Towards a Community-Informed Model for PhD research?
A place-based exploration of attitudes to doctoral research programmes in Nottingham

Acknowledgments

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Executive Summary

This research took a place-based approach (McCann, 2019), within the context of Co(l)laboratory, a Research England funded pilot of a new, civically-informed doctoral training programme in Nottingham, to explore public perceptions of PhD programmes. The aims of the research project were threefold. Firstly, the research aimed to identify public perceptions of the target audiences, purpose, and outcomes of PhD programmes, and the extent to which these programmes were seen as valuable to wider society. Secondly, the project aimed to facilitate discussions of how PhD research agendas could become informed and shaped by the needs of local communities. Finally, this project took an inclusive approach, aiming to facilitate access to information relating to PhD programmes for participants.

Findings indicate good awareness and understanding of the PhD as an academic commitment to doing research, and a prestigious qualification undertaken at a university. However, little was known about how research agendas are set and by whom, with limited awareness of the outcomes or impact of PhD programmes and their capacity to contribute to real change, especially within local communities. Perceptions of the types of people undertaking PhDs varied, with two contrasting views and value judgments attached. PhD students were perceived either as young 'career students' who were more likely to be white, middle-class and privileged, or as older, mature students, driven by their passion for their subject and more likely to come from a wider range of backgrounds. Finally, despite evidence of some scepticism about the types of projects receiving funding, there was a clear desire for improved communication of the findings of PhD research, with participants keen to understand more about the outcomes and impact of research projects being undertaken by researchers locally.

1. Background and Literature

A recent report (Campaign for Science and Engineering[1], 2023) found that a significant proportion of the public do not perceive that UK research and development (R&D) benefits them, with those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds more likely to feel this way. Further, while local visibility of R&D was low, many expressed that they wanted to learn about the research activities being undertaken in their area (*ibid*, 2023). Further, whilst public trust in universities is generally high, there is low awareness of how research is funded (BEIS, 2020). Specifically, the UK PhD funding landscape is complex, with a multiplicity of funders involved (HEPI, 2020), though a third of all PhDs are self-funded (Vitae, 2022) with these research projects being designed initially by the prospective candidate. Yet in relation to publicly funded PhDs, one key study investigating public attitudes to higher education (HE) found some support for public investment in universities (UPP and HEPI, 2022), but also drew attention to concerns about public money being wasted on research. These findings are reinforced by a recent report from HEPI, which found that while the majority of the public have faith in the capacity of universities to meet the challenges currently facing the UK, there is also considerable scepticism about the types of research being carried out by academics (HEPI, 2025). Alongside evidence that those from disadvantaged socioeconomic groups have few interactions with universities (UPP Foundation and HEPI, 2022), public engagement with universities and their research appears patchy, despite high-level

[1] CaSE

policy initiatives aiming to embed the 'civic' focus of universities across the sector (Harrow and Guest, 2021). Considerable work is needed to engage local communities within universities' research agendas, consider the types of stakeholders currently engaging in knowledge exchange activities with universities, and effectively communicate the benefits of academic research to the public.

Despite significant investment in UK universities' outreach activities in recent decades, with government policy agendas supporting increased awareness of the benefits of participation in undergraduate education, little effort is made to communicate the potential benefits of research degrees. Indeed, despite a proliferation of different doctorates in recent decades (Park, 2005), and the significant economic contribution made to the UK economy through doctoral research (Read *et al*., 2024), there is scant evidence about how – and indeed whether – doctoral education is understood by, and to what extent any benefits of PhD research are perceived by the public. Given the socioeconomic challenges faced by communities across the UK, and the significant public funding ascribed to UK funding councils and other research-intensive organisations for PhD programmes, it is critically important to examine their perceived value and impact.

