

Diversity of applications for Royal Society early-career fellowship programmes - 2025

An independent analysis commissioned by the Royal Society

By the Careers Research & Advisory Centre (CRAC) Ltd

February 2026

Published by the Careers Research & Advisory Centre (CRAC)

© Careers Research & Advisory Centre (CRAC) Ltd 2026

Careers Research & Advisory Centre (CRAC) Ltd
22 Signet Court
Cambridge CB5 8LA
www.vitae.ac.uk

Contact:

Robin Mellors-Bourne, Director of Research & Intelligence
robin.mellors-bourne@crac.org.uk

About CRAC

The Careers Research & Advisory Centre (CRAC), registered as a charity in 1964, provides research, expertise and innovation services for all those who support career development, at all ages and across all sectors. CRAC's research and consultancy work focuses on career-related learning, employability development and career transitions, including STEM and researcher careers. CRAC also owns and manages the Vitae programme, which enhances support for the professional and career development of researchers and, increasingly, development of the research environment and positive and inclusive research culture.

Contents

1. Introduction	1
2. Key findings	2
3. Data considerations	3
4. Main findings of comparative analysis	5
4.1. Gender	5
4.2. Nationality	6
4.3. Ethnicity	7
4.4. Disability	9
4.5. Age	10
5. Trends in results over time	12
5.1. Changes in profile of the eligible pool	12
5.2. Changes in profile of scheme applicants	12
6. Additional comparisons	15
6.1. Intersectionality	15
6.2. Applicants to Russell Group institutions	16
6.3. Should benchmarking be restricted only to applicants based in the UK?	17
7. Recommendations	20

1. Introduction

The Royal Society is committed to increasing diversity in science, technology, engineering, mathematics (STEM) by actively seeking out participation from under-represented groups. The Society recognises that science needs people with the widest range of talents, backgrounds, perspectives and experiences, and has committed to contribute to removing barriers that unfairly prevent people from accessing scientific education and careers. Its stated goal is to help ensure that anyone with the passion and talent for science can study, work and thrive in STEM. Enhancing the participation of talented scientists from currently under-represented groups is part of this commitment to diversity.

As part of its efforts, the Society publishes data on the diversity of those who apply to and obtain its early-career fellowships, namely the University Research Fellowship (URF), Dorothy Hodgkin Fellowship (DHF) and (until recently) Sir Henry Dale Fellowship (SHDF) schemes. These awards support talented postdoctoral researchers with the potential to become research leaders in their fields to conduct scientific research in the UK. The fellowships aim to help them establish an independent research career, accelerating them to research leadership. The Dorothy Hodgkin Fellowship scheme is positioned explicitly to support scientists in early career who require a flexible working pattern due to personal circumstances.

In 2020 the Society commissioned the Careers Research Advisory Centre (CRAC) to determine the diversity profile of postdoctoral researchers in the UK who were eligible for these awards.¹ This was used as a benchmark for the Society to consider whether the nationality, ethnicity and gender diversity of those who applied for these awards between 2018 and 2020 were representative of those eligible to do so (in the UK). In 2021 the Society published the results of that comparative analysis, revealing that the gender and ethnic diversity of applicants to these early-career fellowship schemes was less than that of those eligible to apply, and hence that the diversity of applicants could preferentially increase in future.

The Society re-commissioned CRAC in 2024 to provide a revised benchmark profile of applicants in the UK eligible to apply for URFs and DHFs between 2020 and 2023, including SHDFs for the years in this period it was open.² This population of postdoctoral researchers in the UK is hereafter referred to as the “eligible pool” for brevity.

In this current report we provide results of the updated benchmarking, wherein we compared diversity data for those who applied for these schemes with the recently developed diversity profile of the eligible pool. It considers an expanded range of diversity data compared with the 2021 process, now reporting results for gender, nationality, ethnicity, age and disability.

¹ *The profile of postdoctoral researchers in the UK eligible for Royal Society early career fellowship schemes*, CRAC, 2021. <https://royalsociety.org/-/media/policy/publications/2021/trends-ethnic-minorities-stem/profile-of-postdoctoral-researchers-in-uk-eligible-for-rs-early-career-fellowship-programmes.pdf>

² *Profile of postdoctoral researchers in the UK eligible for Royal Society early-career fellowship programmes – 2024*, CRAC, 2025. <https://royalsociety.org/-/media/policy/publications/2026/profile-postdoctoral-researchers-in-uk-eligible-royal-society-early-career-fellowship-programmes-2025.pdf>

2. Key findings

- The updated benchmarking exercise shows that applicants to these early-career fellowship schemes, when viewed together, continued not to be fully representative of the diversity of eligible applicants in the UK, although many results need to be considered as indicative due to the small population sizes. Nonetheless, there are also some signs of progress being made towards a more inclusive picture.
- Female researchers continued to be under-represented amongst applicants to the URF scheme, with little change since the last comparison exercise in 2021, but continued to be strongly over-represented in applicants to the DHF scheme which has an established reputation for offering flexibility to awardees such as those with caring responsibilities.
- Applicants of European Economic Area (EEA) nationalities were somewhat over-represented amongst applicants to the schemes, and those from non-EEA countries somewhat under-represented, compared with the eligible pool in the UK, while UK applicants were broadly representative. Data suggest this imbalance is reducing with time, in line with a similar shift of balance within the eligible pool.
- Researchers of UK nationality from an ethnic minority background were under-represented amongst applicants to both schemes, although their proportion had risen since the last exercise, as it had also in the eligible pool.
- In the same way, researchers across all nationalities with an ethnic minority background were under-represented as applicants, but with evidence that this proportion too is rising with time, both within applicants and within the eligible pool.
- Black postdoctoral researchers continued to comprise a small minority in the eligible population in the UK (under 2% of UK nationals, and 3% of all nationalities). They comprised a very small number of applicants to the URF scheme (around 1%). There have now been a few Black applicants to the DHF scheme but none of UK nationality.
- Disabled researchers were under-represented amongst applicants to the URF scheme, but (in parallel with female researchers) were over-represented in applicants to the DHF scheme. The proportion of disabled researchers in the eligible pool has been rising relatively quickly, and there is beginning to be some evidence of a rise amongst URF applicants. However, the number of such applicants remains very small, which makes trends hard to discern, and the number of researchers preferring not to disclose whether they had a disability or condition or not was as high as of those making such a declaration.
- In terms of age, viewed using very broad age bands, the age profile of applicants was broadly representative of the eligible pool. There was some evidence that the age profile of the eligible pool has been getting slightly older, and while this was not seen amongst applicants other evidence suggests those starting awards may on average be getting older.
- When similar benchmarking is conducted only for applicants to Russell Group institutions, very similar results were obtained, although this to some extent simply reflects that a high proportion of all applicants (83%) intend such an institution to be their host.
- As an experiment, a similar process was conducted considering only applicants who were already in the UK when they made their application, as in principle this subset can more closely be benchmarked against the profile of the eligible pool (currently calculated for postdoctoral researchers only within UK universities). Profiles and comparisons obtained were similar overall to those for all applicants, despite around 30% of URF applicants being outside the UK when they applied. There was some evidence that applicants outside the UK tended to be somewhat less diverse than those in the UK, in relation to gender, disability and ethnicity.

3. Data considerations

3.1. Scope and data selection

Applicant diversity data as presented in this report are gathered as part of the Society's diversity programme and collated from data explicitly and voluntarily declared by applicants. They are collected via the Society's grant application system, Flexi-Grant®, when an individual applies for a Research Fellowship. Whilst the Society's online data collection methods make completion of the questions on the diversity form mandatory, all questions contain an option of 'prefer not to say' so not all respondents choose to provide all aspects of the diversity information requested.

