements to funding.

This category broadly encapsulates the information and the process of receiving or asking to receive stipends, small grants, and placement support. This it is highly relevant to most of the other categories: NBC website and documentation; administration; bureaucracy/paperwork; caring responsibilities; disability, mental health; distance travelled (housing-commuting); additional workload, access to resources, supplies and software; and time related issues.

a. Bureaucracy in HEI and NBC Administrative Support

8 participants reported bureaucratic processes as an issue demanding additional workload, time and stress.

The higher ranking of bureaucracy over funding (31/23) in the first heat map indicates that despite what financial support is available to them, participants continue to struggle submitting documents to fund research costs and reimburse expenses.

This is particularly challenging for neurodivergent students (e.g., dyslexia, ADHD) who find structuring applications difficult, and for students with long-term illnesses who find the process exhaustive due to limited energy.

4 students expressed a preference for separating supervision and personal tutorship roles.

They prefer discussing financial or bureaucratic challenges with another knowledgeable staff during office hours.

Moreover, 2 students reported feeling like they were “running around in circles” due to gaps in communication between the university and Northern Bridge.

Many participants shared the sentiment that the NBC administrators are helpful and overall quick to respond, despite overwhelming workload. They asserted that the regulations and policies are prohibitive and prescriptive, often exacerbating existing difficulties.

One of the participants suggested:

“They [the policy documents] could give the administrators more room for accommodating specific people’s needs. If there is something in a grey area, let the administrator decide [how to address it]. Then, the administrator can have a conversation with me about what is and is not allowed.”

Thus, regulations need to be revisited to allow administrators to communicate with students, especially marginalised groups, about grant applications. Similarly, another participant suggests regular office hours with an NBC staff for face-to-face (online) consultations on applications, benefiting all participants.

b. Caring Responsibilities and the Need for Extra-Funding Opportunities

1 participant identified a lack of financial support to carers as a barrier. 2 additional participants admitted that caring responsibilities would pose a barrier in them continuing the PhD.

One participant mentioned spending their NBC funding for childcare and therefore having to take on extra jobs, which increases their general workload, increases stress factors and distracts them from the research. They also struggle to find or afford care provision alternatives when needing to attend conferences, seminars, or fieldwork - therefore being able to attend/ avail of opportunities can depend heavily on factors such as length of notice periods/ financial constraints.

Moreover, caring responsibilities can also include elderly care. P3 notes that middle-aged and senior PhD students may be “a sandwich generation,” balancing care for both children and parents, leading to added stress, extra workload, and expenses.

They often face challenges with short-notice opportunities and need more time for organizational tasks. Planning difficulties are closely tied to financial constraints, as swiftly arranging provisional care can add extra costs and stress. Therefore, additional funding support and opportunities in timely manner are demanded by caregiving researchers.

c. Small Grants for Resources, Art Supplies, and Software Subscriptions

4 participants shared that the need for easing and expanding small and large grant applications for resources, art supplies, or software subscriptions.

The main reasons for asking this accommodation on grants are expenses of remote working, disabilities, and art and technology related materials.

3 participants who studied remotely had issues in accessing physical books.

Digital copies may be inaccessible due to different reading cultures or health conditions. Although the libraries or universities were helpful, engaging this process required additional time and resources on the part of the student.

2 participants discussed the additional expense they faced in commuting to the universities and to the NBC summer school.

They highlighted that students who live around the city where the summer school is organised are expected to commute without financial assistance. Grant applications for study trips presented challenges for participants, including delays in processing this documentation: leading to rejections for funding and additional financial hardship.

1 participant mentioned that another issue with the small grant application is expenses for practice-based or art-based students.

They struggle to afford art supplies and hire people, often using their stipend for materials instead of living expenses, affecting their daily life and mental health. They

suggest a student-centred approach, such as receiving funding in advance rather than risking reimbursement.

3 participants with disabilities had different experiences with applying to NBC small grants for software subscriptions.

One participant, with an accessibility advisor handling communication, received support smoothly. Another had to spend significant time convincing the board. The third did not apply due to NBC regulations prohibiting software subscriptions. This highlights two key issues: while the administration is supportive, regulations limit their ability to grant support, and (self-)advocacy plays a crucial role. Since not all students have the resilience or conditions to advocate for themselves, the stress of small grant applications should be minimized, and eligibility should expand to include software purchases or subscriptions.

5.2.3. Placements for Part-time, International, or Disabled Students

The Northern Bridge Consortium provides 6 months additional funding period to 3.5-year stipends if the PhD student holds a placement with an approved institution outside of academia. This provides an outstanding opportunity to finance their PhD, support living conditions, sustain visas, pursue interests, network, enhance resumes, and enrich work experience.

Although 1 participant appreciates the improvements on placements over the years, 6 participants discussed the barriers to placements.