2. Research Questions

To achieve the three aims of this research as set out in the executive summary, the following research questions were developed:

1. How, if at all, are PhD degrees understood and perceived by members of local communities?
2. What level of awareness do members of local communities have of the potential benefits and value of university research, and PhD research programmes?
3. What local challenges do members of local communities perceive could potentially be addressed through PhD research programmes?
4. What awareness is there of opportunities to undertake PhD research and the knowledge/experience/qualifications required of applicants, for example expectations re prior qualifications such as a Master's degree?

3. Methodology and Ethical Considerations

This project was given a favourable ethics opinion by Nottingham Trent University's Research Ethics Committee in September 2023, and the National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement (NCCPE) guide to ethical principles in community-based participatory research (2022) was used to inform the approach to this research. The project was undertaken with a social justice perspective, noting university-based research agendas often 'do to' communities, rather than actively engaging members of the public (NCCPE, 2019) and recognising that access to information about, and funding for, research degrees is far from equal (Leading Routes, 2019; Pasztor and Wakeling, 2018). In response to this, participants were involved in the co-production of a 'Demystifying Research and PhDs' guide produced in summer 2024 as a key output developed from the focus groups used in this study. Beyond this, participants were offered opportunities to engage in a range of community-facing events organised by Co(l)laboratory, enabling them to input ideas about future priorities for research in their local areas.

The focus group method was selected as most appropriate to do research with local residents, allowing individuals to engage in deliberative participation on a specific topic (Macnaghten, 2021). This approach necessitated careful facilitation, aiming to empower participants and ensure contributions were valued. Focus group questions were devised for participants with differing levels of knowledge of and exposure to HE. The call for participants was circulated to local community organisations and gatekeepers. Criteria for participation were limited; participants had to be Nottinghamshire residents and not have completed a PhD. Table 1 summarises participants' demographic characteristics, including HE qualifications and levels of deprivation in residents' local areas, to provide context for levels of awareness of PhD programmes. Data collection was undertaken in November 2023 via 4 focus groups, one of which was online, with others taking place in-person in accessible public venues in Nottingham, with a total of 27 participants recruited and representing a relatively diverse population.

Table 1- Characteristics of Focus Group Participants

Pseudonym	Gender	Ethnicity	Age	Area of Nottingham	Deprivation index[2]	Highest qualification	Knew someone who had done a PhD
Adam	M	Black or Black British – African	26-30	Clifton*	Clifton East 1 and Clifton West 3	A Level	Yes
Alice	F	White British	18-25	Sherwood	1	A Level	Yes
Ben	M	White British	31-39	Mapperley	2	Taught Masters degree	Yes
Bobby	M	White British	26-30	Sherwood	1	Taught Masters degree	Yes
Charlie	M	Black or Black British – African	18-25	Ashfields	4	GCSE	No
Dave	M	White British	31-39	Clifton*	Clifton East 1 and Clifton West 3	Taught Masters degree	Yes
Declan	M	Black or Black British – Caribbean	26-30	Cotgrave	4	Undergraduate degree	No
Francis	M	Other White Background	18-25	Beeston*	Beeston North and Central 3 Beeston Rylands 4, Beeston West 5	GCSE	Yes
Henry	M	Black or Black British – Caribbean	26-30	Bramcote	5	GCSE	No
Hua	F	Chinese	50-59	St Ann's	1	A Level	No
Iris	F	White British	70+	Gedling	4	Undergraduate degree	No
Jamal	M	Black or Black British – African	50-59	Sherwood	1	Higher National Certificate	Yes
Jane	F	White British	60-69	Carlton	3	Taught Masters degree	Yes
Jaya	F	Black or Black British – Caribbean	26-30	Kimberley	3	Undergraduate degree	Yes
Kamau	M	Mixed- White and Black African	31-39	Annesley & Kirkby Woodhouse	3	Taught Masters degree	No
Kevin	M	White British	40-49	Sherwood	1	Taught Masters degree	Yes
Kiran	M	Asian or Asian British- Indian	26-30	Trent Bridge	3	Undergraduate degree	Yes
Laura	F	White British	18-25	Lady Bay	5	Undergraduate degree	Yes
Lewis	M	Black or Black British – African	18-25	Beeston*	Beeston North and Central 3 Beeston Rylands 4, Beeston West 5	GCSE	No
Matt	M	Other White Background	40-49	Kirkby in Ashfield	Greenwood and Summit 1	Taught Masters degree	Yes
Michael	M	Mixed- White and Asian	60-69	Sherwood	1	Taught Masters degree	Yes
Pauline	F	White British	60-69	Woodthorpe	5	Undergraduate degree	Yes
Ruby	F	Black or Black British – Caribbean	26-30	Bestwood	1	Undergraduate degree	No
Samuel	M	Mixed- White and Black African	18-25	Southwell	5	Undergraduate degree	No
Seema	F	Asian or Asian British- Indian	18-25	Trent Bridge	3	Undergraduate degree	Yes
Sophia	F	White British	26-30	Sherwood	1	Undergraduate degree	Yes
Suzi	F	Black or Black British – Caribbean	18-25	Sherwood	1	Undergraduate degree	No