The diversity profile of postdoctoral researchers in the UK eligible to apply for URFs and DHFs between 2020 and 2023, including SHDFs for the years in this period it was open, has been established by CRAC for benchmarking purposes.³ This population is referred to in this report as the 'eligible pool'. It was defined using Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) data about academic staff in the UK, using a series of filters to model award scheme eligibility criteria, as described in that report. This led to a somewhat smaller population size for 2022/23 than expected (than was observed in previous years), which was revealed to be due to issues in the underlying data relating to the 'contract type' and 'highest qualification' filters used. We believe that this still represents the best potentially available approach to establishing the profile of the eligible pool although results for 2022/23 are thought to be somewhat less reliable than those for preceding years. In practice, the results derived through this approach for 2021/22 are used here as the benchmark population, not for 2022/23.

Diversity data are presented here for the three application years 2020/21, 2021/22 and 2022/23, in order to produce new results and not duplicate application rounds covered in the previous benchmarking report. To avoid the need for bespoke new analysis of HESA Staff Record data for the eligible pool for this aggregated period, the diversity profile for the 2021/22 academic year was used as the benchmark drawn directly from the recent eligible population diversity report.

Diversity data were available for $N=1835$ URF applicants⁴ and $N=310$ DHF applicants. The URF diversity data excluded 220 applicants for fellowships to be hosted at institutions in Ireland (very few of whom were from UK nationals), as these institutions are not in the HESA Staff Record data or eligible pool.

3.2. Data presentation and representativeness

In presenting diversity data about award applicants, the Society generally follows Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) guidance on rounding and suppression to anonymise statistics and minimise chances of identification of individual data subjects. Its guidance includes the following rounding protocols which have been adopted in this report, in presentation of both diversity data and comparative results for the pool of eligible researchers:

- Counts of people are rounded to the nearest multiple of 5;

³ *Profile of postdoctoral researchers in the UK eligible for Royal Society early-career fellowship programmes – 2024*, CRAC, 2025. <https://royalsociety.org/-/media/policy/publications/2026/profile-postdoctoral-researchers-in-uk-eligible-royal-society-early-career-fellowship-programmes-2025.pdf>

⁴ Including 330 SHDF applicants

- Percentages are calculated and stated on the basis of counts prior to rounding;
- Percentages are not published if they are fractions of a small group of people (defined as fewer than 22.5 individuals).

These protocols may lead to stated proportions (expressed as percentages) that do not sum to 100% and/or sub-totals that do not combine to the expected total. Sub-groups which comprise one or two individuals are stated as zero in numerical results. In the charts that follow, proportions of applicants are shown as percentages with the number of individuals (after rounding) also labelled in parentheses. Where such labelling is not practically possible, *N* values are shown separately.

Results are presented for key characteristics from the data supplied by the Society, including proportions selecting a 'prefer not to say' option. Cases where a data item was unknown were excluded. The analysis of applicant age used two broad age bands, as utilised in the accompanying analysis of the eligible pool of researchers, rather than a more granular range of age bands.

Nationalities were considered on the basis of being UK, EEA or other ('non-EEA'). In practice Swiss nationals (*N*=30) were coded to the EEA group, on the basis that their employment rights are similar. In the eligible pool analysis, nationalities were aggregated on the basis of EU countries rather than EEA but the difference that this made to comparative results was believed to be insignificant.

Where results are reported for applicants in 'A-side' ('physical sciences') and 'B-side' ('biological sciences') subject remits, these were coded based on the primary subject listed in the application data (or secondary where 'other' was the primary code). For the purposes of comparative analysis, 'B-side' applicants included all applicants for SHDFs within the period studied (SHDFs being designated to cover 'biomedical sciences').

The statistical representativeness of comparisons between results for applicants and the eligible pool is limited due to the small size of many sub-populations being considered. Chi-squared testing indicates that certain differences are statistically significant, e.g. white ethnicity amongst all URF applicants vs. eligible pool. However, differences within smaller populations (such as DHF applicants, or a subset of URF applicants) and/or for minority characteristics (such as disability, or Black ethnicity) are not significant statistically on this basis. For this reason, many of the results here are indicative (and potential findings from them should be seen with that caveat).

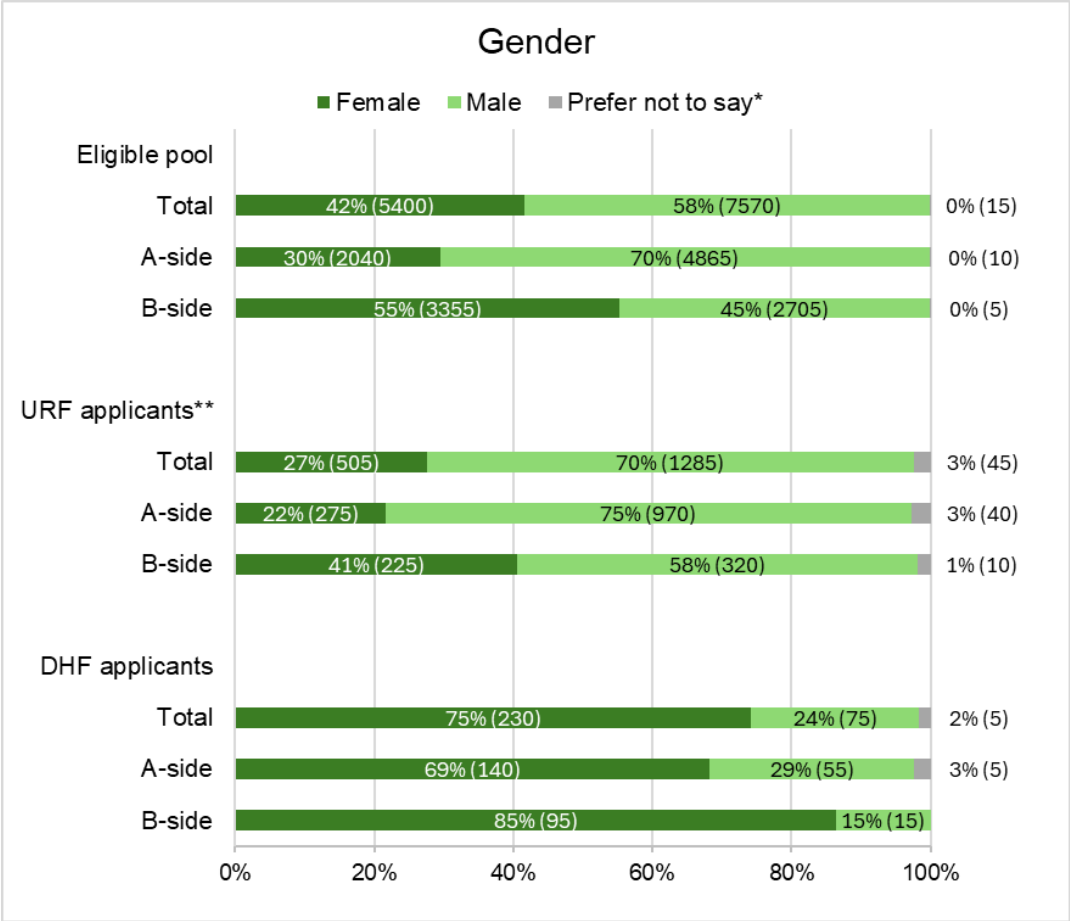
This limitation can be seen practically when considering minority characteristics within a small award scheme. For example, fewer than 10 DHF awards are made annually, in total. For a characteristic that is observed in 5% of the eligible pool, a representative number of DHF awardees with that characteristic would be 0.5 per year. This begs the question of whether a lack of any DHF awards in a particular year is an under-representation or not (quite aside from any difficulties presented by rounding conventions).