Difficulties with placement applications were experienced due to factors such as part-time study mode, international studentship status, and inaccessibility of the process.

4 participants highlighted challenges about placement applications due to unclear documents and insufficient guidance and 2 of them highlighted lesser support to part-time and international students.

P5 specifically needed more information on part-time student support, as part-time placements, therefore part-time students, receive lesser financial support. They sought guidance on shifting to full-time status to access full support.

Similarly, P2 reported the lack of clear information on how international students can benefit from placements and the impact on their visas. They noted that, being limited to 20 hours of work per week, international students can only take part-time placements, restricting their access to support (e.g., accommodation, transportation).

P2 also questioned how international students can access long-term placements (3–6 months) outside the UK, as Home Office regulations restrict stays abroad beyond four weeks, potentially affecting their immigration status. This creates disadvantages, making equal support inadequate. Clearer information, guidance, and equitable solutions from universities and Northern Bridge are needed.

2 neurodivergent students found placement documents confusing and the resultant bureaucracy overwhelming.

P6 avoided placements for the complexity, while P1 reported that juggling the bureaucracy for international placements is error-prone, thereby causing self-doubt and stress.

Finally, 2 other participants noted the unavailability of online and hybrid placements as barriers in their experience.

P8, an autistic student, avoids placements due to the uncertainty of new environments and difficulty with transportation, suggesting remote placements as a solution. Similarly, P4, unable to participate due to a long-term illness, wishes for a placement but finds online options too solitary, lacking collaboration and networking. Therefore, students with different abilities should be taken into consideration while designing placement opportunities.

5.2.4. Inclusivity and Intersectionality in Representation and Support

This section discusses how the participants' diverse backgrounds shape their PhD experience and what the issues are to enhance inclusivity and equity in supporting disadvantaged groups. As discussed before (in [5.2.](#)), these experiences are intersectional, which means that most participants face barriers at least two of the below categories.

a. Disability, Neurodiversity, and Mental Health Representation and Support

6 participants encountered barriers while receiving support for long-term medical conditions, neurodivergence, mental health, blindness, and hearing impairment.

These barriers are evident in:

- the diagnostic process and subsequent bureaucracy,
- insufficient accessibility support within universities,
- financial hardship due to additional costs (e.g., prescriptions, treatments),
- inaccessible documentation in applications ([discussed in 5.2.1.](#)),
- taking breaks and inadequate awareness on the breaks,
- inflexible working patterns,
- inaccessible environments at conferences and summer schools.

2 participants discussed receiving late diagnoses for dyslexia and autism, leading to retrospective reflections on missed support.

During this period (e.g., post-diagnosis realisation or grief), P1 found the diagnosis report difficult and struggled with navigating support alone. They needed in-person help from knowledgeable staff to address their concerns.

P1 felt obligated to disclose their diagnosis to unassigned staff because the Northern Bridge website lacks a contact address for disability support. They also found the communication between university accessibility teams and Northern Bridge poor. As neurodivergent individuals often feel shame and frustration asking multiple questions, the website should clearly list the right contact for disability support and outline a simple process.

2 participants shared the sentiment that universities address practical challenges of dyslexia (e.g., assistive technologies, short-term counselling), but their support is mostly geared toward undergraduates and not adapted for PhD students.

Teaching responsibilities for dyslexic PhDs, such as reduced marking workload, require continuous self-advocacy to ensure these adjustments are actioned. To support neurodiversity, requests for adjustments need to be taken seriously.

2 participants mentioned another key barrier which is to receive Disability Student Allowance (DSA).

A participant could not receive DSA due to the cost of disability assessments, while another noted that DSA is unavailable for PhDs in Northern Ireland, forcing them to advocate for the provision of their own assistive technologies. This highlights the need for better promotion of DSA and guidance during financial hardships.

2 participants discussed access adjustments for the Northern Bridge summer school and conferences.

Wearing face masks during illness outbreaks, using air purifiers and ventilating rooms by opening windows can support those with long-term conditions (e.g., long COVID) and menopause.

Flexible seating arrangements should also be made for those with chronic illnesses and neurodivergence, allowing space for fidgeting, stimming, and the ability to move around freely.

Microphones and audio amplification are needed to create an accessible environment for hearing-impaired individuals. Background music can be distracting for neurodivergent participants. Additionally, larger font sizes, coloured paper in brochures, and fewer words with larger fonts on presentation slides are other requested access adjustments for summer schools and conferences.

2 participants with long-term illness and neurodivergence need recovery time after events.

P4's experience with a long-term illness shows their progression differs from the norm, but they are still required to prove this. Similarly, P8 felt expected to work to normative timelines, leading to regular burnout. Therefore, different working speeds should be normalised, and the need for rest reflected in regulations.

Finally, 2 participants were actively considering leaves of absence but need more information on paid leave.

