

WHAT DO RESEARCHERS DO? POLICY BRIEF

UK doctoral graduates are highly employable, earn a clear premium over first-degree graduates, and apply doctoral-level skills across a wide range of roles in the UK workforce.

This briefing sets out the evidence from **What do researchers do? 2026** and its implications for funders and higher education (HE) institutions, using HESA Graduate Outcomes data on the destinations of graduates of UK doctoral programmes (across all nationalities).



KEY FINDINGS

- **Doctoral graduates earn a clear premium.** Doctoral graduates in full-time UK employment have median earnings of £42,000, compared with £29,000 for first-degree graduates at the same point after graduation (Fig. 1).
- **UK doctoral training attracts and retains international talent.** Around 60% of international doctoral graduates were working in the UK fifteen months after graduation, while 6% of UK doctoral graduates were working overseas (Fig. 2).
- **Doctoral graduates remain highly employable.** Among 2022/23 doctoral graduates, 91% were working fifteen months after graduation, with fewer than 3% unemployed (Fig. 3).

Fig. 1.
**Median earnings
(15 months after graduation)**



Fig. 2.
**Post-graduation destinations
(15 months after graduation)**

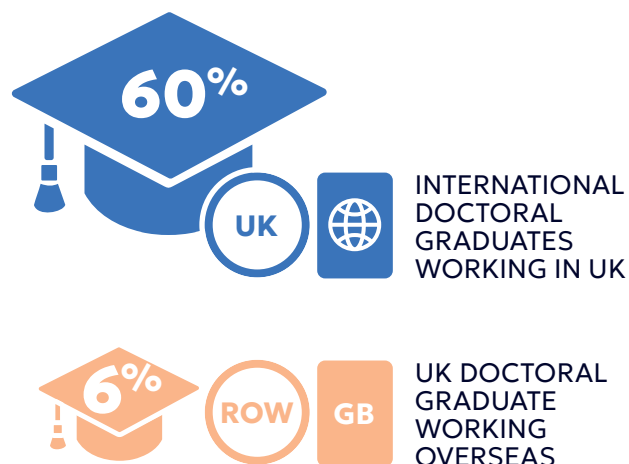


Fig. 3.
**Employment outcomes
(15 months after graduation)**



- **Doctoral-level skills are widely used in employment.** Over 90% of doctoral graduates say they draw on skills developed during their doctorate, with 96% reporting frequent use of general skills developed during their doctorate and 93% frequent use of research skills they developed (Fig. 4).

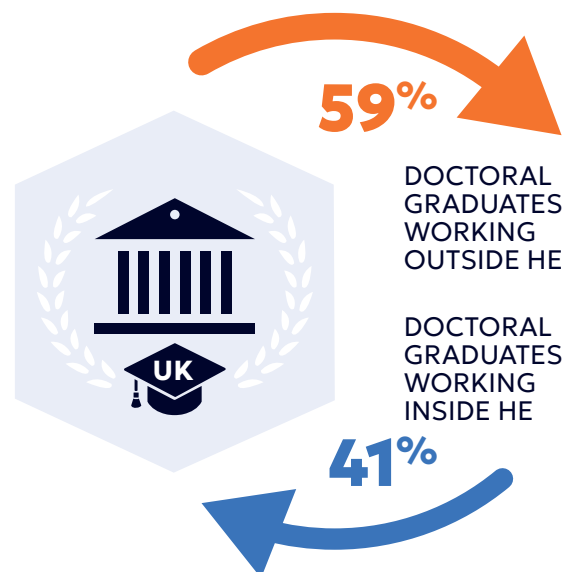
Fig. 4.
**Doctoral skills use
(15 months after graduation)**

DOCTORAL SKILLS USED IN EMPLOYMENT



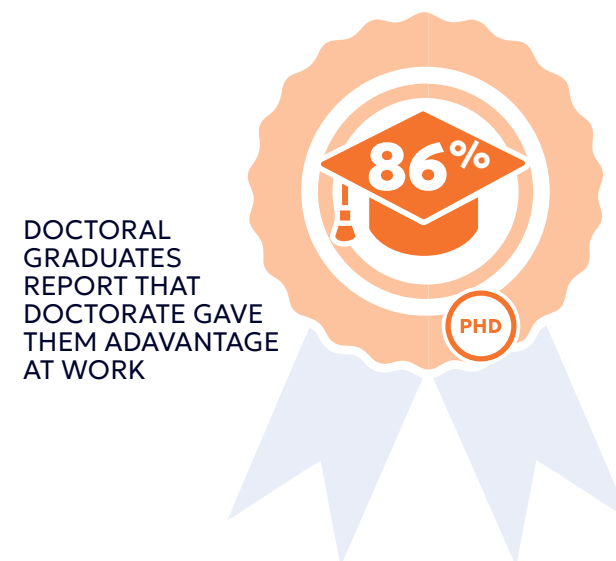
- **The majority of doctoral graduates work outside HE.** 59% of doctoral graduates working in the UK were in roles outside HE and 41% in HE roles (Fig. 5).

