

PhD Jargon-Buster Project

Executive Summary

Description

The PhD Jargon Buster project was developed to investigate and address accessibility barriers posed by academic terminology in the UK PhD and doctoral award application process and postgraduate research experience, focusing on the Northern Bridge Consortium (NBC) Doctoral Training Partnership. The project aimed to gather insights into how PhD students, particularly those from non-traditional or underrepresented backgrounds, engage with complex academic language and institutional jargon.

Jargon: Special words and phrases that are used by groups of people, especially in their work.
e.g. technical jargon, legal jargon, computer jargon.

Key Outcomes

- Data sources include:
 - Survey open for 100 days, receiving 40 detailed responses from current and recent PhD students.
 - Workshop conducted at the Northern Bridge Induction Day on 7th November 2024, gathering further qualitative insights from first-year year students, which at that stage had completed approximately one-month full time or less than one month part time of their PhDs.
- Common terms flagged as inaccessible or confusing included:
 - Symposium
 - Research environment
 - Postdoctoral studies
 - Research assistant
 - Early career researcher
 - PhD candidate
 - Research proposal
 - Quantitative and qualitative research
 - Research statement
 - Doctoral Training Partnership (DTP)
 - Viva, Induction, Postgraduate Researcher (PGR), and others

- 63% of survey respondents hesitated to ask about terms they felt “should be common knowledge”.
- Abbreviations and field-specific terminology were identified as key challenges for international and non-traditional students.
- 65% of survey respondents agreed that academic language presents an accessibility barrier for students from diverse or non-traditional backgrounds.
- Both workshop participants and survey respondents highlighted cultural and institutional gaps, e.g., adapting to UK academic language and practices.
- A draft glossary was created to address identified terminology barriers, covering over 50 key terms.
- Recommendations from workshop participants and survey respondents included clearer language in application materials, consistent terminology across documents, and more hybrid/online learning options to improve accessibility.

1. Purpose

The primary objectives of the project were:

- To identify terms and phrases that NBC PhD students find inaccessible or confusing at the time of applying or during the PhD.
- To explore the specific challenges faced by international students, first-generation scholars, non-native English speakers and those from non-traditional academic backgrounds when navigating postgraduate research in UK Higher Education Institutions (HEI).
- To create an accessible *Glossary of Academic Terms* to define common terms and explain acronyms.
- To assess the extent to which academic terminology functions as a barrier to inclusion and accessibility for NBC PhD students.

- To propose strategies for improving clarity and support for NBC PhD students navigating academic language.

2. Methodology

This section details the comprehensive and systematic methodology employed in conducting the research, emphasising the design, robust data collection procedures, and meticulous analytical strategies. The approach was tailored to explore the complexities of academic jargon and its implications for NBC PhD students, ensuring both depth and breadth in the findings.

2.1. Research design

The project employed a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative approaches to capture nuanced perspectives on academic jargon challenges (see figure below). Specifically, the research integrated survey responses and an interactive workshop to achieve data triangulation, enhancing the validity and reliability of the findings. The study spanned nine months with the survey open for 100 days – a period deemed sufficient to gather diverse insights while allowing for iterative analysis. This mixed-methods approach facilitated the exploration of both measurable trends and in-depth personal experiences.