P8 emphasises the need for empathy and awareness among administrators, supervisors and peers regarding breaks. Promoting flexible study modes, such as part-time options for disabilities or winter downtime for depression, can support researchers' wellbeing.

b. Aging Representation and Support

4 participants questioned how “a PhD researcher” is conceptualised in academia.

They noted that language in Northern Bridge training and events often describes PhD students as **“young, able-bodied”** or **“early-career researcher”**.

P3 expresses its urgency by saying, **“There is something around ageing which needs to be understood and recognised and not avoided. Because it’s not avoidable.”** They stressed the need to recognise aging because biases on aging negatively affects support systems in housing, funding, care-support, training, and accessibility.

1 participant could not rent an apartment near their university due to their PhD status as a student, not an employee and inadequate threshold of funding.

They were forced to rent in student halls or shared houses with younger students, which was unsuitable for their mental, physical health, and socialisation. As a result, they had to live at a distance from the university, leading to further challenges with accessing resources and commuting expenses.

1 participant explains that universities lack support for carers due to the assumption that researchers are young and without caregiving responsibilities.

They argue that researchers in their 20s may also have domestic duties. Therefore, the image of a researcher should be redefined and reflected in policies to create more inclusive access adjustments.

2 participants noted that mature students may feel unfamiliar with current systems and have different habits of research.

One participant finds digital resources challenging to use and the current expectation from the students different from the previous years. Similarly, another participant reported the issue in sharing cultural references with their younger students. Thus, navigating these differences needed to be adjusted with better guidance in information.

1 participant observed that mature students face challenges in recognising the value of their work.

P3 mentioned that mature students' efforts can be ignored, and particularly mature artists face barriers in receiving opportunities, recognition, and spaces. This issue impairs their sense of belonging in the arts and research community.

2 participants felt that training was marketed to early career researchers.

P3 asserts **“The trainers should review their training material and include wider range of exemplars [on aging]. They can examine the**

underlying assumptions about life stages.” This can be achieved through building further dialogue with mature students on which trainings that they would like to acquire to pursue their career aspirations.

c. Gender and LGBTQIA+ Representation and Support

2 participants raised issues regarding representation and support for women and LGBTQIA+ individuals.

The issues range from raising awareness to providing accessible environment, financially and socially supporting their research, and forming peer-networks.

1 participant mentioned that menopause is not discussed in academia and the physical environments are not designed appropriately (e.g., ventilation of rooms).

Similarly, the lack of support to caring responsibilities also needs to be revised with its gender aspects. Although women (mostly cisgender) are well-represented in Northern Bridge cohorts (as reflected in the survey participation), support systems for women, trans and nonbinary individuals, and those with similar experiences (e.g., menopause) need improvement.

1 participant highlights the challenges of researching LGBTQIA+ communities, noting that due to the political climate and transphobic and homophobic biases, university support is inadequate.

Unsure of the longevity of this support, the interviewee remarked that they feel anxious about the future. Although they try to connect with other members of the student cohort, their university does not currently support research groups in this

area. Given the low participation of transgender and nonbinary individuals in Northern Bridge cohorts (Carvalho De Mello & Christy 2024, 4), there is an urgent need to enhance representation.

d. Addressing the Decolonisation and Ethnic Minorities

1 participant in the interview indicated that the lack of conversations on decolonisation and inadequate representation of ethnic minorities at administrative and student levels are major issues.

In a similar vein, anonymous feedback collected from the Northern Bridge Summer School 2024 highlighted the failure of current terminology to address decolonisation as part of EDI work:

“The definition of EDI as “Equality, Diversity and Inclusion” fails to address the more contentious aspects of how this work should be performed. Rather, NBC should consider responding to the more contemporaneous acronym of “Equity, Decolonisation and Intersectionality.”

Thus, this anonymous PhD student points to a way to elevate and make more visible the urgency of decolonisation in changing the definition of the acronym of EDI.

Our interview call did not reach or was not responded by individuals from ethnic minorities, which proves the issue mentioned above.

Thus, depending on these instances and observations from the interviews and the summer school, two main questions can be raised:

- How can EDI projects enhance approachability, refine methods, and improve result execution?
- How can universities and funding support systems become more responsive and trustworthy in academia?

5.2.5. Overcoming Isolation with a PhD Community

6 participants viewed the PhD journey as isolating and believed meeting other Northern Bridge students to discuss issues or topics would be beneficial.

As these participants occupy different study modes, building a PhD community or peer network is essential to strengthen the sense of belonging for both part-time and full-time participants.

3 participants suggested various approaches to solve this issue.

P9 appreciated meeting peers at Northern Bridge events and proposed more opportunities to network among the cohort, such as quarterly peer meetings.