[2] Indices of Deprivation 2025 are a relative measure of deprivation for small areas (Lower-layer Super Output Areas) across England. Data in this column shows Average LSOA Rank, where a lower rank indicates that an area is experiencing higher levels of deprivation, thus Rank 1 = most deprived. Source: Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) 2025 https://imd.localinsight.org/#/map

* indicates where the participants' specific electoral ward within their local areas was not known, and so all possible deprivation index data for these wards in this area of Nottinghamshire are shown in the next column

4. Findings

Research findings are presented below, set out in response to the original four research questions.

4.1 Understandings and perceptions of PhDs by members of local communities

Structure of PhD programmes

Generally, participants had a good understanding of the PhD as an academic endeavour. There was a high level of awareness that a PhD involved commitment to doing research which would result in a prestigious qualification from a university. Many participants with HE qualifications understood that the title of 'Doctor' was part of the PhD qualification, though there was some confusion about whether this applied to all PhD graduates, or only those who had studied for a PhD in Medicine. There was more variation in participants' awareness of the length of time PhDs usually take to complete; for those without a HE qualification, or who had completed one some time ago, the length of time to complete a PhD was longer than they had expected, with an assumption that it would take one or two years. Whilst it was generally understood that PhDs could be undertaken in any subject, participants perceived that PhDs in STEM subjects would be more common, and that these types of PhDs were likely to be most widely known about by those outside universities.

Funding and Development of PhD programmes

The process by which PhD programmes were designed, developed and funded was not well understood. The dominant assumption was that universities themselves largely funded PhD programmes, though there was some awareness of other potential funders such as the NHS, private companies and national governments, and some thought that individual benefactors might sponsor some programmes. Whilst a significant number of PhDs in the UK are self-funded, there was low awareness among participants of the ability for individuals to self-fund. Aside from a small number of individuals who knew someone that had funded a PhD on a subject of their choice, most assumed that the topic of PhD programmes was dictated by the university or organisation providing funding. Though some younger participants expressed concerns about the types of subjects receiving PhD funding, older individuals – who within the sample were more likely to have HE experience than younger participants – were more likely to be sceptical. This was most apparent when discussing the public funding element of some funded PhD programmes, an issue raised by the author within focus group discussions. Whilst UK research councils were briefly mentioned by two individuals, participants did not directly identify a link between UK government and research councils providing PhD funding, and the role of UK taxpayers in funding PhD programmes.

Characteristics of PhD students

Two models emerged from participants' perceptions of who PhD students might be, each with differing value judgements attached. The first was a young 'career student', perceived as undertaking a PhD straight after completing other academic degrees, and to be doing research in a STEM subject. Overall, participants assumed that this type of student was likely middle- or upper-class and therefore privileged, with a financial support system in place. These students were perceived less favourably, and in direct contrast to the second model of potential PhD students identified through participants' perceptions; individuals who were older, driven by their passion for a particular subject. Those choosing to pursue PhDs later in life were seen to be more motivated by intellectual curiosity rather than purely career progression, and were viewed considerably more positively than younger students studying for a PhD straight after other degrees. In many cases, these younger students were perceived negatively, with participants assuming these types of students simply did not want to enter employment beyond academia. It was evident that participants' knowledge of people who had done a PhD significantly shaped the types of people they were able to envisage as potential PhD students. Whilst the dominant assumption was that PhD students were more likely to be from middle-class backgrounds, some resisted this view, citing examples of people that they had known to be from wider class backgrounds. Few brought up the perceived ethnicity of potential PhD students explicitly, but among those who did, they often conflated middle-class students with White students.