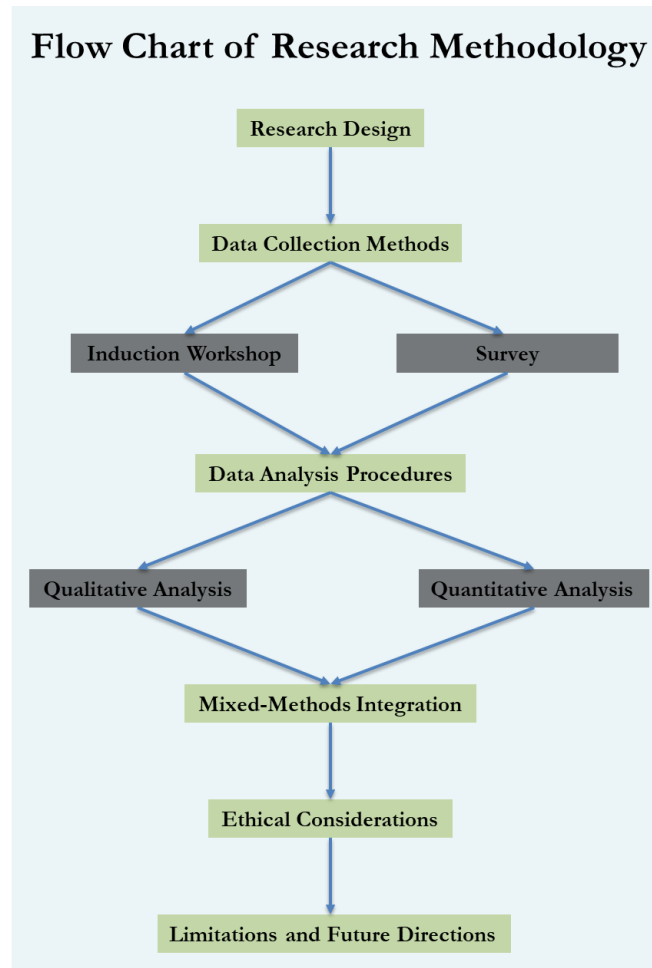


Figure 1: Flow chart to show the mixed-method application in the study

2.2. Ethical considerations

The research adhered to stringent ethical standards:

- Confidentiality: Anonymity of participants/respondents was preserved through de-identification of data and secure storage protocols.
- Informed consent: Clear, accessible information sheets were provided, and informed consent was obtained prior to participation.
- Data security: All data was encrypted and stored on secure institutional servers, accessible only to the research team.

2.3. Data collection methods

2.3.1. Survey

A structured survey was administered, providing quantitative data on the prevalence and nature of terminology challenges. Microsoft Forms was the chosen platform for gathering responses online.

- **Duration:** The survey remained open for 100 days, allowing adequate time for diverse participation.
- **Respondents:** 40 PhD students (33 full-time and 7 part-time) in different stages of their degrees from across the Northern Bridge Doctoral Training Partnership (DTP), representing various disciplines and institutions [Figure 2].
- **Survey structure:** The survey employed a branching structure tailored for non-native English speakers, facilitating a deeper exploration of language-related challenges. Non-native English speakers included those whose primary language of education was not English, or who engage with English as a second language. Questions focused on terminology comprehension, document accessibility, and institutional support awareness.
- **Data collected:** The survey yielded both quantitative data (e.g., frequency distributions of terminology challenges) and qualitative narratives from open-ended questions, enriching the dataset.

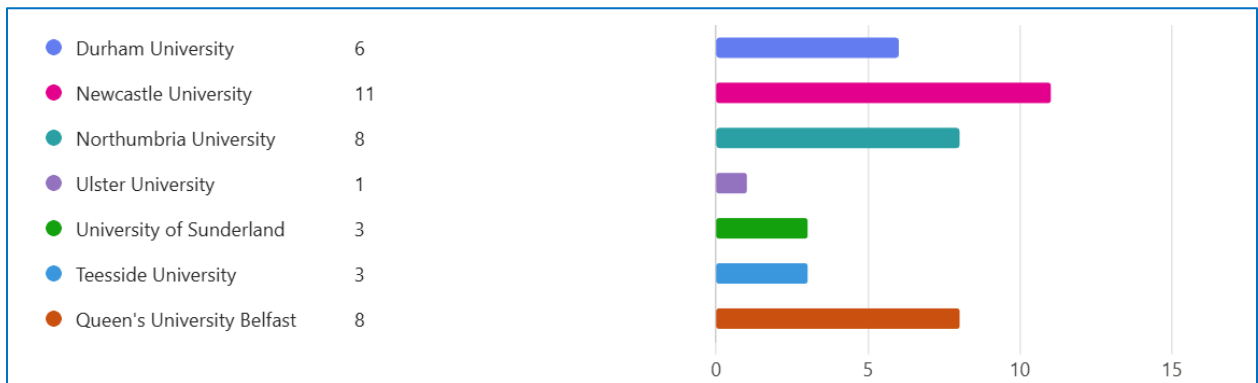


Figure 2: Participation in Survey

2.3.2. Induction Workshop

An interactive induction workshop served as the primary qualitative data source. Conducted on 7th November 2024 at the Northern Bridge Induction Conference, the workshop facilitated in-depth discussions and real-time polling on terminology barriers.