P3 explains that “[with] programmes of training and development, there could be stronger attempts to bring PhD students together at the same time in the same space virtually or physically to operate together”. Therefore, trainings can be designed with a focus on networking.

Similarly, P7 suggests, “[NBC students] can have peer-to-peer meetings and support each other in what we're going through, facilitating that interdisciplinary and intersectionality, bringing us all together.” These meetings can be encouraged by the Northern Bridge through organisation and using the website by introducing the researcher profiles to contact each other.

6. Recommendations: Scenarios, Actions, Training and Access Rider

Accessibility: Review and Repair presents recommendations in four formats: scenarios, a list of actions, training examples, and a template of access rider.

6.1. Scenarios

This section explains scenarios as a tool to expand upon suggestions suggested by respondents to the survey and interview.

Writing scenarios is a participatory method in industry and different sectors to:

- find solutions to company or community issues in scenario planning workshops where employers, employees and different groups co-create narratives to understand milestones in decision-making, detect areas to improve, and plan future.
- reply to issues of employees in surveys with guidance of legal experts, EDI professionals, and individuals with lived experiences. Our approach to composing scenarios follows guidance on [Trans-Inclusive Culture Guidance](#) produced by the University of Leicester (MacLeod, Sandell, Cowan et al, 2023).

Accessibility Review and Repair was unable to benefit from this method due to several limitations. The limited fellowship period (initially 6 months with a 3-months extension) and the unavailability of participants' schedules made it impossible to organise scenario-based workshops, which typically take several months only to

conduct. Additionally, addressing issues with legal experts and communities fell outside the scope of this fellowship.

However, in this section, we want to highlight the method of writing scenarios as an effective practice that can be utilised in academic context for current and upcoming DTPs. The following scenarios aim to portray students' experience and suggest actions in line with how this research might be developed into tangible actions for change. However, the format underlines the significance of creating a dialogue between the students and DTP administrators, involved in decision-making.

6.1.1. Scenario 1

It is often difficult to understand what resources or tools are available to me, so I'm not sure who to approach to ask for support. I find that communications through Northern Bridge can often feel depersonalized and can massively vary from institution to institution - this only alienates me further.

Support should be responsive to individual needs, rather than relying on predetermined and outdated solutions which are often not fit for purpose. The implementation of regular Northern Bridge Office hours, coordinated by NBC administrators from each host university, should provide an opportunity for face-to-face consultation and valuable listening time. Office hours provide the opportunity for problems around paperwork surrounding the PhD to be tackled on a case-by-case basis, without taking away from the necessary time required to undertake primary research: **"An accessible PhD is where the hard part is the research, not figuring out what is being asked".**

There should be a common understanding between host institutions within Northern Bridge Consortium of what the structure, milestones, and timeline of a PhD looks

like, inclusive of what funding is available to them year-to-year (although we understand that there are many cases where student experience might vary).

This 'timeline' could be communicated through an easy-to-read document, which outlines what is expected of the student across the three to four years of study. Importantly, this document should aim to promote an equity of approach across departments and universities. This should help cement commonalities between values and the provision of resources between host institutions to support candidates through the PhD process.

6.1.2. Scenario 2

I am an NBC student living with the consequences of Long Covid, contracted midway through my PhD. As a result of this diagnosis, I now feel more isolated from my research community than ever. How can I find ways to connect with my peers?

Where possible, in-person conferences, workshops and training should be more accessible to people with health issues, including providing proper ventilation and the provision of air purifiers as standard to prevent the spread of COVID-19 and related respiratory diseases. The provision of proper ventilation and air purifiers can be justified under the provision of 'reasonable adjustments', which institutions and employers, such as universities, are legally obligated to provide to support disabled people.

The problem with the PhD's emphasis on individual achievement is that it can often isolate students under the illusion of self-reliance, which means the deficit for support always falls on the individual. However, the most vulnerable students within the cohort require peer support networks as a necessary means to feel engaged and

included in the research community. To tackle this, NBC leads and administrators should encourage the development of thematic, student-lead working groups within Northern Bridge to support interdisciplinary research and address institutional issues, including those relating to access.

These working groups, where relevant, should have the opportunity to hold decision-makers to account for when they fail to consider reasonable adjustments. One such approach would be implementing an annual meeting with Northern Bridge coordinators (online or in a hybrid setting) to report on and review access provision. The creation of these peer networks will help NBC students discuss and navigate their challenges collectively and hopefully enable strategies of mutual support.

6.1.3. Scenario 3

I am a ‘mature’ PhD student. Much of the current training benefits ‘emerging’ scholars, who are assumed to be much younger than me and who, culturally, I feel deeply out of touch with. I feel this is indicative of a lack of recognition for older students, who, like me, carry a great wealth of lived experience. I have reported these concerns before, but they have been ignored.