In the final section of the report there is some consideration of whether benchmarking of this nature should be conducted as here by comparing the diversity data for all applicants (irrespective of location when they applied for the fellowship) with the profile of the eligible pool of postdoctoral researchers in the UK. Another option would be to compare data only for those applicants within the UK at the time of application, with the profile of the eligible pool in the UK, as this could be a tighter match. The comparative results presented will hopefully guide a future decision on the optimal strategy to adopt in this respect.

4. Main findings of comparative analysis

4.1. Gender

The gender profile of applicants continues not to be representative of the eligible pool of postdoctoral researchers in the UK, with under-representation of female researchers applying to the URF/SHDF scheme but over-representation amongst those applying for DHFs.



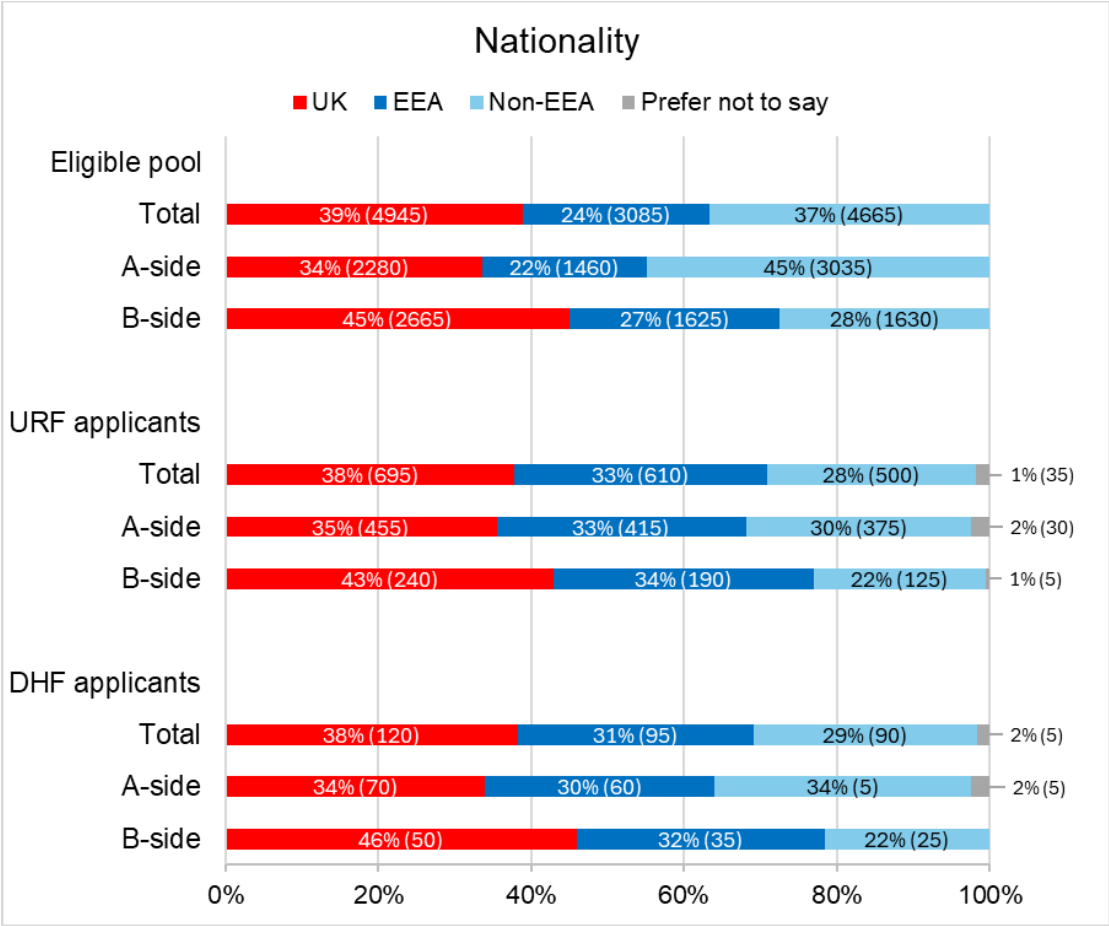
*Includes small numbers specifying another gender

**SHDF included within B-side, throughout

- 27% of applicants (2020-2023) for the URF/SHDF scheme were female compared to 42% of the 'eligible pool'. This under-representation against the eligible pool was seen in both 'A-side' and 'B-side' remits, to broadly similar extents.
- By contrast, 75% of applicants to the DHF scheme were female, higher than the proportion in the eligible pool (42%), presumably in part due to the reputation of the scheme to offer flexibility – for example, to accommodate better those with caring responsibilities.
- The gender profile of award-holders has been broadly similar to that of applicants, with female researchers slightly over-represented in awardees (compared with applicants) for each scheme and on both the A- and B-sides of the URF scheme.
- During the period studied, URF awarding rates for female applicants were very slightly higher than for men, overall and on both A- and B-sides. The same has been seen in the DHF scheme but to a much larger extent, with few awards being made to male applicants.

4.2. Nationality

A higher proportion of EEA⁵ applicants applied for the schemes relative to the eligible pool of postdoctoral researchers in the UK, and a lower proportion of non-EEA applicants.