- **Participants:** 60 first-year PhD students representing seven HEIs across the North-East of England and Northern Ireland, who at that stage had completed approximately one-month full time or less than one month part time of their PhDs. The workshop was open to any Northern Bridge student who attended the Induction Conference in person.
- **Structure and facilitation:** The workshop incorporated group-based discussions, collaborative activities, and anonymous polling, enabling participants to articulate experiences in both structured and free-form settings.

- Data generation: Insights related to terminology challenges were documented through facilitated notes, audio recordings (with consent), and poll results. The data was later transcribed and coded for thematic analysis.

2.4. Data Analysis procedures

A multi-phase analytical process was implemented:

- Quantitative Analysis: Descriptive statistics provided an overview of terminology comprehension patterns, while inferential analyses (e.g., chi-square tests) explored associations between demographic variables and identified challenges.
- Qualitative Analysis: Thematic analysis was conducted following Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework. Codes were developed inductively to capture emergent themes related to linguistic accessibility and institutional support.
- Integration of findings: A convergent parallel design was employed to integrate qualitative and quantitative data, allowing for a holistic interpretation of the research questions.

2.5. Limitations and future directions

Although the methodology yielded rich insights, certain limitations warrant acknowledgment:

- Geographic scope: The study's sample was restricted to HEIs in the North-East of England and Northern Ireland. Future research could expand the geographic scope to enhance generalisability.
- Longitudinal insights: The cross-sectional design provided a snapshot of experiences. Longitudinal studies could capture evolving perceptions over the course of doctoral studies.

3. Key findings

3.1. Inaccessible or confusing terminology

“From the outset, it was an uphill battle. How could I answer questions that I didn't understand? PhD applicants are ordinary people, not yet subsumed by academia. It felt that Northern Bridge didn't even consider that some of us were not yet versed in PhD language.”

Survey respondent

Both survey respondents and workshop participants repeatedly flagged the following terms and acronyms as difficult to understand, particularly during the PhD application process:

- 1 + 3 PhD
- Annual Review
- Collaborative Doctoral Award (CDA)
- Consortium
- Data Management Plan
- Doctoral Training Partnership
- Doctoral Training Partnerships (DTPs)
- Early Career Researcher (ECR)
- HEI/non-HEI
- Nominee
- PhD Candidate
- Quantitative and Qualitative Research
- Research Assistant
- Research Environment
- Research Excellence Framework (REF)
- Research Proposal
- Research Statement
- Studentship
- Student/Staff-Led Collaborative Doctoral Award
- Symposium