Fig. 5.
**Employment sector of UK
doctoral graduates (HE vs non-HE)
(15 months after graduation)**



- **The doctorate delivers value in obtaining employment.** 86% of doctoral graduates report that a doctorate was required for their job or gave them an advantage in getting it (Fig. 6).

Fig. 6.
**Doctorate as a requirement/
advantage in getting a job
(15 months after graduation)**



WHAT THIS MEANS

This evidence shows that UK doctoral training supports strong career outcomes both within and beyond academia. Doctoral graduates apply advanced skills across the UK workforce and command a clear earnings premium. UK doctoral training also contributes to the UK's ability to attract and retain international research talent. This is an early picture at fifteen months after graduation, and the full contribution of doctoral training to careers and to the research and innovation system emerges over a longer period.



RECOMMENDATIONS

Funders

Funders support doctoral training through investment in studentships and training programmes. **What do researchers do?** evidence shows this investment is linked to strong employment outcomes, widespread use of doctoral level skills and a clear premium associated with doctoral-level qualifications.

Research funders should:

- **Maintain or increase investment in doctoral training**, recognising its role in strengthening workforce capability and advanced skills development across a range of sectors, the earnings premium it delivers for graduates, and its contribution to attracting and retaining international talent in the UK research workforce.
- **Facilitate longer term tracking of doctoral careers beyond this early point** (fifteen months after graduation), to build a stronger evidence base on career progression, skills use and the long-term impact of doctoral-trained graduates.

HE institutions and research institutes

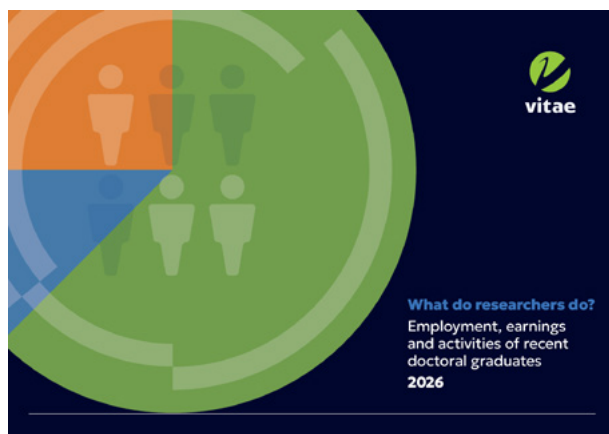
HE institutions shape how doctoral-level skills are developed, recognised and evidenced through programme design, supervision and researcher development support. This places institutions at the centre of how doctoral training translates into the skills graduates report using in employment.

HE institutions should:

- **Support doctoral students and supervisors to recognise how doctoral skills apply across a wide range of employment settings**, including roles outside HE, and to consider a broad set of career directions.
- **Draw on graduate outcomes evidence on employment, skills use and earnings to inform programme design and researcher development support**, including learning opportunities and external work experience where appropriate.

ABOUT THIS BRIEFING

This policy brief draws on **What do researchers do? 2026**, the latest in CRAC Vitae's long running **series** of analyses of doctoral graduates' early careers in the UK. The series is widely used across the sector to understand where doctoral graduates go and how they contribute to the wider research and innovation system after completing their degrees.



The 2026 report analyses data from the HESA Graduate Outcomes (GO) survey of 2022/23 doctoral graduates, conducted 15 months after graduation. The analysis includes 10,690 respondents (around 45% of the total cohort), across all nationalities. Graduate destinations are analysed using occupational clusters such as higher education (HE) research, teaching in HE, research outside HE and other doctoral level roles. This approach focuses on the type of work graduates do, rather than analysis by either sector or occupational code alone, and provides a clearer picture of how doctoral level skills are applied across the labour market.

FURTHER QUERIES

For further discussion of the evidence and its implications for policy and practice, please contact: policy@vitae.ac.uk