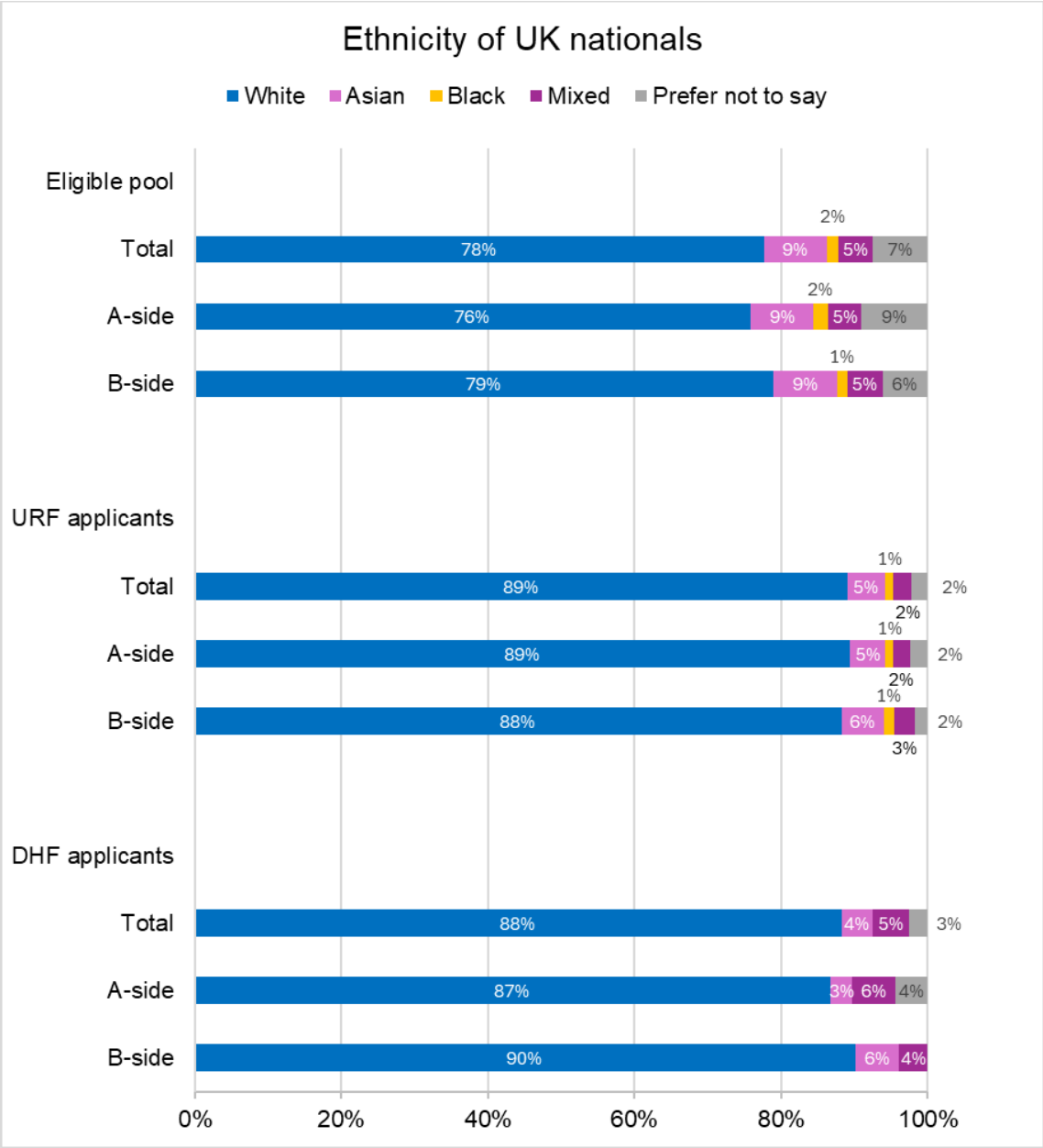


- Similar proportions of applicants to the schemes, overall, were of UK (British) nationality compared with the eligible pool.
- There were higher proportions of EEA and lower of non-EEA national applicants to the schemes than in the eligible pool, respectively, for both schemes. A similar picture was seen in analysis of URF applicants in A-side and B-side subjects separately.
- Awarding rates have been higher for URF applicants who are UK nationals than for EEA applicants, and significantly higher than the case for non-EEA applicants, leading to over-representation of UK researchers amongst the awardee population. The small number of DHF awards prevents robust statistical analysis of this type but UK researchers appear to be over-represented in this scheme too.

⁵ Nationalities were self-declared with no account for dual nationality. EEA included Swiss citizens. Eligible pool profile stated for EU nationals.

4.3. Ethnicity

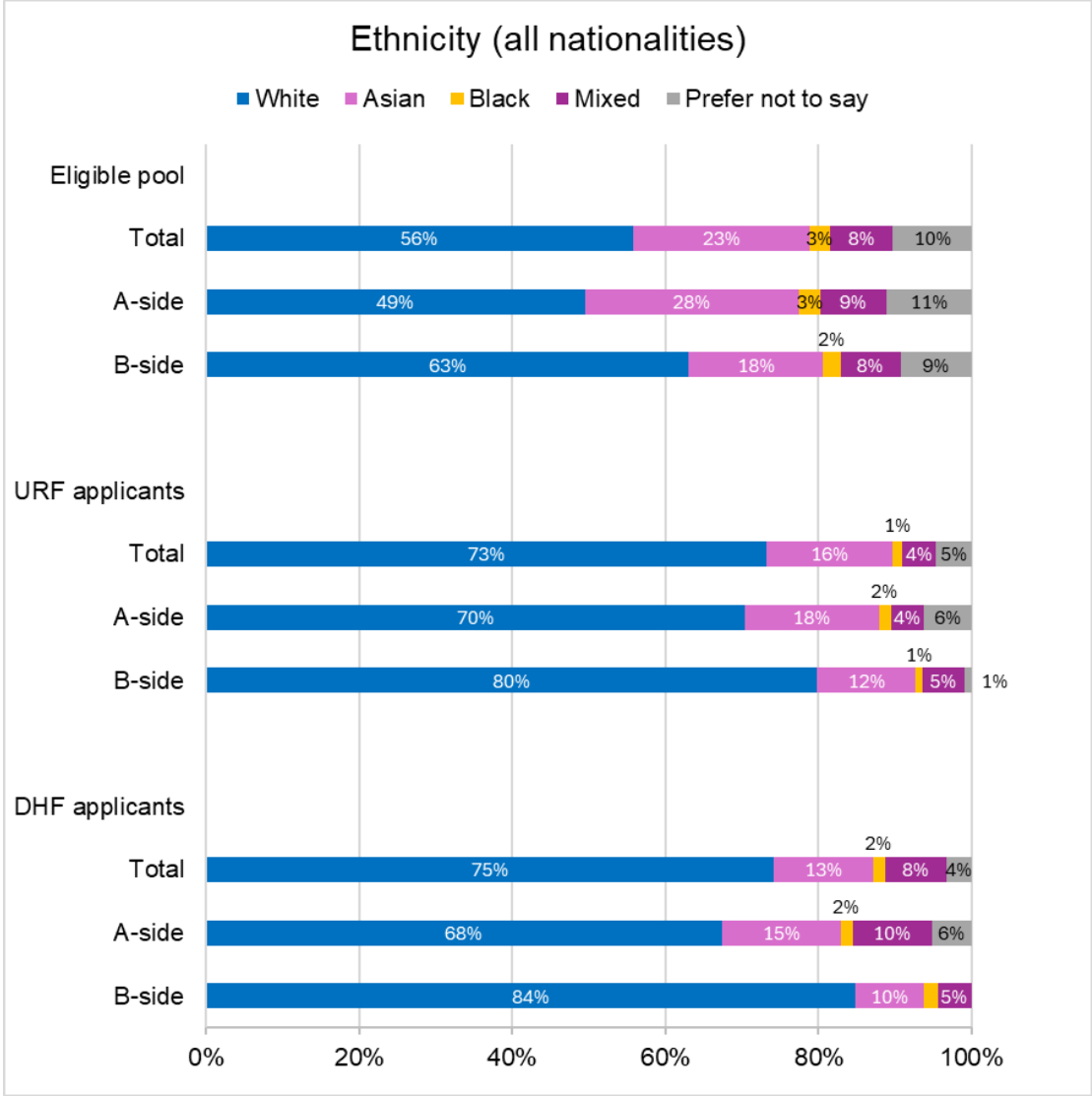
The ethnicity profiles of scheme applicants of UK nationality are not representative of the eligible pool of postdoctoral researchers in the UK.



Note. As not all sub-group sizes are readily labelled on the chart, the following *N* values are given:

Population	Total	A-side	B-side
Eligible pool	4945	2280	2670
URF applicants	690	455	240
DHF applicants	120	70	50

As for UK nationals, the ethnicity profiles of scheme applicants across all nationalities are not representative of the eligible pool of postdoctoral researchers in the UK.



Note. As not all sub-group sizes are readily labelled in the chart, the following *N* values are given:

Population	Total	A-side	B-side
Eligible pool	12990	6915	6070
URF applicants	1830	1280	545
DHF applicants	310	195	115

- In the eligible pool the proportion of researchers who identified themselves to be from an ethnic minority background was lower amongst UK nationals (16%) compared with all nationalities (34%), although these proportions have risen since the 2021 analysis. The largest proportions in each case were from an Asian background, especially prominent within physical sciences (A-side remit) when all nationalities were considered together.