There is a pressing need for better integration of older, part-time, students - a generation who are more likely to share lived experience with their supervisors, rather than their younger peers in the PhD process. As a result, mature students are often left feeling patronized and excluded from the wider cohort. Age is a protected characteristic in the Equality Act 2010; it is illegal to discriminate against an individual on the basis of their age in an educational setting. Therefore, inclusive language and fair and equal representation of mature students should be prioritized in forward-facing roles. Age and representation should form an active part of the recruitment and review of future NBC training providers [also explored in the training recommendations].

Moreover, NBC should consider providing a directory of its student cohort which profiles a range of candidates from within its research community. The creation of a research directory on the NBC website would benefit prospective PhD candidates in finding out more about the process directly from the students, and help to acknowledge the variety of backgrounds, approaches and life stages of individuals entering the PhD.

6.2. List of Actions

This section lists recommended actions based on the survey, interview analyses, and the overall research.

6.2.1. Northern Bridge Website

- Create an “**About**” page on the navigation bar, different than the Home page. Then, transfer information on the universities and the interactive map on the contact page to the about page.
- Design the **contact** page only for contacting the Northern Bridge. The contact details (e.g., email address) for the Northern Bridge Consortium should be the first element to see. Then, the contact details for the directories in each university can be the second element to see in the hierarchy.
- Display the list of subheadings **on navigation bar** when the curser hovers over headings or clicked on them.
- Highlight the **main headings** on the navigation bar when clicking on the subheading list on the left panel. It should be visually clear which major heading the user is viewing.
- Unfold the subheadings on the left panels inside pages permanently rather than pop-up.
- Use **breadcrumbs** for headings and subheadings (e.g., Home / Resources / For Award Holders / Placements and Internships).
- Ensure **search bar** directs the user to the Northern Bridge website and documentation rather than the data on Newcastle University’s website.
- Use main body text: minimum **16px size** with resizing option at least 200% of its original size.
- Display **alternative text** (or alt text) for all images, preferably visible on the web page. An alt text describes the images concisely without unnecessary details and repeating the main text.

- Place a clearly visible “**accessible toolkit**” or “**assistive toolbar**” on the website which can include the following functions:
 - **Screen-reader:** Transform text to speech.
 - **Text resizing:** Adjust font size for readability.
 - **Font change:** Adjust font type for different reading needs.
 - **Colour change:** Change background and text colour (e.g., white text on black background).
 - **High and negative colour contrasts:** Adjust, increase or decrease colour contrast for clarity.
 - **Grayscale:** Remove colour, view in grayscale.
 - **Screen mask:** Define area to read and mask the rest.
 - **Links underline:** Underline links for easy identification.
 - **Simplify page:** Hide button shapes, any distractive design elements, images, or make the page plain text.
 - **On-screen Keyboard:** Provide writing without the physical.
- Use less-text based approach and **more visual explanation**.
- Ensure **any video is not missing** and that **all videos load properly**, play without errors, and function correctly across devices and browsers. A subtitle is required to accompany the video and option of installing the transcript.
- Edit videos as **topic focused** and **shorter clips** in duration to provide easy walk-throughs for applications.
- Build a **dynamic academic calendar** on the website. The calendar can include the dates for the induction, summer school, conferences, workshops or any other related events.
- Showcase **PhD profiles** (with whom giving consent) to support peer-networking.

6.2.3. Northern Bridge Documentation

- Use minimum 12 pt, preferably **14 pt size** in text, easier font (e.g., Arial), text-alignment to the left.

- Write documents with **automatised headings** (e.g., “Headings and Other Styles” in Word document) to make the screen reader distinguish if the text is a heading, main body text, or list.
- Use **simple and short sentences** without hard words for easy reading.
- Visualize the application process for small and large grants, and placements with **a workflow chart** that is suitable for screen readers or prepare a **video tutorial** with subtitles and transcripts.
- Prepare a brief **welcoming pack** for new PhDs to introduce Northern Bridge, different opportunities, expected monthly salaries and whom to contact for different kinds of support.
- Provide disabled students clear information and prepare an easy-reading **Accessibility and Neurodiversity Guide** on the Northern Bridge Website.
- Share the template of **an access rider** on the Northern Bridge website. An access rider can guide PhDs how to communicate on working hours, rest days, and any access adjustments with their supervisors and partner institutions in collaborative doctoral awards and placements.
- Design academic **planning example** or a **workflow for the part-time students** to help them trace their PhD progression.

6.2.4. Funding and Financial Support

- Improve **financial transparency** and clearly outline information on monthly stipends, small and large grants, and placements.
- Organize an **(annual) online session** explaining the regulations of funding in details, walk-through the grants and placement application process, and Q&A. The video of this session can be placed on the NBC website and made available to the whole cohorts.
- Support financially **caregiving PhD students** and help them in arranging provisional caregivers in their absence during research and academic events.
- Consider **intersectionality** in students’ experiences and backgrounds in decision-making for support systems.