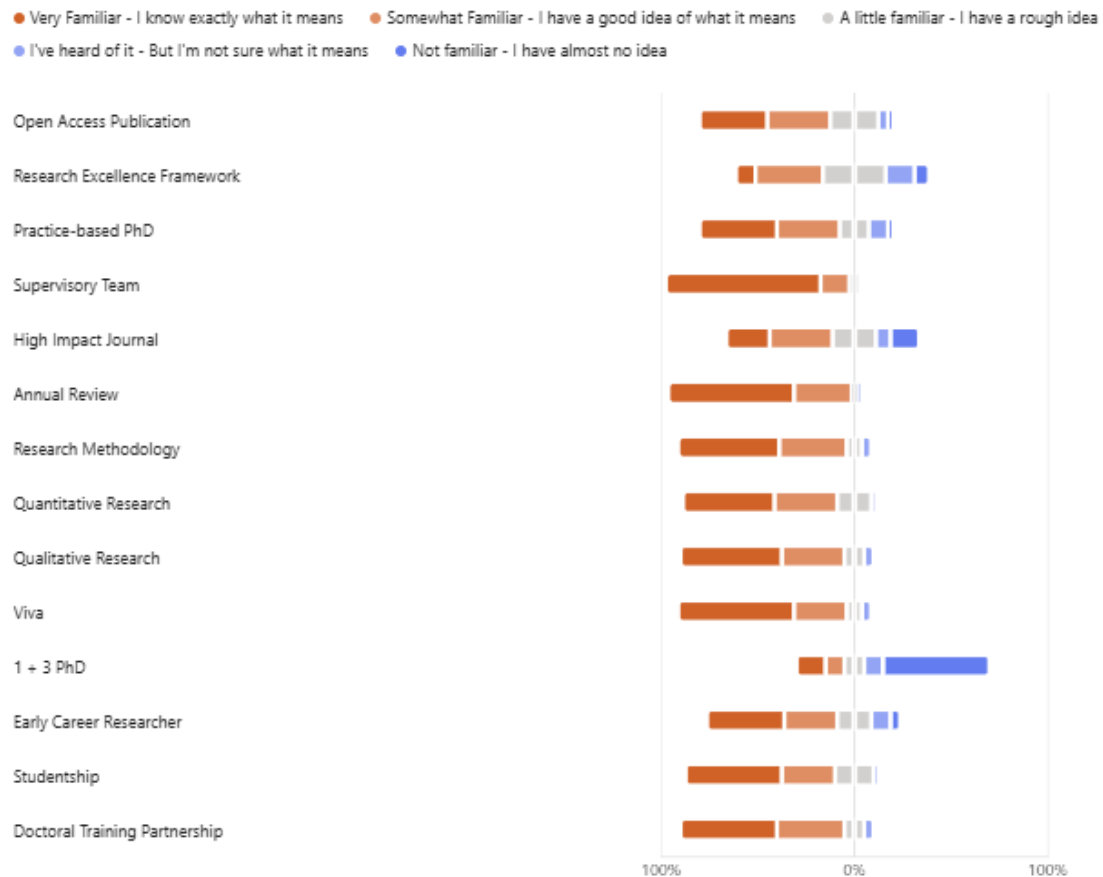


Figure 3: Inaccessible Terminology according to participants

In addition, international students specifically identified terms such as “Viva”, “Induction”, “Supervisor”, and “Postgraduate Researcher (PGR)” as unfamiliar.

“I did not know what a Viva was when I first applied and pronounced it: ‘veeva’.”

Survey respondent

3.2. Impact on students from non-traditional backgrounds

“Often people from diverse or non-traditional backgrounds won’t have access to the same materials and modes of study whilst at school. This carries on into university.”

Survey respondent

The data gathered revealed that for students from non-traditional backgrounds, obscure or confusing terminology poses yet another barrier for access to HEIs.

- Discussions at the workshop revealed that many international students struggled with academic abbreviations and UK-specific university terminology.
- First-generation students reported difficulties understanding application language, particularly where terms varied between disciplines and institutions.
- 65% of survey respondents believed that academic terminology creates accessibility barriers for students from non-traditional or diverse backgrounds. 53% of survey respondents believe that UKRI or NBC’s documentation could be a barrier for students from non-traditional backgrounds, while 43% were unsure.
- 63% of survey respondents expressed hesitation to ask about certain academic terms or processes, fearing they were deemed “common knowledge”.
- During the workshop, participants were presented with a poll with the question “*Who do you think are most disproportionately affected by the language used in academia and higher education?*” The answers included:
 - Neurodivergent people (including those in the autism spectrum, dyslexic, or with ADHD);
 - People from low-income or working-class backgrounds;
 - Non-native English speakers;
 - International students;
 - First generation students;
 - Mature students;
 - People with care responsibilities;
 - Disabled people in general;
 - Students returning to HE after a long break;
 - Students without a close relationship with their supervisor or without connections in academia.

24. Do you believe that academic terminology presents accessibility barriers for students from non-traditional or diverse backgrounds?

[More details](#)

Yes	26
No	2
Maybe	12

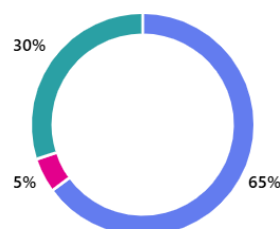


Figure 4: Accessibility for PhD students from non-traditional backgrounds

20. Do you believe there are any terms or jargon in the Northern Bridge Consortium's or UKRI's documentation that could be a barrier for students from diverse backgrounds?

[More details](#)

Yes	21
No	2
Unsure	17

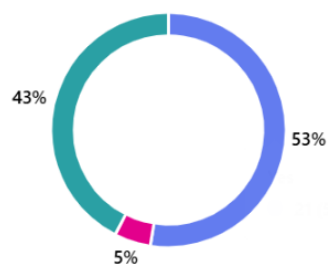


Figure 5: UKRI Document – Accessibility

“I have struggled building my academic vocabulary - the terminology sometimes feels too ‘elite’ so despite the fact that I understand it (which is a muscle I have developed), I feel awkward using it because I feel I am being deliberately opaque so as to be accepted by the academic community.”

