

Update on UK Food Systems Centre for Doctoral Training

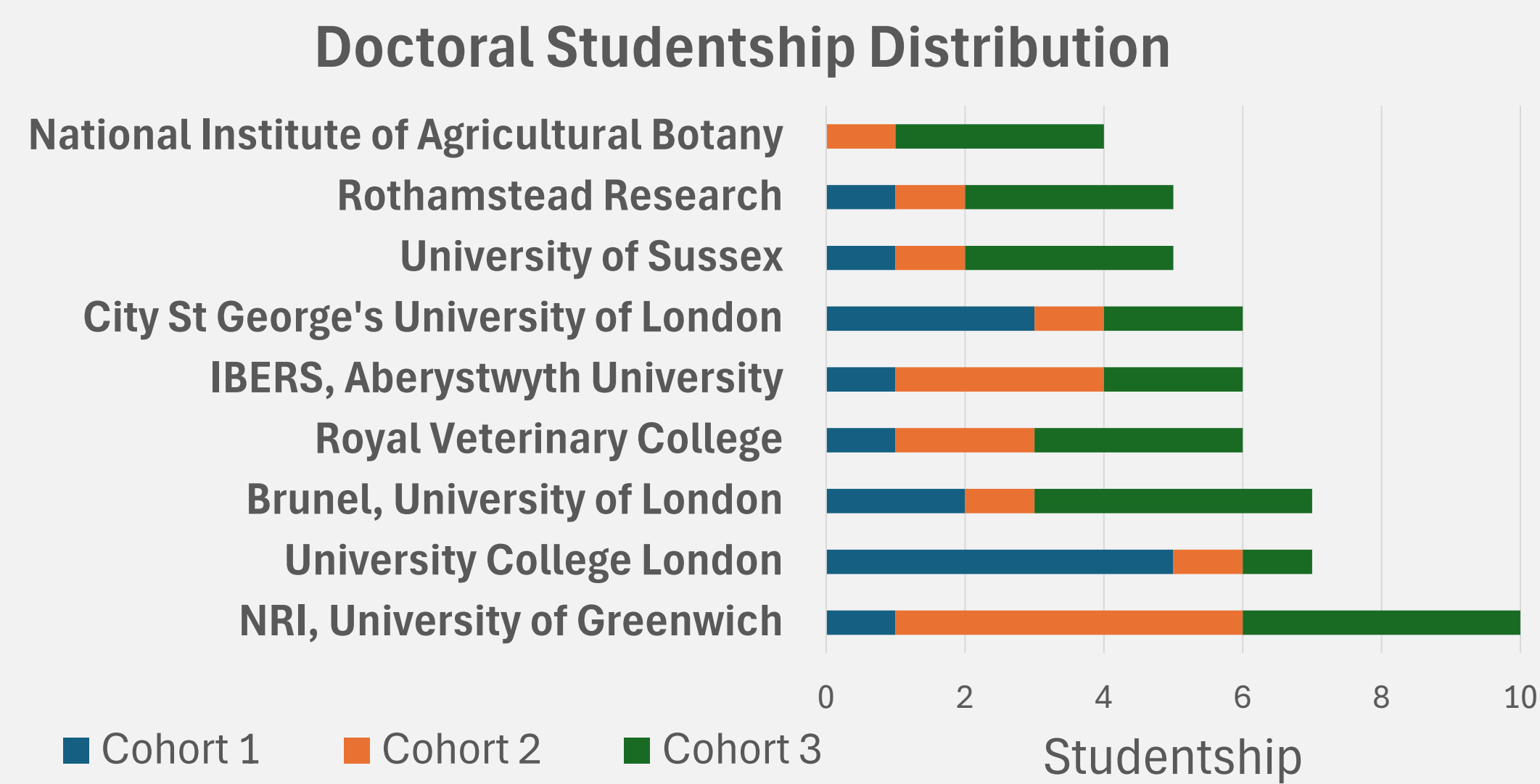
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Vision: A new type of PhD programme to train 55 doctoral researchers, to embark on a challenge-led, co-designed, and interdisciplinary food systems research. Doctoral researchers engage with real-world challenges, build partnerships, share a body of knowledge and co-create a community of practice, culminating in their development as food systems change-makers.