- Ease small grant applications to buy **research resources (e.g., physical books)** and **software subscriptions**.
- Inform and financially support practice-based students for **the art projects' expenses**.
- Inform students on eligibility criteria for **paid leave, sick leave** and **parental leave** to support their disabilities, wellbeing and other conditions.
- Notify students about opportunities in a timely manner, **offering more time** for accommodating for caring duties and to book transportation in advance.

6.2.5. Administration and Bureaucracy

- Establish a **centralised support system** for seven universities.
- Bridge the gap between the universities (e.g., accessibility teams) and the Northern Bridge administration by **informing related university departments** on the Northern Bridge.
- Inform students about **the division of responsibilities between HEIs and NBC**, specifically outlining which issues fall under the remit of each, to ensure students contact the appropriate body.
- Establish a clear and well-communicated **point of contact** that considers disability services, financial concerns, and needs-based accommodations as operating within a broad spectrum of 'access'.
- Streamline and **visualise access support process** to decrease the additional workload, errors, and stress.
- Organise regular **online office hours** for student cohorts to ask their questions in person.
- Revise the grant application process to **minimise application time** and **PhDs' self-advocacy**. Students who may need support can be unaware of the possibility, do not acquire external help for advocacy, or have insufficient resilience due to various reasons, including mental health issues and marginalised backgrounds.

- Collect information on **access adjustments and intersectional conditions** during Equal Opportunities Monitoring to ensure further support.

6.2.6. Accessibility, Disability and Neurodiversity Support

- Raise awareness and improve communication around accessing the **Disabled Students Allowance (DSA)**.
- Create funding opportunities for **disabled students in Northern Ireland** to compensate the lack of DSA.
- Support **students who live far from the universities** on accessing libraries and resources, transportation expenses and the sense of belonging to the research community.
- Examine why **mature students** aged 35 and over identify disabled less likely than the younger students and raise accessibility awareness among them.
- Investigate why **male students** are less likely to request accommodations and whether additional outreach is needed.

6.2.7. Placements

- Explain the **placement application process clearly**, delineating step by step milestones, and indicating **workflow**.
- Financially support **part-time students** to undertake placements. Should that require a shift to full-time study when undertaking placements, this should be at the request of the student and not to fulfil arbitrary guidelines around funding. Many students cannot work full-time, and so this change in mode of study can be at the detriment of their needs.
- Inform and financially support **international students on placements and visa procedures**. The regulation of NBC placement needs to be revised in consideration of international students' inability to do full-time placement to prevent their disadvantage caused by the Home Office regulations.

- Develop more **remote opportunities for placements**, particularly with the institutions whose main work pattern is remote or hybrid to ensure a meaningful experience for the PhD students.

6.2.8. Summer Schools, Conferences, and Events

- Share a welcoming document that includes **a photo of the venue** and how many **people will be expected** to attend.
- Remind all participants to **use microphones** during the collective discussions in big venues.
- Encourage and remind participants to **introduce themselves with their pronouns** at the beginning.
- Design **flexible seating and quiet rooms**, allowing individuals to move at their leisure, acknowledging that many students might fidget or stim. Open-air venues, as weather allows, are particularly beneficial in allowing this freedom of movement, while providing additional ventilation
- Provide **noise cancelling headphones** and **fidget toys** (e.g., rollers, stress balls, pop-its) for neurodivergent individuals.
- Prepare **an accessible option for brochures** (e.g., larger size font – 16pt or 18pt –, coloured paper or overlays) for better reading.
- Ensure **air purifiers** are working, and rooms are regularly **ventilated** (e.g., opening windows).
- Organise conferences and any events in **hybrid formats**, allowing remote researchers to virtually attend.

6.2.9. Inclusivity in Representation and Support

- Refine ethnicity data collection and **broaden ethnicity categories** to better reflect diverse student backgrounds.
- Ensure that survey options accurately represent **all possible identities** to capture a more comprehensive picture.

- Revise **language used in training**, documentation and events with consideration to students at all life stages.
- Tailor opportunities and **support to mature students** by providing fair recognition for their research and artworks.
- Organise an **annual hybrid forum**, which might be in addition to summer schools, to build dialogue between different stakeholders, provide space for students to voice over their barriers, and the administrators to present improvements to previous years' challenges.
- Hold **participatory design sessions** with students and administrators. This online session can help design better, responsive and accessible services together to ensure trustability.
- Organise **training** to promote inclusion of LGBTQIA+ and decolonial practices.