Outcomes of PhD programmes

Whilst just over half of all focus group participants knew someone who had done a PhD, the majority had very limited understandings of that person's research, and were unable to articulate any outcomes or impact of their PhD. Just four participants were able to describe to some extent what their friend or family member had done or achieved in their PhD, with two able to give a reasonably detailed account of what the PhD had related to, and the findings of the research. Among participants who had known someone doing a PhD – in some cases a family member or friend – there was some acknowledgement that it was problematic that they could not articulate what that research had been about, or had found. This was connected to a desire to learn more about the impact and findings of PhD research programmes, with many participants observing that better translation and communication of research findings was needed from those pursuing PhDs.

Along with their knowledge of PhD students in their own networks, participants' judgments of imagined PhD students were often directly related to their own experiences of HE, and the opportunities they perceived as more or less being possible for them. It was clear that participants who identified as working-class perceived middle-class individuals as being more easily able to access PhD programmes, not only due to financial support but because of their familiarity with HE. This echoes the findings of research which highlights the importance of academic role models for working-class students (Greenbank, 2009; Travis *et al*., 2023), and the significance of cultural and social capital in shaping working-class individuals' experiences of HE (Reay, 2015).

4.2 Awareness of the potential benefits and value of university and PhD research programmes

Career-related benefits for PhD holders

There was strong awareness amongst participants of the career-related benefits of a PhD for individuals, with the qualification and associated title of 'Doctor' perceived as having significant prestige. Participants used words such as "*kudos*" and "*cachet*" to describe the way in which they felt the PhD was valuable for individuals' social and professional status. The PhD was viewed as a significant personal accolade, and as such participants perceived that having this would lend authority to individuals in both professional and personal contexts. There was consensus that having a PhD would lead to career progression and advancement in a particular field, and a related assumption that this would result in increased salary; something borne out by statistics highlighting the increased earnings for doctorate holders compared with other degrees (Vitae, 2022). There was some evidence that older participants viewed certain post-PhD career destinations as more appropriate than others, with most assuming individuals studying for PhDs were likely to stay in academia and lecture. In contrast, younger participants were more likely to consider that PhD holders would work across a range of industries after graduating. Significantly, there was agreement among participants that having a PhD warranted individuals' faster career progression and increased likely seniority in their chosen field, due to the specialism of their knowledge.

Potential for PhDs to contribute to public good

Beyond benefits to individual PhD holders, wider societal benefits of PhD research were identified by some participants, echoing calls to reimagine doctoral education in relation to its potential for public good (Clarence, Handforth and Smith-McGloin, forthcoming; Deem, 2020). Generally, younger participants were more likely to assume PhD programmes would have a positive social impact, and that students were motivated by this potential to make a difference. This view was shared by around half of participants, who expressed considerable faith in the ability of research to help illuminate and understand societal problems, and thus the potential for PhDs to contribute to public good. This was identified particularly in relation to medical advancements and pharmaceutical developments. There was also some evidence of trust in PhD students and universities generally to conduct research with integrity, compared with privately sponsored research.