Survey respondent

- Many workshop participants reported that they felt excluded or discouraged by the complexity of academic language, particularly in theoretical texts and discussions with supervisors.
- During the workshop, participants were presented with a poll with the question “*How do you feel about the language used in academia?*”
 - Workshop participants expressed a dominant sentiment of frustration, confusion, and exclusion in relation to academic language. Words such as “*bamboozled*”, “*exasperated*”, “*alienated*”, “*intimidated*”, and “*elitist*” highlight a recurring theme — academic language often acts as a barrier rather than a bridge to knowledge.
 - Workshop participants frequently described academic discourse as “*verbose*”, “*confusing*”, “*perplexing*”, and “*convoluted*”. These terms suggest that the intricate and often jargon-heavy nature of academic communication can create obstacles for those unfamiliar with its conventions.
 - Additionally, phrases like “*exclusionary*”, “*pretentious*”, “*obstructive*”, and “*distant*” indicate a perception that academic language can feel deliberately inaccessible, reinforcing feelings of alienation among learners and the broader public.
 - Even though the role of academic language in maintaining rigour and depth was acknowledged, the overall sentiment of workshop participants suggests that while precision is valued, excessive complexity undermines accessibility. For instance, of 41 answers to the poll question, only six reflected positive or neutral attitudes towards academic language, including terms such as “*precise*”, “*specific*”, “*curious*”, “*complex*”, and “*ambivalent*”.¹

3.3. Existing language and institutional support during the PhD

- Non-native English speakers expressed that they primarily relied on online resources (e.g., dictionaries, translators) and peer support to navigate terminology challenges.
- Institutional support mechanisms available highlighted as useful by survey respondents included iRISE, Queen’s University Belfast’s staff network; INTO, University of Newcastle; and Durham Center for Academic Development (DCAD).
- However, responses to the survey indicate relative unawareness regarding these resources among students, with only 33% of respondents being able to identify support available at their home institutions.

¹ The term “*ambivalent*” was repeated twice.

3.4. Suggestions for improvement

“There is no need to speak in this way. We are all researching subjects that we hope to share with the public and to move society forward. This is impossible if we act as gatekeepers by locking knowledge away in unapproachable language. Use plain language to reach the greatest amount of people, otherwise, it's elitist.”

Survey respondent

- Adjusting and simplifying terminology both (i) in the PhD and award application materials and process, and (ii) in institutional documents – including universities, NBC and UKRI – for clarity. During the workshop we asked people to look at excerpts taken from official documentation from the NBC and UKRI website. Some of the feedback we received explicitly states changes needed in such documents:

The example that my table was given was excerpt 2, Information for Student-Led Collaborative Doctoral Award Applicants [from the NBC website]. Some suggestions that we had as a group were:

- 1. To change the term ‘nominee’ to applicant or student. Especially as further down in the document, the term ‘student’ is used which almost suggests two different people - the student and the nominee. It would perhaps be useful to have just one term used consistently across all documentation*
- 2. The term ‘host institution’ prompted lots of discussion for our group and raised questions about why the term institution was used rather than the more simple and obvious ‘University’. It also raised the issue of being institutionalised and that it was something to be avoided. Additionally, the term ‘host’ wasn’t as clear as it could be. We thought ‘Chosen University’ was much clearer. Whilst the terms ‘host’ and ‘institution’ can be understood independently, when used together in this context we thought it could be an unfamiliar concept and one that dehumanises the process. Workshop participant.*

- Standardising definitions across institutions to improve consistency. During the workshop discussion, participants highlighted regional variations in terminology used by universities across the UK. While some terms are commonly used, their meanings can differ significantly depending on the institution, consortium, type of funding call, department, or programme. For example, the term “research proposal” is widely used, but its format and requirements can vary greatly between contexts.

- Ensuring training, conferences, and workshops are accessible online, particularly for students with disabilities, care responsibilities, or those who need additional flexibility.
- Avoiding overly complex or discipline-specific jargon in general PhD guidance.
- More tailored support – workshops and training – to help tackle the linguistic barriers previously discussed, both during the PhD/award application process and the PhD.
- Ultimately, to enhance academic inclusivity, institutions should consider adopting clearer, more engaging, and accessible language. Striking a balance between precision and comprehensibility can help bridge the gap between academia and wider audiences, ensuring that knowledge remains a shared and open resource.