6.2.10. Wellbeing and PhD Community

- Raise awareness of the **importance of regular breaks** among administrators, supervisors and peers.
- Support students to build **a peer network system**. The number of events such as Induction Day, Summer Schools, writing / editorial retreats can be increased.
- Establish **a mentorship program or a buddy system** between students in the earlier and later stages of their PhD (or with alumni) with financial compensation for the mentors' time.
- Develop **an alumni network** between current and graduate students.
- Organise **an online alumni conference** to present past dissertations and NBC success stories.
- Establish **a private, secure Discord server** (or relevant system, e.g., Microsoft Teams, Slack) for the Northern Bridge cohort to foster an online PhD community. This type of communication system can allow administrators

to create diverse subchannels to encourage cross-disciplinary networking and channels of peer support.

- **Discord** is an online platform for messaging, audio or video calling, screensharing, file-sharing, organising forums, and managing communities through subchannels.
- Please see “How Discord Works...” - a short video-explanation by the Discord Team.
- Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TJ13BA3-NR4>
- Please see Dr. Heather Saigo’s video-explanation of “Using the Discord Platform to Support Learning and Culture in Higher Education”
- Link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HPb_7LyQxRs
- **Microsoft Teams** is another similar tool that is already being used by most HEIs. However, creating a common NBC server with PhDs across all universities would be challenging with Teams as it is restrictive for different e-mail extensions to be an administrator - compared to Discord.

6.3. Training and Other Suggestions

The following section lists suggestions of training and web accessibility. However, as the researchers did not attend these sessions, the quality and inclusivity of these trainings should be checked in advance.

Drawing on their lived experience and expertise in these fields, the NBC student cohort may offer better suggestions and even provide relevant trainings. Therefore, the NBC student cohort should be included in decision-making regarding these trainings to co-create opportunities.

6.3.1. Accessibility and Neurodiversity

- **Disability Awareness Training**, organised by Enhance the UK, 4 hours, online.
 - Contact: info@enhancetheuk.org
 - Link: <https://disabilityawareness.training/virtual-disability-awareness-training/>
- **Autism and SPELL in Higher Education**, organised by National Autistic Society, 3 hours, online.
 - Link: <https://www.autism.org.uk/what-we-do/autism-know-how/training/sector-specific-training/spell-higher-education>
- **The Dyslexia Friendly Learning Environment**, organised by British Dyslexia Association, 2-3 hours, e-learning, providing also bespoke training option (1-6 hours).
 - Contact: training@bdadyslexia.org.uk
 - Link: <https://www.bdadyslexia.org.uk/>

6.3.2. Age Diversity

- **Age Awareness in the Workplace**, organised by Generations Working Together, 3 hours, online.
 - Contact: solutions@gwt.scot
 - Link: <https://generationsworkingtogether.org/training/workplace>
- **Age Inclusion Training**, organised by Business in the Community, 1.5-hour.
 - Contact: info@bitcni.org.uk
 - Link: <https://www.bitcni.org.uk/what-we-do/>
- **Menopause Awareness at Work**, organised by the Diversity Trust and Menospace, 1 hour, webinar.
 - Contact: info@diversitytrust.org.uk
 - Link: https://www.diversitytrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/menopause2_1.pdf

6.3.3. Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic

- **Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Talent and Leadership Development**, organised by the Diversity Trust, 2 hours online meeting and 70 min pre-recorded material.
 - Contact: info@diversitytrust.org.uk
 - Link: <https://www.diversitytrust.org.uk/transgender-awareness-training/>
- **Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Cultural Competence Certification Scheme**, organized by Diverse Cymru for organisations, online or in person.
 - Contact: suzanne.duval@diverse.cymru

- Link: <https://diverseecymru.org.uk/black-asian-and-minority-ethnic-cultural-competence-certification-scheme/>
- **Race and Mental Health in the Workplace**, organised by Mind Forward Alliance, 3 hours.
 - Contact: training@mindforwardalliance.com
 - Link: <https://mindforwardalliance.com/What-we-do/Training/Training-courses/247-/Race-amp-Mental-Health-in-the-Workplace>

6.3.4. Gender Diversity, Transgender, Nonbinary and LGBTQIA+

- **Trans Awareness and Inclusion**, organised by Gendered Intelligence, 6 hours in-person and online, providing Trans awareness course and help for policy development.
 - Contact: training@genderedintelligence.co.uk,
 - Link: <https://genderedintelligence.co.uk/about-us>
- **Gender Diversity Awareness for Employers & Service Providers**, organised by Gender Identity Research & Education Society, half or full day, online, providing policy development and e-learning support.
 - Contact: Camilla.thrush@gires.org.uk
 - Link: <https://www.gires.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/GIRES-Services-Leaflet-20220824.pdf>
- **Neurodiversity and Trans Identities**, organised by Mermaids UK, 1.5-hour, providing training session for corporates.
 - Contact: allana.grant@mermaidsuk.org.uk
 - Link: <https://mermaidsuk.org.uk/training/>