Scepticism about the efficacy of the PhD as a tool for change

Participants' views of academic research were often not straightforward. Whilst PhD programmes could be seen as having potential to contribute to public good, there was also significant scepticism about the nature and value of PhD research, and the efficacy of academic research more generally as a tool for social change. This was often connected to concerns about the types of research undertaken, something echoed in other studies examining public attitudes to HE and research (HEPI, 2025; UPP and HEPI, 2022). A key theme which emerged from discussions was a perceived disconnect between the academic world and the 'real world', observed by around half of participants; all of whom had at least one university degree. Significantly, even participants with multiple degrees at times expressed very critical views of PhDs, using descriptions including '*navel-gazing'*, '*ivory tower'*, '*academic waffle'* and '*silly stuff'* within wider comments. Interestingly, the language used by some echoed broader perceptions of the academic world being disconnected from the 'real' world, with participants expressing concerns that the research and the resulting knowledge could be left '*in a drawer'*, '*on a bookshelf'*, or in a more contemporary reference '*behind a paywall'*.

In some cases, participants connected the length of time required to complete a PhD to concerns about the likelihood of research having impact. Several participants considered that the challenge of completing a PhD over three or four years might lead individuals to simply abandon research findings rather than make efforts to communicate them more widely, and ensure that they enabled real-world impact. For the few who had known individuals with PhDs funded by national or international organisations, there was the perception that there was more potential for PhD programmes to have impact if they were designed within this framework. One participant articulated that he felt it would be challenging for individual researchers, without the support of a larger organisation, to ensure that their PhD would contribute to social change:

> *"How much it can quite change the world without like someone like the NSPCC being behind it, or somebody bigger, who can then move that forwards beyond that, in a sort of political timeframe? They* [PhD student] *haven't got the power or the influence to move that along."*
>
> (Kevin, White British, 40-49, Sherwood, Taught Masters degree)

4.3 Views of the potential of PhD research programmes to address local challenges

Desire for research with focus on societal challenges in Nottinghamshire

Participants identified a range of economic, societal and health-related challenges in their local areas, including the cost-of-living crisis, housing quality and affordability, transport infrastructure, health inequalities, crime, and pollution. Interestingly, the issues raised did not appear to vary by area of residence, or correspond to a particular group of participants. There was consensus that these issues were national challenges, but ones that felt particularly problematic across Nottinghamshire. Perhaps surprisingly, given the high profile of media coverage of Nottingham City Council's bankruptcy at the same month as focus groups took place (BBC, 2023), there was only one reference made to the financial crisis in local government. Several participants indicated that the East Midlands was often neglected in government funding and initiatives, referencing the levelling up agenda as having little local impact in Nottinghamshire, and perceiving a significant economic divide between different regions.

It was clear that despite some scepticism about the impact and efficacy of the PhD as a tool for change, participants were keen to see research undertaken locally to address the challenges and issues they identified in Nottinghamshire. There was a perception that due to perceived disinterest in the East Midlands from national government, only local people were likely to be motivated to conduct research which focused on local issues. There was cautious optimism about the potential for PhD programmes with a place-based focus to address local challenges, though participants were keen to caveat this with the need for research that focused on delivering change within their communities. It was also acknowledged that research could be a tool to focus on the challenges affecting smaller, often marginalised communities, and that these types of communities could stand to benefit most from this research focus.

Political limitations on the capacity for research to contribute to change

Most participants observed the wider political landscape as critical to the ability of academic research to contribute to societal change. The capacity of research to be translated into action was seen to be in the gift of national and local government, and the extent to which research was connected to their priorities. Some observed the tension between individual researchers and the political context that they were working within, and felt that individuals could only do so much in offering potential solutions to challenges through undertaking research. This pragmatic perspective was shared by the majority of participants, who acknowledged that political will was required for research to be able to have impact, and that whilst PhD programmes could offer potential solutions to societal challenges, national government would need to enact them:

> *"They can provide solutions, but they cannot offer the solution. They can only provide solutions and the government, yes, the government should be able to see how they can bring these solutions to the daily lives of the residents."*
>
> (Charlie, Black or Black British– African, 18-25, Ashfields, GCSE)

Others highlighted the additional possibilities that research could have in relation to specific issues, in terms of raising awareness of the areas that should be prioritised by decision-makers. Yet it was acknowledged by some that the opaque nature of political processes and policymaking posed barriers to the capacity for research to contribute to change. Whilst individual researchers could do quality research, there was a concern that without the input of key stakeholders working in influential positions, research findings would fail to reach decision-makers.