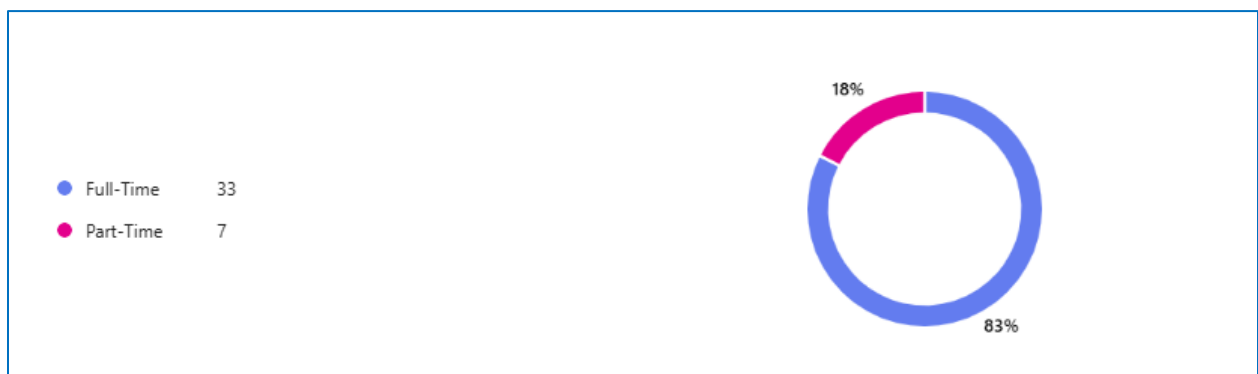
4. Conclusion

The PhD Jargon Buster project reveals important challenges in UK higher education posed by academic language/terminology, particularly for students from non-traditional, underrepresented, and international backgrounds. Addressing these barriers through clearer communication, institutional support for both staff and students, and inclusive practices will contribute to a more accessible and equitable higher education environment.

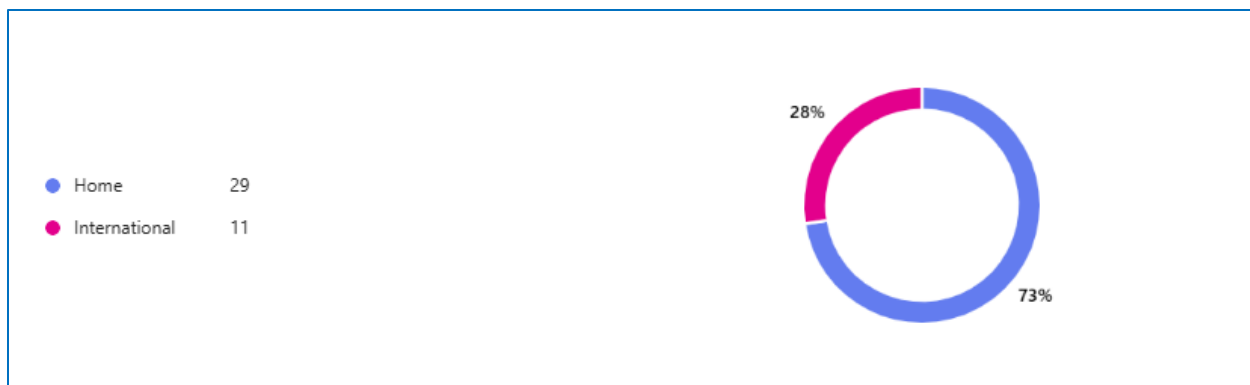
One particularly distinctive and insightful outcome from this project was the strong consensus around how deeply academic language intersects with feelings of belonging and confidence in academia (See Appendix 2). Many students reported that unfamiliar terminology not only created practical barriers but also reinforced perceptions of academia as an exclusive or elitist space. Additionally, the project surfaced new insights into how even common terms (e.g., “*Research Environment*”, “*Practice-based PhD*”, “*1+3 PhD*”) used in academia – particularly during the PhD and award application process – can be alienating when left unexplained, especially in recruitment or induction materials. Survey respondents and workshop participants recognised that learning the language of PhD study and research is very much part of the doctoral journey. However, it is important that HEIs and DTPs emphasise that students are not expected to understand it all from the outset and offer adequate support both in the application process and during the PhD.