- Applicants for the early-career schemes from an ethnic minority background were under-represented compared with the eligible pool, whether UK nationality or all nationalities were considered.
- Amongst UK nationals, applicants to the URF scheme from Asian, Black and multi-ethnic backgrounds were all under-represented compared with their proportions in the eligible pool. This was also the case for Asian and Black applicants to the DHF scheme. Similar trends emerged when all nationalities were considered.
- In this period, there were no applications from Black UK nationals to the DHF scheme and very few to the URF scheme. Because the proportion of Black researchers in the eligible pool is also very low, caution is needed when considering results for this group (as the rounding convention can mask true results).
- If these data or results are in future considered in more detail, particularly for sub-groups, it may be valuable to compare proportions of researchers of known ethnicity only (i.e. excluding those stating 'prefer not to say', as variations in that proportion within different sub-populations could impact on the comparisons derived).
- In the URF scheme, the proportion of UK-national award-holders with an ethnic minority background has been broadly similar to or slightly higher than that of applicants, with the awarding rate slightly higher for ethnic minority applicants. When all nationalities are combined, the awarding rate for ethnic minority applicants has been slightly lower than for white applicants, however, leading to a lower proportion of ethnic minority awardees compared with the proportion amongst applicants.
- There have now been URF awards (fewer than five) to Black applicants, although the number of applications from Black researchers – of UK or any nationality – remains low and robust statistics cannot be presented.
- The small total number of DHF awards hinders statistical analysis of this kind, but notably there was only one award to a researcher with an ethnic minority background (and none to such researchers of UK nationality).

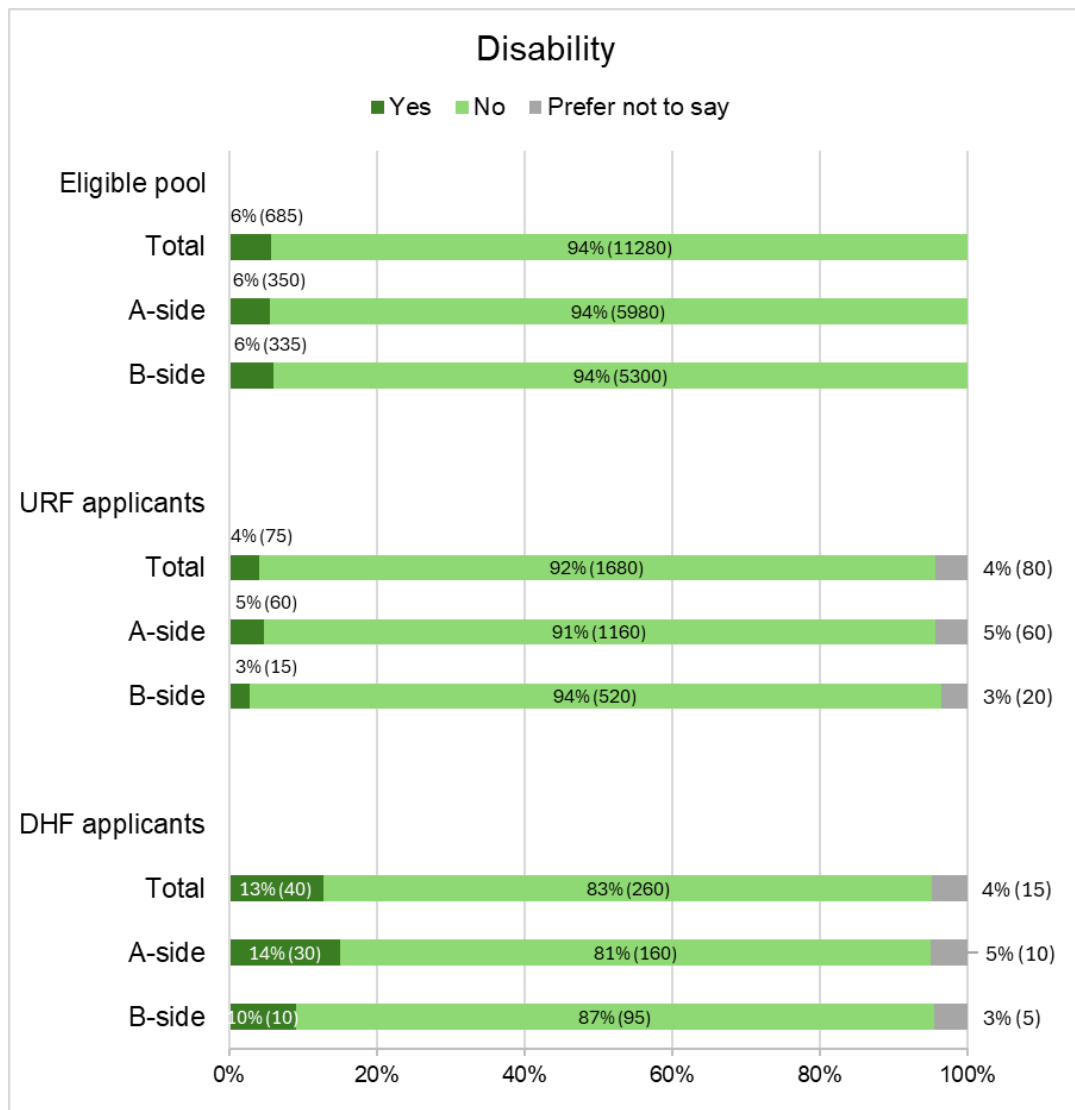
4.4. Disability

Researchers declaring a disability who made applications to the URF scheme were under-represented compared with the eligible pool of postdoctoral researchers in the UK, but were over-represented amongst applicants to the DHF scheme (see chart on next page).

- 4% of applicants to the URF scheme in the period studied declared that they had a disability or other condition, which was lower than the proportion in the eligible pool (6%).
- In contrast, the proportion of applicants to the DHF scheme declaring such conditions (13%) was over twice as high as the proportion in the eligible pool (6%), although caution needs to be exercised as this result was based on very small numbers of applicants per round. It is likely that the higher proportion relates to the positioning of the DHF scheme, which specifically offers flexibility to awardees.
- Only a handful of URF awards have been made to applicants declaring a disability (and slightly more to those preferring not to state if they had one), preventing robust analysis. Based on the limited data available, this broadly reflects the disability profile of applicants.

Awarding rates appeared to be broadly similar for disabled and non-disabled applicants alike, with the caveat that this was based on small applicant numbers.

- Proportionally, disabled awardees were over-represented in the DHF scheme compared with applicants, but the number of such awards (fewer than five) was so small that this cannot be considered a robust finding.