Ability of local residents to influence research agendas

Despite increasing calls for place-based research (McCann, 2019), and some initiatives attempting to facilitate community input into local research priorities (NCCPE, 2019; Young *et al*., 2025), participants felt there were few opportunities for them to influence research agendas. Beyond this, for those without HE qualifications, there was a perception not only that they *would* likely not be able to influence the research that was undertaken, but that they perhaps *should* not. These participants felt that as part of the HE system, the PhD would have its own process and curriculum, and that those inside this system would have a clear rationale for what topics to research:

> *"It's not…our place to determine what another person is going to do or study during their PhD."*
>
> (Charlie, Black or Black British– African, 18-25, Ashfields, GCSE)

This view that it was "*not our place*" to influence the types of research undertaken corresponds with participants' understanding that money and influence are needed to steer research agendas, and that this power is found in universities and government rather than being held by individuals or local communities:

> *"I don't think people like us…have much of a like a big role to play in what topic is chosen or what particular area is going to be used for a particular research or study, because like I said before, it is mostly done by the university and also by those benefactors or the government…So my voice or my say can't really be cared for in the same way…I'm just there and they are those other people with the money and the influence that can move research and so on and those people can say wake up and go OK, I want to study on this, and they have the money to back it up, so in a way, in a general sense, people like me…I think that I don't really have much of a role or say in what topic or research can be done."*
>
> (Lewis, Black or Black British– African, 18-25, Beeston, GCSE)

This view that "*people like us*" do not have a valuable role in steering research agendas and that their voices were not valued in the same way as "*other people*" working in academia and government, reflects traditional conceptions of academic research which is 'done to' communities (NCCPE, 2019). Whilst these comments were not explored in further depth within the focus group, it could be interpreted as indicating

the distance felt by individuals from racially minoritised groups from those in government and other decision-making roles. This perception also centres traditional values of intellectual freedom that can emphasise paternalistic notions of academic research (Bortolin, 2011), speaking back to hierarchies of knowledge and assumptions that lived experience is not as valuable as academic knowledge (Ishkanian *et al*., 2025). Significantly, whilst younger participants without experience of HE were more likely to feel that they did not – or even should not – have a role in influencing research agendas, older participants with multiple university degrees did not express the same sentiment.

While participants felt that directly influencing the types of research undertaken in their local areas would be extremely challenging, there were other less direct ways that participants identified as to how they might contribute to positive change in their local communities, such as using political pathways. In addition, participation in research projects was seen by some as a possible method of contributing to research outcomes in their local area, though some expressed concerns about how and if people from different backgrounds are included, or excluded from research. These concerns echo literature highlighting the historic exclusion of racially minoritised groups, women, disabled people and other marginalised groups from research across subject areas (Adley *et al*., 2024; Bower *et al*., 2020; Redwood and Gill, 2013).

4.4 Awareness of current and future PhD research programmes

Learning about ongoing academic research including current PhD programmes

It was felt that there were limited existing mechanisms for residents to learn about current research being undertaken in their local areas, and evidence that participants felt distant from research being undertaken at their local HE institutions, echoing recent reports highlighting low awareness of the impact of universities locally (CaSE, 2023), particularly outside London and the South-East (HEPI, 2025). Within discussions of how academic research could be better shared with the wider public, potential strategies suggested included widening the platforms used to share research, including through lifelong learning organisations such as U3A, as well as publishing research findings through different types of outlets, including trade, community and local presses. It was felt that individual researchers also needed to consider how to engage people from different groups with their research, and for PhD students specifically, it was felt that they should be encouraged to engage with their local communities throughout their programme, despite the challenges this might pose for the researcher in translating their research findings in an accessible way. These findings indicate the need for greater transparency in communicating research findings to wider audiences; while there has been increasing attention on open research practices, these practices are far from embedded within university research cultures.