Another key takeaway was the degree to which students from across different institutions and disciplines shared similar experiences, suggesting this issue is systemic rather than isolated. The survey and workshop also revealed a clear demand for plain (non-jargon) language and consistent terminology, particularly in application processes and training documentation. This highlights an area where immediate, impactful change is possible.

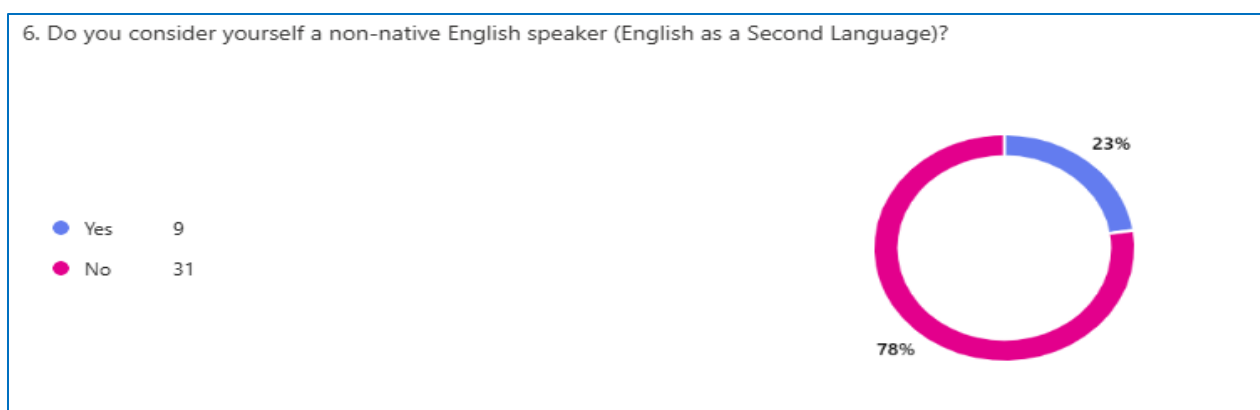
Appendix 1: Demographic data of participants



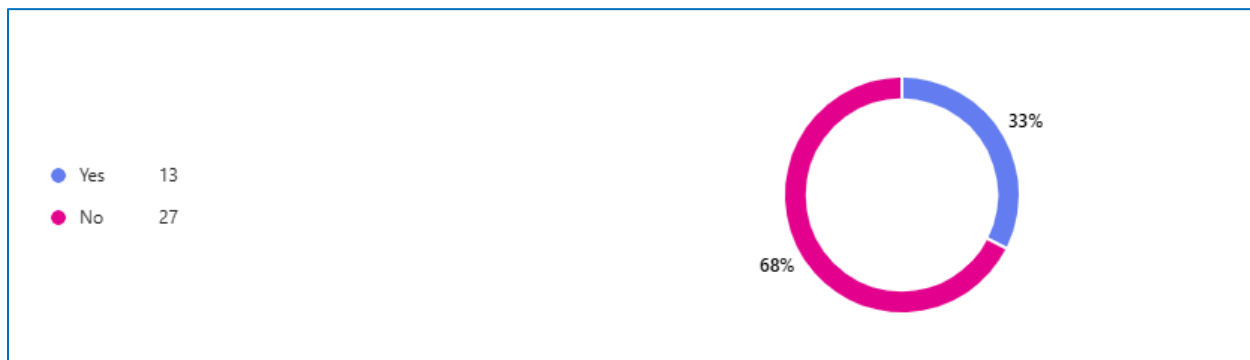
1.1.: Full-time and part-time students participating in the survey



1.2.: Home and International students participating in the survey



1.3.: Non-native and native English speakers



1.4.: First generation HE students



1.5.: First generation doctoral students

Appendix 2: Anonymous responses regarding language barriers

1. Survey respondents in answer to the question *“Do you have any other comments about language barriers you or others have experienced in academia?”*

Id	Name	Response
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1	anonymous	I think the preference for latinate, elevated/lengthy language is a barrier that is inherently tied to white privilege and the 'white tower' of academia. A far greater skill would be to prioritise or reward simply explained language in outputs.
2	anonymous	I understand a lot of these terms now, but didn't know/understand them prior to the PhD.
3	anonymous	As above, list of words academics use which are not used in normal life: epistemological, ontology, quotidian etc!
4	anonymous	People who call a seminar a 'symposium' when it is in fact just a seminar, but they change the name because symposium sounds fancier--this excludes people (mainly but not exclusively non-native English speakers) who won't have encountered that word before and don't know what it is, and there's not even a legitimate reason for using it beyond vanity; same with 'viva', why are we speaking Latin, why can't we just call it a 'thesis defence' or an 'oral exam'
5	anonymous	There is no need to speak in this way. We are all researching subjects that we hope to share with the public and to move society forward. This is impossible if we act as gatekeepers by locking knowledge away in unapproachable language. Use plain language to reach the greatest amount of people, otherwise, it's elitist.