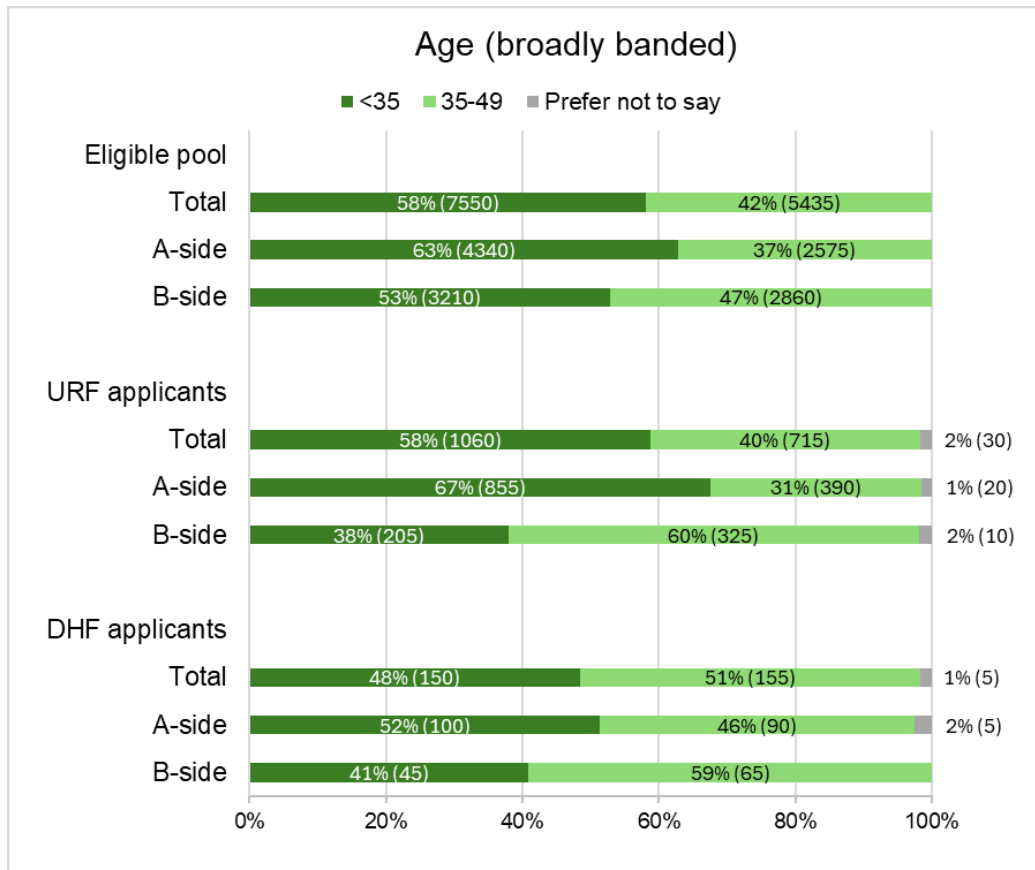
4.5. Age

Based on the aggregated age bands used, applicants to the early-career schemes were reasonably representative of the age profile of eligible postdoctoral researchers in the UK.

- Only broadly aggregated age data were available for the eligible pool for benchmarking purposes. Comparison on that broad basis suggested that, overall, the age profile of URF applicants was representative of the pool, with 58% aged under 35 years.
- Just under half of applicants to the DHF scheme were in that age band (48%), a slight under-representation compared with the eligible pool. This pattern, of more awards going

to older applicants, may relate to the scheme's offer of flexibility, as more of the older applicants could have caring responsibilities.

- There were consistent trends showing greater proportions of A-side subject applicants aged under 35 than of those in B-side subjects, reflecting this difference in the eligible pool.



- For the DHF scheme, the awarding rate was broadly similar within both age bands, so the broad age profile of awardees was roughly similar to that of applicants.
- In the URF scheme, overall, there was some evidence that younger researchers (aged under 35) were slightly over-represented amongst awardees compared with the profile of applicants. When analysed in detail, this was driven by award-making in the A-side subjects, in which the awarding rate for applicants aged under 35 was over twice that for older applicants. This led to 83% of A-side awards being made to applicants aged under 35 (who comprised 68% of applicants). On the other hand, awarding rates for B-side applicants were broadly consistent for both these age bands.

5. Trends in results over time

5.1. Changes in profile of the eligible pool

From our recent report detailing the profile of postdoctoral researchers in the UK eligible for the Society's early-career fellowships,⁶ we can summarise the key changes in the personal characteristics of the eligible pool in the period covered in this report to be the following. These are based on comparison of results derived from HESA data for 2022/23 with those obtained for 2018/19:

- The gender balance did not shift substantively, remaining at around 41-42% female, although but that overall figures masks variations with subject and with nationality;
- The balance of nationality (considered broadly) has changed, with a slight decrease in the proportion of the eligible pool being of UK nationality, while the proportion of EU⁷ nationals decreased and proportion of other nationalities rose;
- There was some diversification in terms of ethnicity, with over 16% of UK nationals of known ethnicity having a minority ethnic background, up from 13% in 2018/19. That increase was driven mostly by researchers with an Asian background, while those with a Black background remained under 2% (a proportion which grew very slightly);
- In parallel, there was also diversification in ethnicity when all nationalities were considered together, those with an ethnic minority background reaching 36% of the eligible pool (compared with 29% in 2018/19). Again, this change was strongly driven by increasing numbers of researchers with Asian background. By contrast, the proportion with a Black background remained at under 4%, although this too reflected proportional growth;
- The most prominent shift was in relation to disability, with 5% of the eligible pool declaring some form of disability (including neurodiversity conditions and mental ill-health) compared with 3% in 2018/19. This increase was driven by more researchers declaring a mental health condition or cognitive/learning difference, whereas the extent of physical or medical conditions of disability did not increase;
- Based on the broad age bands as this report's results, on average eligible researchers became slightly older across the period, with the proportion aged under 35 years declining from 65% to under 60%.

5.2. Changes in profile of scheme applicants

One assessment of change can be made by comparing the aggregated results for the two periods, i.e. comparing the results in this report for 2020-2023 with those in the previous report. This revealed:

- There has not been a substantive change in the proportion of female applicants, so the overall under-representation of female researchers in URF applications and awards

⁶ *Profile of postdoctoral researchers in the UK eligible for Royal Society early-career fellowship programmes – 2024*, CRAC, 2025 <https://royalsociety.org/-/media/policy/publications/2026/profile-postdoctoral-researchers-in-uk-eligible-royal-society-early-career-fellowship-programmes-2025.pdf>

⁷ Analysis was for EU nationals rather than EEA; in practice the vast majority of EEA nationals were from EU nations

continues (and the over-representation in the DHF scheme also continues). As context, a similar relative lack of change in the gender profile was also seen in the eligible pool;

- In terms of broad nationality, the proportion of UK applicants to the URF has risen very slightly (36% to 38%), while there were slightly greater but still modest changes seen in EEA applicants (falling from 37% to 33%) and non-EEA applicants (25% rising to 28%), respectively. This appeared to be driven mainly by changes to the nationality profile of A-side applicants, while the nationality profiles of URF B-side applicants and DHF applicants were essentially unchanged. These trends are broadly in line with changes seen in the eligible pool over the same period;
- The proportion of UK-national applicants to the URF with an ethnic minority background has incrementally increased (8% to 9%, and to 10% in B-side subjects), but the numbers within specific ethnic groups were very small so comparisons may not be meaningful. That said, there were some UK Black applicants to the URF scheme (fewer than 10) in the recent three years, which was an improvement as none were reported in the previous diversity analysis. There was no evidence for change in this aspect of diversification in the DHF scheme. For both schemes, some under-representation of ethnic minority researchers continues, but some progress has been made in the URF scheme, at the same time that there has been slight further diversification of ethnicity of UK nationals in the eligible pool;
- In parallel, the proportion of ethnic minority applicants of all nationalities to the URF scheme also increased modestly, from 18% to 21%, and in the DHF scheme from 21% to 23%. This appears to have reflected slight increases for all the sub-groups analysed (Asian, Black and mixed ethnicity), albeit numerically several of these sub-groups were very small. This, again, constitutes continued under-representation of ethnic minority researchers amongst applicants but some reduction in the extent of that under-representation (while the ethnicity profile of the eligible pool has been diversifying).

It was not possible to determine changes for disability or age on this basis, as these were not analysed in the previous diversity data report.