PhD Programme



Nine consortium partners (universities and research organisations) support 55 Doctoral Researchers from diverse backgrounds over three cohorts. Funded by the TUKFS training grant or co-funded with a consortium or associate partner – with a total cost of £10m.

Key features supporting interdisciplinary food systems research include:

- Two short research projects (kernels) in year 1 (one social and one natural science) addressing food system challenges.
- Doctoral projects co-designed by doctoral researchers, supervisors and associate partners
- Interdisciplinary food systems training, including from IFSTAL.
- Residential summer school and annual research symposium.
- Each doctoral researcher has social and natural science supervisors.
- Engagement of doctoral researchers in co-creating and delivering training and development (e.g. summer school and symposium).
- Academy with >100 partners from business, government and civil society. Partners engaged in priority setting, co-supervision of projects, offering training seminars and internship placements.

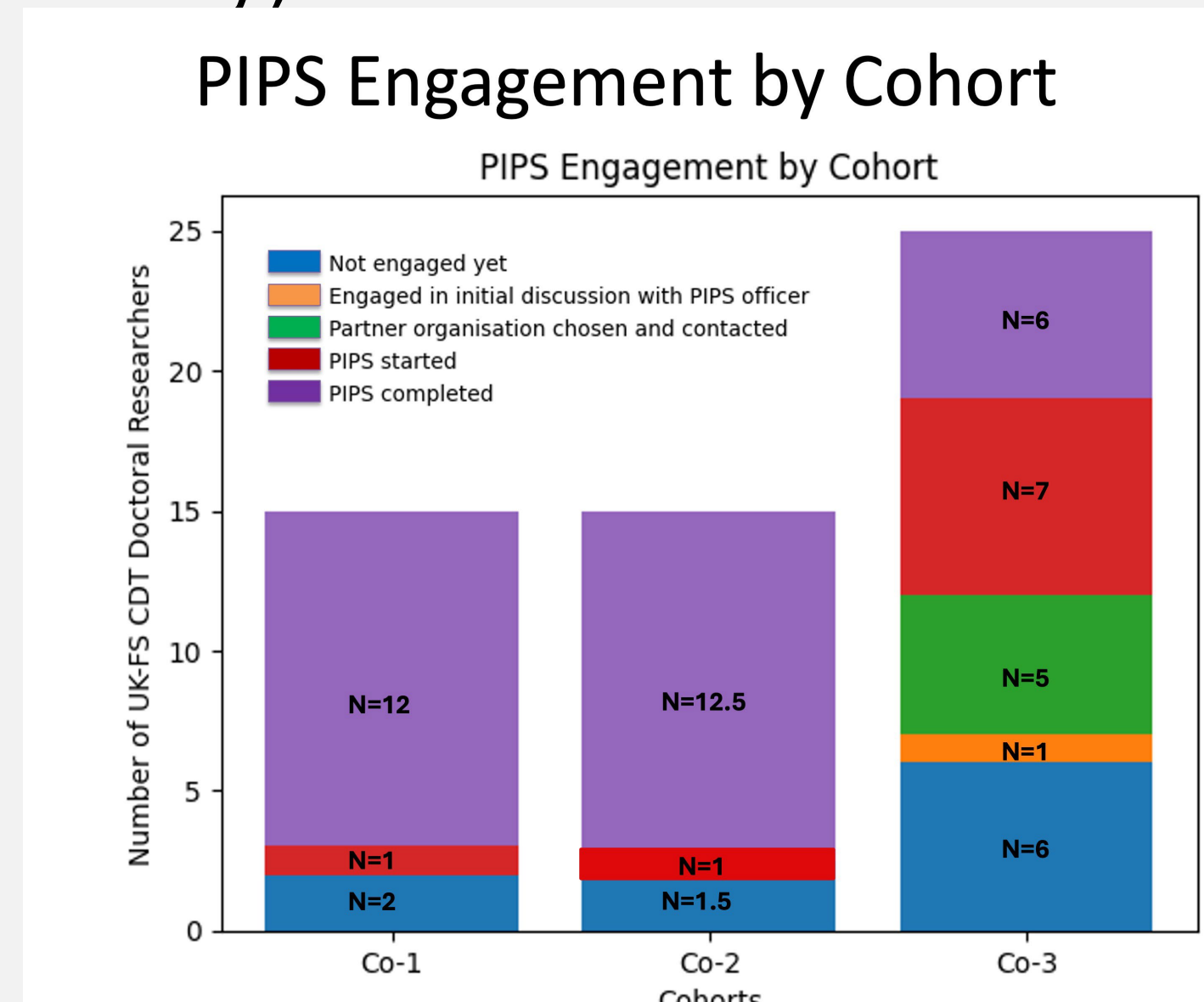
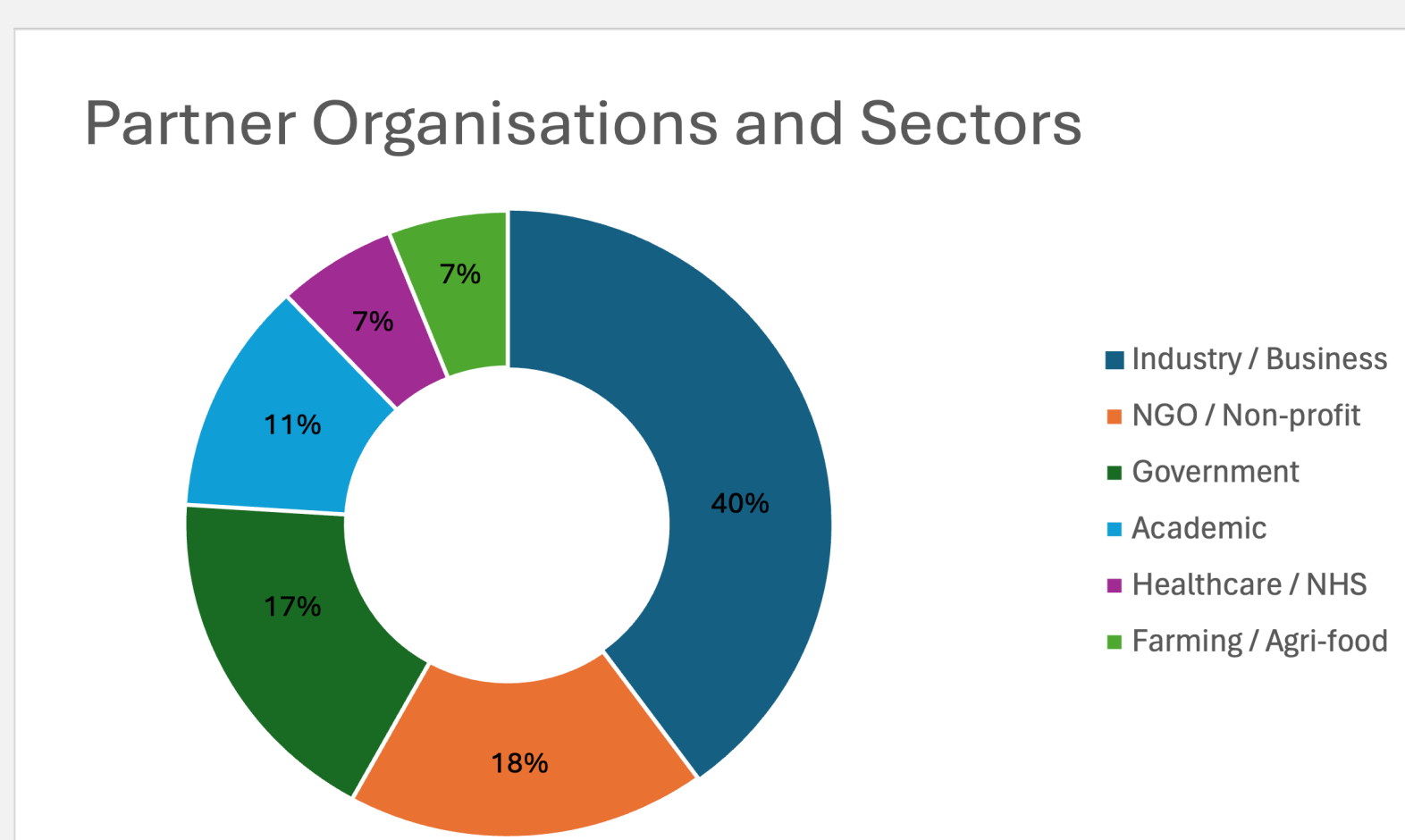
The 2025 CDT Summer School marked our largest residential training event with all three cohorts gathering at Rothamsted Research. Doctoral Researchers took part in three days of capacity building and knowledge sharing, including sessions on interdisciplinarity in food systems research, writing food policy briefs, science visualisation, and student-led sessions. They had the opportunity to share their research via oral and poster presentations in a showcase event. We look forward to the 2026 Summer School.