Interestingly, almost all participants who expressed a desire for improved communication of research – rather than simply suggesting ways that universities and researchers could do this better – were all highly educated, and from older age groups. This supports the findings of other studies which have found that those from more advantaged socioeconomic groups are more likely to see the benefits of research, and therefore more likely to want to learn about the research going on in their local communities (CaSE, 2023; 2025). While many participants considered how research could be better communicated to those outside universities, only two expressed concerns about how – and indeed whether – research participants learn about the outcomes of research that they participate in, and considered how historically, some communities may have felt exploited by researchers, reflecting literature which highlights the problematic nature of this type of research (NCCPE, 2019).

Accessing information about studying for a PhD

As part of focus group discussions, participants were asked where they might seek information about how to do a PhD if they, or anyone they knew, wanted to study at this level. The vast majority cited online sources, with university websites being the most obvious place that they would look. Individuals who knew someone close to them who had done a PhD were also aware of national websites advertising PhD opportunities. However, it was felt that information about possible funding available to support individuals while they studied for a PhD needed to be prioritised, and made as transparent as possible, along with clarity on the process of how to apply.

Online access to information about studying for a PhD was deemed to be particularly important for those who might be less familiar with, or comfortable in HE environments, though there was also recognition that some people – especially those from older generations – may prefer to access information via physical means. It was noted that there was little overlap between opportunities to study and research at universities and civic spaces in the city where the public access information, such as local libraries. Significantly, one participant noted that there was little local visibility of opportunities to do PhD research, and that this reflected an assumption that only individuals with existing aspirations would be interested in pursuing a PhD, creating a self-selecting pool of potential applicants. This observation reflects the lack of diversity within UK PhD populations (UKCGE, 2024), and literature indicating the barriers to accessing opportunities for postgraduate education for potential applicants, especially for those without a traditional academic track record (Burford *et al*., 2024; Leading Routes, 2019; Smith-McGloin *et al*., 2024).

Conclusion

This research explored public perceptions of PhD programmes in Nottinghamshire, in context of evidence that a significant proportion of the public do not perceive that UK research benefits them (Campaign for Science and Engineering, 2023). It has highlighted that whilst there is some understanding of PhD programmes, there is a lack of transparency in how research agendas are set, low awareness of the outcomes of PhDs, and clear assumptions about the types of people who might undertake PhDs. Further, while participants could see potential for PhDs to contribute to public good, there was evidence of significant scepticism in relation to the types of subjects being researched, and the ability of PhDs to have impact and contribute to social change. Despite this scepticism, there was a clear desire for more knowledge about research being undertaken locally. Local residents perceived few opportunities to influence research agendas and felt distanced from the research being undertaken within their local area; something the Co(l)laboratory programme in Nottinghamshire aims to address (see Appendix A).

This project makes a valuable contribution to literature exploring the civic role of universities, as there is little existing work which explores public attitudes to academic research, or PhDs specifically. This project highlights the need for researchers to demonstrate the benefits of their research to communities beyond universities, and for institutions to better communicate research findings and the public value of research to local residents. Whilst the economic benefits of PhD programmes are clear (Read *et al*., 2024), the cost of running these programmes for universities is high (UKRI, 2024). With increasing financial pressures on universities, there may be concerns about their capacity to continue to support PhDs, or work towards improved translation of research impact from PhD programmes. However, given the scale of the socioeconomic challenges facing communities across the UK, and the considerable public investment in research, it is critically important to demonstrate the value and public good of PhD and wider academic research.

As an academic working in a role supporting the training and development of Co(l)laboratory PhD students, as well as academic and community supervisors, I have valued the opportunity to engage with a critical assessment of public attitudes towards doctoral research, and the way in which doctoral education is perceived more widely. Whilst the project has been small-scale, the findings can be used to inform the way Co(l)laboratory and any future initiatives are designed, communicated, and delivered.