Another assessment of change over time could be made on the basis of changes in results between individual years in the recent period studied, i.e. 2020/21, 2021/22, 2022/23. The small scale of the DHF scheme restricts the potential for comparative analysis of individual years, as small numerical changes could lead to apparently substantive annual percentage changes for certain sub-groups. Nonetheless, the following annual shifts could be seen:

- The proportion of female applicants to the DHF scheme varied between 70% and 77%, and between 25% and 31% for the URF scheme, although the lower of these values in fact were recorded in 2022/23;
- Rather more consistent trends (variances) were seen for the proportions of URF applicants by broad nationality, reflecting the overall shift in balance between EEA and non-EEA applicants. The nationality profile of DHF applicants was more varied and showed less consistent trends in the balance of nationality groups, presumably reflecting the smaller size of the scheme;

- With small numbers of UK-national URF applicants with an ethnic minority background each year, it was unsurprising to see somewhat inconsistent annual results, while the numbers per year in the DHF scheme were so small that such analysis was not possible;
- When considering the ethnic background of all nationalities, amongst URF applicants there was a consistent rising trend, i.e. greater proportions of applicants with an ethnic minority background year on year, but there was less consistency within any particular ethnicity sub-group. Variances within DHF applicants by year were relatively small, with no overall clear trend of increase;
- Analysed by year, the proportion of disabled applicants to the URF scheme broadly rose, but a similar rising trend in the proportion preferring not to state if they had a disability should also be noted. A more consistent trend was visible in terms of the falling proportion of applicants declaring no disability. The numbers of DHF applicants declaring a disability each year varied strongly (e.g. the number in 2022/23, $N=20$, was double that in the previous year) due to the relatively small numbers applying in any one year;
- Finally, there were consistent annual rises in the proportion of URF applicants aged under 35, despite an 'ageing' eligible pool, but not for DHF applicants.

Collectively, comparison of aggregate results between the two periods studied, and of results annually in the recent period, suggests some evidence for increasing diversity in applications to the schemes with time in relation to ethnicity and disability, but little change in relation to gender. At the same time, the balance of nationalities has shifted modestly, which will have had some effect on the extents of change, due to intersections between nationality and personal characteristics such as gender and disability.

6. Additional comparisons

6.1. Intersectionality

A section of our recent report on the profile of the eligible pool was dedicated to the intersection of certain characteristics, i.e. where variances in one characteristic may be related to variances in another. One key example highlighted in that report was differences in the diversity profiles of eligible researchers in A-side and B-side subjects, respectively, with a markedly lower proportion of female researchers in A-side subjects. Another feature was that the largest nationality sub-group amongst A-side researchers was non-EEA, whereas for B-side researchers it was those of UK nationality. In this current diversity report, we have tried to present (where possible) diversity data for applicants in the two respective subject groups separately, as well as for the overall aggregated position, and made comparisons with the respective segments of the eligible researcher pool.

Another key intersection is nationality, in this case based on three broad groupings (UK, EEA and non-EEA). Table 6.1 summarises key characteristics for the eligible pool, URF applicants and DHF applicants, for each group. This shows that the under-representation of female applicants to the URF scheme occurred within all three nationality groups. On the other hand, under-representation of applicants with an ethnic minority background was more strongly evident amongst UK applicants (9% of URF applicants compared with 17% of the eligible pool). Similarly, under-representation of disabled applicants – with the caveat of the low incidence and hence small numbers – appeared only within UK applicants (in practice, very low proportions of non-UK URF applicants researchers or the eligible pool declared disability).

Table 6.1 Diversity profile of eligible pool, URF applicants and DHF applicants, with broad nationality group (aggregated for the three years studied)

		UK	EEA	Non-EEA
% female				
	Eligible pool	42% (1725)	47% (1225)	36% (1630)
	URF applicants	26% (180)	31% (185)	27% (135)
	DHF applicants	72% (85)	82% (80)	73% (65)
% ethnic minority				
	Eligible pool	16% (735)	7% (170)	74% (3355)
	URF applicants	8% (60)	5% (30)	62% (310)
	DHF applicants	9% (10)	9% (10)	52% (50)
% disabled				
	Eligible pool	9% (355)	3% (70)	2% (75)
	URF applicants	6% (40)	3% (15)	2% (20)
	DHF applicants	18% (20)	9% (10)	9% (10)
% under 35 yrs				
	Eligible pool	62% (2560)	58% (1505)	57% (2585)
	URF applicants	73% (485)	54% (320)	50% (245)
	DHF applicants	53% (65)	49% (45)	42% (40)

In contrast, the over-representation of female researchers and disabled researchers amongst DHF applicants was seen across all the three nationality groups, albeit based on modest numbers of applicants, although the position in relation to ethnicity was not so clear.

Differences with age, on the basis of the bands reported, were also not so clear cut; there was some suggestion that UK applicants to the URF scheme were somewhat younger than for the eligible pool, but this was not seen for the other nationality groups. For the DHF scheme, applicants in all the nationality groups appeared to be slightly older than in the eligible pool.

6.2. Applicants to Russell Group institutions

Analysis was also undertaken of applicants specifically to host institutions which were members of the Russell Group of research-intensive institutions, compared with the profile of eligible researchers in those institutions. Table 6.2 summarises these results for the two schemes and the eligible pool, for Russell Group members and all UK institutions (as charted earlier in this report) for comparison. This reveals the applicant diversity profiles for Russell Group institution hosts to be mostly very similar to the overall results.

Table 6.2 Diversity profile of eligible pool, URF applicants and DHF applicants, overall and for Russell Group member institutions (aggregated for the three years studied)

		All	Russell Group*
% female			
	Eligible pool*	42% (5400)	41% (3555)
	URF applicants	27% (505)	25% (325)
	DHF applicants	75% (230)	76% (185)
% UK nationality			
	Eligible pool	39% (4945)	34% (2975)
	URF applicants	38% (695)	38% (490)
	DHF applicants	38% (120)	34% (85)
% ethnic minority (UK)			
	Eligible pool	16% (735)	15% (2300)
	URF applicants	8% (60)	8% (40)
	DHF applicants	9% (10)	11% (10)
% disabled			
	Eligible pool	6% (685)	4% (380)
	URF applicants	4% (80)	5% (60)
	DHF applicants	13% (40)	13% (30)
% under 35 yrs			
	Eligible pool	58% (7550)	62% (5365)
	URF applicants	58% (1060)	66% (825)
	DHF applicants	48% (150)	49% (120)

*Results for eligible pool in Russell Group for 2022/23, drawn from recent report; eligible pool given for 2021/22 as elsewhere in this report

That overall similarity was perhaps not entirely surprising given that 83% of all applicants⁸ applied to undertake a fellowship at a Russell Group host institution. The profile of eligible researchers at Russell Group member institutions was also reported as broadly very similar to the overall profile of all eligible researchers in the UK, in our recent report. Given these similarities, further analysis of applicants within this specific sub-group – for example by scheme or within a specific year – was not attempted.

We noted that the awarding rate amongst applicants for URFs with Russell Group institutions as hosts was 11% during the period studied, which was somewhat higher than the awarding rate for applications made to institutions outside this group (9%). Comparative results for the DHF scheme were 6% and 5% respectively, although in practice under five DHF awards were made to applicants hosted at institutions outside the Russell Group.

It should be borne in mind that these comparisons were made on the basis of applications for fellowships that would be hosted at Russell Group universities, not amongst applicants who were already at those universities. While detailed data on the current employer at time of application was not available to us, we could tell that that around one quarter of these applications were from researchers who were outside the UK when they made the application, and hence would not have been in the eligible pool.