6.3.5. Mental Health and Wellbeing

- **Managing Your Mental Health during Your PhD**, a talk given by Dr Zoë J. Ayres – a wellbeing advocate, 30 min.
 - Contact: <https://www.zjayres.com/>
 - Link: https://www.zjayres.com/files/ugd/e97a8c_d73609bcd01b45f7b3aa101fa975bfc1.pdf
- **Managing Mental Health at Work**, organised by Mind, 4 hours – full day, online or in person, providing help for policies.
 - Contact telephone: 0300 123 3393
 - Link: https://www.mind.org.uk/media/rzchpavy/workplace-wellbeing-training-brochure-2324_0724-1.pdf
- **Access Docs for Artists**, an inclusive guide in writing access riders, outlining your specific needs.
 - Link: <https://www.accessdocsforartists.com/guide-to-making-an-access-doc>.

6.3.6. Web Accessibility

- **Recite Me**, a Gateshead-based company providing assistive toolbar and other accessibility services.
 - Contact: info@reciteme.com
 - Link: <https://reciteme.com/>
- **ReachDeck**, an accessibility toolbar created by Texthelp.
 - Link: <https://www.texthelp.com/en-gb/products/reachdeck/>

6.4. Access Rider Template

This section introduces the concept of an access rider and shares a basic template for PhDs to communicate their access accommodations – for example, with their supervisors, CDAs and placements.

Access documents, also known as ‘access statements’ or ‘access riders’, are designed to prevent endless conversations about access by offering a considered and detailed list of what might be needed when. This enables employers and colleagues to simply know how best to support someone without the need for assumptions or guesswork.

Access riders are in common use among disabled people. They are most frequently used by disabled artists, arts workers and freelancers in moving between job contracts and working collaboratively. This is because access documents can be a particularly handy way to short-circuit complicated questions around access, possible adaptations and preferred working methods in short-term projects.

EXAMPLE ACCESS RIDER

Name

Intro Paragraph
Here you can write a brief intro paragraph about you and your work/arts practice. You can also write about your condition if you wish to disclose that and how it affects you. You should list the things that are essential to understanding how to work with you.

E.g., I am a producer and I work mainly in theatre and visual arts. I have a condition that affects my energy levels and causes chronic pain. My condition is exacerbated by: weather, stress, dehydration and overexertion. My condition can change rapidly day to day and even hour to hour, I will be sure to communicate clearly with the team about how I'm feeling.

My Access Needs
Here you can outline your main access needs. You can also separate them into sections according to different aspects of your work.

E.g., Office days-

- I deal with chronic pain in the early mornings so prefer to work afternoons
- I need a rest area to manage symptoms of my fatigue
- I need to take regular breaks from screens as I'm prone to migraines.
- I need written communication read aloud as I am visually impaired

Figure 14: An access rider template from Unlimited, a disabled-led arts organisation (Watson, 2024) [\[downloadable link\]](#).

You can also divide your access document into sections as below:

Introduction:

This part is to explain your background and how you identify, inclusive of pronouns. You may or may not choose to disclose your specific conditions (see Figure 14).

It is far more important to name what barriers you might or do currently face in clear and simple terms.

These documents are intended to be confidential, and to be adapted and developed as circumstances (and inevitably, life) change. Where possible, you should also identify what steps you might take to mitigate these.

You could use bullet points. Examples of access adjustments could include the following:

- extra time when delivering documents to deadline
- flexible working across in person and online spaces
- frequent breaks in meetings
- need for meetings to be audio-recorded and/or followed up by email.
- In this context, it might be important to consider what works for you across two following headings: scheduling and travelling.

Scheduling:

You can explain what days and times during the week are you likely to be free, or at your most productive.

This might be particularly relevant if you have caring responsibilities, take medication (again, not necessary to disclose which or for what reason) or are currently working across multiple job roles or contracts.

Travel:

You can explain what you would like others to consider when moving from A to B. It may sound obvious, but this can be as simple as declaring your proximity (or distance) from public transport.

This might include a preference or necessity of using a particular kind of transport because of ease of access, or the time taken to move between spaces. For example,

can you use steps, stairs and/or the lift comfortably? Do you prefer working in quiet spaces, in insulation, small or large groups, and/or spaces with natural light?

You might then attach a link or two to supporting documents which might promote understanding of some of the barriers you highlight in the document. This part is optional but can be related to a specific condition you live with, or a pre-existing problem (e.g., presenteeism).

It is important to be mindful of what time and expectation we have on each other in reading these. Access riders should be short, simple and to the point. With that said, it is also flexible if you choose to write an access document, how you structure them, what time you dedicate to it and who you send it to. In some cases, it may be relevant to share your access rider with multiple people. In others, it may only be a route to convey access needs when scheduling meetings and managing collaboration between you and one other person.

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