2. Survey respondents in answer to the question *“Do you believe that academic terminology presents accessibility barriers for students from non-traditional or diverse backgrounds?”*

Id	Name	Response
1	anonymous	I have studied with lots of international students who speak English well but still struggle with some academic terms as they have never come across them before
2	anonymous	often people from diverse or non traditional backgrounds won't have access to the same materials and modes of study whilst at school. this carries on into uni - they may not know what is accessible to them and what help is there because they have lived to be self sufficient with the limited resources they have
3	anonymous	When you come from another country, usually you've learned the language but you have not learn the specific terms used in university

4	anonymous	As someone who is working class, the first one in my family to do an UG, and the only person in my entire family (including extended) to do a PhD, I really had (and still don't to some extent) no idea about academia.
5	anonymous	I think even the term PhD or doctorate or thesis are specific to high- high level academic contexts. Even as an undergrad my grasp of "what a Masters was" was entirely determined by scraps of knowledge that I pieced together from friends. What these degrees consist of is not innate knowledge.
6	anonymous	When your parents have not spent much time in higher education, you have to learn these on your own. Growing up, I would never have thought I would do a PhD, it's only because I have been well guided by my MA supervisors and my prospective PhD supervisor.
7	anonymous	terms in different assessment systems and research bodies, not in common use
8	anonymous	mostly to do with generational privilege structures
9	anonymous	The terminology is often set out in a prose that is dense and inaccessible. Simple, clear language would be more accessible to all.
10	anonymous	Academic terminology often doesn't cross over well from department to department, meaning students who have taken less traditional routes into Classics are definitely disadvantaged. I believe this applies to students who have taken less traditional routes into academia in the first place too.
11	anonymous	As someone on the autistic spectrum, people like me might have trouble understanding specific terms and phrases and may request clarification.
12	anonymous	As per response to Q14. The language is intimidating. It's like a club that you have to prove that you're clever enough to join. Maybe there could be subtitles in normal language that are played whilst someone is speaking in complex academic language.
13	anonymous	I have an undergraduate and post graduate degree and I still struggled to understand what was expected of me and what a PhD application really is. I can imagine someone with a different background or one outside of academic studies would find it even more confusing. Now that I have been accepted and am beginning my studies I understand a lot more and would be keen to support students who need help with applications.
14	anonymous	I think the language and the way things are written and referenced can sometimes be impenetrable and consequently unwelcoming and intimidating.
15	anonymous	If first in family or a new discipline.
16	anonymous	The language is something which inherently benefits those with connections to higher education - whether that's family, current or previous supervisors, colleagues. It helps to reenforce a pattern of higher education being an exclusive and privileged group that is inaccessible for those not 'in the know'.
17	anonymous	Plus to ethnicity or second language speaker, I think having working class backgrounds bring challenges. The elitism in academia sometimes reflect on the language. Sugarcoating the problems rather than focusing on the problems or writing resources in "intellectual" but highly inaccessible language could be some of the examples.
18	anonymous	I'm a native speaker and can't get my head around some of the seemingly nonsense words used in this industry so can only imagine how hard it must be for a non-native English speaker
19	anonymous	It would not surprise me if this was the case. We all have very different starting points.
20	anonymous	I don't think this is my case, but there can be so many different backgrounds that I tend to think that this is possible

21	anonymous	It can be very intimidating, leaving you feel stupid and not good enough to peruse the research. The initial learning needed to push through can feel huge and very isolating
22	anonymous	It can be demotivating when its hard to understand
23	anonymous	Academic terminology is only used in academic settings, it is not unlike learning a new language - and learning languages is hard!
24	anonymous	I am a native English speaker and I am constantly tripped up by jargon that is unnecessary. Expecting someone working in a second language, coming form a non-university route, or a neurodivergent student to cope with the onslaught of new terminology places them all at a disadvantage.