6.3. Should benchmarking be restricted only to applicants based in the UK?

In the previous section, we highlighted that the diversity profile of eligible researchers (for these fellowships) was established on the basis only of those already employed at universities in the UK, as systematic data are only available for such staff (through the HESA Staff Record). That profile was used to benchmark the diversity of all applicants to these fellowships in this report, irrespective of their location when they made the application.

However, we recognise that fellowships of this type frequently do involve mobility. While some applicants with a postdoctoral position at a UK institution apply to undertake the fellowship at the same institution, others apply with the intention of taking up the fellowship at a different institution. The dataset available did not allow us to differentiate between these two groups.

Equally, such mobility can also take place internationally and the dataset did contain applicants' country of residence at the time of application. From this it was possible to understand how many applicants made applications from within the UK and how many from overseas (which would have involved an international move, had they been successful). For the URF scheme, 31% of applicants whose country of residence at application was known were from countries outside the UK (comprising 35 different countries). This was higher for applicants in A-side subjects (33%) than B-side (18%). Award rates for each of these sub-groups were similar at around 8%.

A higher proportion of the DHF applicants were already in the UK when they applied (88%, i.e. only 12% from outside the UK). Numerically, most of those applying from outside the UK were in A-side subjects (15% outside the UK, but only 5% of B-side applicants). In this scheme there was some difference in awarding rates, with 7% of UK-based applicants obtaining a DHF but only 3% of those outside the UK when they applied.

⁸ Based on data where host institution was known ($N=1880$, out of 2145 records in total for the three years)

This consideration of applicant location at the point of application raises the question of the optimum strategy to use when benchmarking diversity data against the eligible population, given that the latter is only known for eligible researchers in UK HE institutions. In principle, a more robust benchmarking method could be to compare the profile only of applicants already within the UK with the profile of eligible researchers in the UK (rather than the results presented hitherto, which are for all applicants).

Table 6.3 illustrates the key profile characteristics for applicants known to be in the UK when they applied, compared with the overall results, by scheme. Perhaps surprisingly, these two sets of results were very similar with differences of only one or two percentage points for each characteristic. Overall, reporting on only the more restricted set of applicants already within the UK at application did not shift any of the benchmarking findings presented earlier in this report about inclusiveness or extents of under-representation.

Table 6.3 Key profile characteristics with location of applicant at time of application, by scheme

		Eligible pool	All	In UK at application	Outside UK at application
% female					
	URF	42% (5400)	27% (505)	27% (285)	18% (85)
	DHF		75% (230)	75% (205)	70% (25)
% UK nationality					
	URF	39% (4945)	38% (695)	39% (410)	31% (145)
	DHF		38% (120)	42% (115)	12% (5)
% ethnic minority (UK)					
	URF	16% (735)	8% (60)	10% (40)	4% (5)
	DHF		9% (10)	10% (10)	-
% ethnic minority (all)					
	URF	34% (4410)	21% (410)	25% (255)	19% (90)
	DHF		23% (70)	22% (60)	18% (5)
% disabled					
	URF	6% (685)	4% (80)	5% (55)	3% (15)
	DHF		13% (15)	13% (35)	6% (5)
% under 35 yrs					
	URF	58% (7550)	58% (1060)	62% (650)	69% (315)
	DHF		48% (150)	47% (130)	45% (15)
% A-side subject					
	URF	52% (6915)	70% (1280)	82% (860)	91% (420)
	DHF		64% (200)	62% (170)	85% (30)

That similarity is likely partly to be because the overall population of URF applicants included a substantive number whose location at application was unknown ($N=330$, who were applicants to the SHDF scheme, which used a different application form), in addition to those who were outside the UK ($N=460$) and those in the UK ($N=1045$). It is likely that many of those of unknown location were actually in the UK, so removing them from the whole sample could have had less effect than expected and not led to a substantive difference between the overall profiles and those for applicants known to be in the UK.

Further insight can be drawn from results specifically for applicants known to have been outside the UK when they applied, shown in the final column of the table. This shows very high proportions of such applicants to have been in the A-side subjects, but also that relatively fewer of them were female, disabled or had an ethnic minority background – i.e. the very characteristics where URF applicants overall have been under-represented compared with the UK eligible pool. Caution needs to be applied to results here for DHF applicants because the number from outside the UK was small ($N=33$).

On the other hand, it is interesting to note that almost one third of those outside the UK at application were of UK nationality, resulting in a nationality profile that was less different than expected. We assume that these included UK researchers who undertook postdoctoral research abroad and wished to use these schemes as a means to return to the UK. Equally, it reminds us about the large number of non-UK nationals amongst postdoctoral researchers already in the UK. This nationality balance of those applying from outside the UK also presumably contributes to the modest proportion of researchers outside the UK at application with an ethnic minority background, which we might have expected to have been higher.⁹

This additional analysis is potentially important in considering the optimum strategy for future benchmarking exercises. In practice, the current strategy of comparing the profile of all applicants (irrespective of location) with that of eligible researchers purely within the UK produced benchmarking findings that are relatively similar to what would have been found using a tighter benchmarking strategy (i.e. only ‘applicants in the UK’). That said, the profile of applicants physically outside the UK at application was somewhat less diverse than overall, so a better picture of inclusiveness could be obtained using the tighter strategy in future. However, we would argue that showing results for both subsets of applicants could be wiser still, as this would provide the fullest picture of the population of applicants, which has some value in itself, in addition to results used to consider inclusiveness of the scheme compared with the eligible population.

⁹ Results for ethnicity not given for DHF applicants outside the UK because so few were of UK nationality

7. Recommendations

The intention of this report is to present a summary of about the diversity of applicants to the Society's early-career fellowship schemes and through the benchmarking process to reveal the extent to which the schemes are inclusive of the population of postdoctoral researchers in the UK eligible to apply to them. It is for the Society to consider its potential actions in response to this independent analysis, so these recommendations are restricted to issues of data collection and reporting.

- As the eligible pool profile can only be established for researchers in the UK, but recently nearly one third of URF applicants have been outside the UK when they apply, in principle benchmarking would be most robustly undertaken on the basis only of applicants already in the UK at application. Practically, it would be wise in future benchmarking exercises to develop profiles both for all applicants and also applicants in the UK, and to present both if they are substantively different.
- 'Prefer not to say' options are offered to applicants when stating their personal characteristics and recently up to 3% of applicants have been selecting this option in relation to certain key demographics. In some cases this is as large a proportion as a minority group of key interest. While this is considered inclusive practice, it does result impact upon the benchmarking (and potentially slightly reduced sample sizes for the most robust comparisons). We recommend maintaining the offer of this response option but to provide additional wording that explains this potential drawback and encourages applicants to consider providing full demographic data.
- Having expanded the range of characteristics covered in this benchmarking exercise, to provide the fullest comparisons possible, we recommend a detailed review of the data that could be acquired about researchers in the eligible pool prior to any future reporting of its diversity profile and subsequent benchmarking. This could provide more insightful results in relation to disability and age in particular. Such review should also take into account the recommendations given in our recent eligible pool report about handling changes in the data that are available.¹⁰
- Finally we recommend that, notwithstanding the evolving data available, and challenges as to how best to analyse it, we firmly recommend the Society continues to play a leadership role as a funder in publishing data both about the diversity of award-making and applicants to its schemes but also benchmarking against the diversity of those eligible to apply to them.

¹⁰ *Profile of postdoctoral researchers in the UK eligible for Royal Society early-career fellowship programmes – 2024*, CRAC, 2025. <https://royalsociety.org/-/media/policy/publications/2026/profile-postdoctoral-researchers-in-uk-eligible-royal-society-early-career-fellowship-programmes-2025.pdf>