Research presentations. Pictured: Laura Lane (Cohort 2) and Barbara Haesler (RVC).

Professional Internship Placements (PIPS)

A 3-month PIP is a mandatory feature of the UK Food Systems CDT. Broadly, there was a positive perception of PIPs among Doctoral Researchers. Most of Cohorts 1 and 2 have completed PIPs, exceptions are part time students. Cohort 3 PIPs are in progress. PIPs have been with diverse range of partners – many part of Academy – and sectors (Private sector, Public Sector and Civil Society).



Academy

The UKFS-CDT Academy provides a platform for collaboration, bringing together Doctoral Researchers, academic supervisors, and >100 partners from across government, industry, and civil society.

The Academy hosts an annual Research Symposium, co-designed and led by our students. This year's theme – "leadership for food systems transformation" – built on previous themes related to 'visualising' and 'narrating' food systems transformation. A co-authored proceedings article is underway, following on from the reflective account of the 2024 Symposium published in the Oxford Academic journal, *Food Science and Technology* (Eagles et al., 2025).



The half-day thematic session was co-designed by our students and featured presentations, panel discussion and interactive elements.



Guest speakers shared their perspectives on leadership, (L-R): Alyson Greenhalgh-Ball, Robyn Minogue, Simon Crichton, Andre Kpodonu, Ian Smith, Adam Bedford.



Cohort 1 students presented their research in the afternoon. Pictured: Niamh Kelly.

Lessons Learnt

Successes:

- 200+ applications for each cohort and recruited 56 students.
- Fostered a highly diverse and interdisciplinary doctoral community.
- Strong cohort identity and peer to peer support.
- Innovative training model grounded in real UK food-system challenges.
- Researchers undertake interdisciplinary research projects, which they lead the co-design with their supervisory teams and Academy Partners.
- Collaborations across academia, industry, government, civil society
- Enriched experiences of kernels, Academy events, student-led initiatives, summer schools and PIPS.

Lessons learnt:

- Intensive administrative load, institutional differences and high programme management costs.
- Visa constraints with the original programme design.
- Addressing Equality Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) for all researchers, including part-time, international, care givers, student with disabilities
- Challenge of maintaining a network of Associate Partners and follow-through with co-funding commitments.
- Meeting doctoral researchers, supervisors, funders' expectations.



UKFS-CDT Summer School July 2025, co-hosted by Rothamsted Research. Pictured: 55 Doctoral Researchers and Management Team.

The UKFS-CDT is funded by the SPF Transforming UK Food Systems Programme, Consortium and Associate Partners