Outputs and Dissemination Activities

As part of this research, a one-page handout summary was produced summarising what PhDs are and how they are structured, which was shared as part of each focus group to facilitate access to this information. This was embedded within a larger Demystifying Research and PhDs guide, co-created with participants after focus groups had taken place. At the point of recruitment, participants agreed to provide feedback on a draft version of this guide, which was used to create the final version. There was a dissemination event in the community to launch this guide, held in July 2025 in a Nottingham city centre venue, and this guide was used by the Co(l)laboratory team during recruitment activities with applicants for the 2026 Collaboratory studentships, to support potential applicants' understandings of PhD programmes and the wider context of the UK research system. Beyond presenting the findings of

this research at SRHE conference 2025, a journal article is currently in development, along with plans to publish an article in *The Conversation* in 2026.

Recommendations

1. **Demystify the processes through which publicly funded PhDs are developed and funded**

Findings indicate that the process by which PhD programmes were designed, developed and funded was not well understood, and that even participants with significant experience of HE did not readily make the connection between government and research councils being funded largely by taxpayers. Universities, research councils and other funders should make clear the mechanisms through which PhD programmes receiving public funding are developed, and be transparent about the individuals and stakeholders involved in this decision-making process to support public trust and faith in PhD research.

2. **Improve communication of the public benefits of academic research and embed culture of open research for PhD students and all those undertaking academic research**

This project highlights the need for institutions to better communicate research findings and the public value of research to local residents, and for researchers to demonstrate the benefits of their research to communities beyond universities. While there has been increasing attention on open research practices, these are far from embedded within university research cultures. Institutions should embed training for PhD students and academic researchers across all subjects to support them to be able to articulate outcomes and impact of their work to wider audiences, and support an open research culture. This could be done in part by building on existing public engagement mechanisms, for example the 3-minute thesis (3MT) model which often has a non-specialist but largely academic audience. This could be a necessary part of all research projects supported by public funding.

3. **Consider strategies to better connect researchers with policy-makers and other change-making organisations**

This research indicates that local residents were aware of political limitations on the capacity of research to be translated into action, and that this affected the potential for academic research to contribute to public good. Whilst academic research, including PhD programmes, can offer potential solutions to societal challenges, researchers should be better supported to consider policy-related outcomes and impact from their research, and connect with local and national policy-makers, lobbying groups and campaigning organisations.

4. **Diversify PhD recruitment activities by advertising via local and civic platforms, highlighting current research and the profiles of those undertaking PhDs**

Opportunities to undertake PhD research are often advertised in traditional ways to those with existing and current experience of HE, and there is little public visibility of opportunities to do PhD research, reflecting implicit assumptions about the types of people who are expected to pursue a PhD. Widening recruitment activities to include advertisements in civic spaces and via local events and platforms, for example by connecting with public libraries, community centres and local press would help to address this, along with sharing examples of current PhD research projects being conducted locally. In addition, these opportunities could be shared alongside profiles of researchers currently undertaking PhDs to address the limited conceptions of the types of individuals who might study for PhDs highlighted in this project.

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Appendix A: About Co(l)laboratory

Collaboratory Research Hub is an 8-year, £7.4m project, funded by the Research England Development Fund and launched in 2022. The programme brings together researchers, community-focused organisations, and citizens to shape research that addresses challenges which are important to them. To carry out this research, Collaboratory will recruit 77 PhD candidates and 37 Research Placement candidates from local communities, supporting them to become future leaders in community-engaged research.

The programme is supported by Nottingham Trent University, the University of Nottingham, the University of Leicester, De Montfort University, and Loughborough University. The programme comprises two regional chapters, Nottinghamshire and Leicestershire and Rutland, each underpinned by the support of the Nottinghamshire and Leicestershire and Rutland civic university agreements through the Universities for Nottingham Partnership and the Universities Partnership, respectively. Ultimately, Collaboratory aims to support positive, evidence-based change for local communities in Nottinghamshire and Leicestershire and Rutland communities through its research.