REPORT

University and College Union

Getting a better deal for postgraduate researchers

A summary report by UCU

This report presents the findings of UCU's research into the experiences and needs of postgraduate researchers in UK higher education. It has been produced in response to the consultation run by UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) on behalf of the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS), on creating a new deal for PGRs.

Successfully completing a PhD must be about more than just 'surviving' broken systems and a lack of support. PGRs must be enabled to thrive through the provision of adequate support and resources to do research they care about, to be able to build meaningful careers in relevant fields, and to live well. Currently, systems and processes do not provide this support efficiently or fairly. Efforts by PGRs to meet their needs in one of these areas can mean trading off or neglecting needs in the the others. As a result, getting through the PhD can often be as much in spite of the way postgraduate research is structured as it is because of it. This is why we need a better deal for all PGRs.

The voice and views of PGRs

The views in this report are those of PGRs, academic staff and others. We gathered these through an online survey of PGRs and others, and two focus groups for PGRs: one in Scotland and one in Wales. Our survey had 536 full responses and a further 429 partial responses. 76% of respondents were current postgraduate researchers, 9% were PhD supervisors, and 8% were post-doctoral researchers or lecturers. The focus groups had nine participants in total.

Models and access to the PhD

The current model for postgraduate research does not meet the needs of different stakeholders in a way that is either fair or efficient. Some PGRs told us they felt they were set up to fail as a result of problems in the system. Problems highlighted by survey respondents could be grouped into three categories:

1. Insufficient income and/or funding and the associated workload and time costs

2. Insufficient specificity in training and the formal requirements of the PhD for career development

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3.   Insufficient interpersonal support and integration of PGRs within universities.

Survey respondents told us that **low pay, followed by personal health and wellbeing, workload, career progression and lack of funding for research support were the biggest issues for PGRs**. These can often require significant amounts of privilege or proximity to privilege to overcome.

> *"I do not regret doing the PhD. However, the process has broken me in many ways and left me in a permanently depleted position with increasing work precarity. For someone like myself who doesn't fit the mold of the traditional academic and has travelled a different path, inequality and who holds privilege in HE is very clear."*

69% of survey respondents told us they thought extending staff status to all PGRs was 'very important', and a further 17.2% said 'quite important'.

Benefits of staff status commonly highlighted by respondents included:

➡   securing stronger rights as employees

➡   gaining more respect for their work and role, and a better understanding for themselves and for others of the PGR role itself from the outset.

➡   being involved in university decision-making

➡   better access to housing through mortgages or better rental arrangements

➡   better pay, access to pensions and entitlement to leave.

> *"Choosing to do a PhD in its current state is choosing to put your life on hold for 4 years. The poor pay from the stipend also means that I cannot save for the future. Being counted as staff would give the assurance that the university is contributing towards my pension (however poor that may be…) which would help reduce the feeling I'm wasting these years of my life when I could be fully employed elsewhere."*

Some respondents also had concerns about extending staff status. These included:

➡   loss of council tax discount and other tax/student loan exemptions

➡   other discounts, including shops, travel, gym membership, academic society membership and conference fees

➡   losing access to student networks, including clubs, student unions and NUS membership

➡   losing access to student support, and additional pressure from managers

➡   reduced flexibility and freedom over people's own time and research

➡   negative impact on equality and diversity, if fewer places were available

➡   losing access to the Graduate visa, or exclusion from study entirely as an international PGR.

However, many respondents pointed out they didn't benefit from some of these elements, or would be willing for them to change in return for better working conditions. For instance, several respondents pointed out they weren't entitled to council tax discount because they were part-time, or because of their living situation, and others said they would have no problem with paying taxes and losing student discounts if they were paid a decent, livable wage.

Some also highlighted an important complexity with regards to state disability benefits and other support and protections for disabled people. This included losing the protection of the anticipatory duty of the Equality Act 2010, which applies to students (as 'customers') but not employees, and the impact on entitlement to Disabled Students Allowance (DSA), Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) and the equivalent element under Universal Credit.

Finally, there were concerns that if staff status wasn't applied to self-funded PGRs then this could increase the costs of self-funding, which would further limit access, both in relation to postgraduate research overall and to training and opportunities within it. There were also concerns that if people could only engage in postgraduate research as a funded member of staff then this would limit access to underfunded areas of scholarship, particularly in relation to arts and humanities. However, it is important to note that self-funded PGRs were more dissatisfied with the extent to which their needs had been met than any other group of PGRs, and that some saw the existence of self-funded PhDs as inherently exploitative.

One alternative approach for PhD study might be to create a two-track system, with different forms of PhD study, of equal esteem, but allowing for greater flexibility in recognition that people do PhDs for different reasons. These two tracks could look like:

➡ An 'early career portfolio doctorate', where funding is intended to provide people, as members of staff, with (a) pathways to research or research-related careers in and outside of higher education and (b) research and/or research-related outputs that are intended to benefit one or more sector.

➡ A parallel flexible and accessible 'PhD by thesis' in which people, as students, would engage in self-directed research for the purposes of subject interest knowledge development.

We believe these models need further exploration, crucially to ensure that no PGR – especially those who are already minoritised by the system - is disadvantaged as a result of any change. In particular, there must be further work done to understand the practical, legal implications for migrant or international PGRs and disabled PGRs.

Routes in, through and out

Comments in our survey highlighted two key themes in relation to support to complete a PhD: lack of money and time, and access to different forms of support.

LACK OF MONEY AND TIME

Low pay and/or the ability to meet the costs of the PhD was the biggest issue for the majority of PGRs. This is likely to have a knock-on effect on issues of health and wellbeing, concerns about workload and worries about career progression. Extra casualised work outside of the PhD is not an effective solution, with survey comments often describing significant underpayment and unfair workloads where adequate work opportunities can be accessed. Access to paid work is also highly variable according to which university a PGR is at, and even which department they are in. Migrant PGRs are only allowed to work for a limited number of hours and, anecdotally, can find it harder to secure work in the first place due to racist systems and assumptions. Nevertheless, universities addressing the issues of

low pay and unrealistic workload allocation in relation to casualised work undertaken by PGRs (and others) would likely go some way to improving a number of related pressures on PGRs.

Our survey suggests that many PGRs view PhD stipends as insufficient to maintain a good quality of life. It should not be the case that additional paid work is required to complete a PhD, without this requirement being formally recognised and taken into account in workload allocation models funding periods. A better solution, however, would be to provide PGRs with remuneration that is both reflective of their value and the work they do, and which does not require supplementing through additional work.

The issue of lack of time is one of lacking time both within the working week as a result of requirements to take on unmanageable or unsustainable workloads, and lacking overall time for PhD completion. Insufficient overall time could be experienced in relation to funding period length, maximum permitted completion period, or both.

There needs to be greater capacity for flexibility in relation to overall time. 53% of respondents said a PhD stipend should last for four years, 14% stated '5 years' and another 25% answered 'however long it takes to complete'. Similarly, 47% said the time limit should be four years, 21% said five years and 26% said there should not be a time limit. The expectation that PGRs should complete their PhDs within 3 or 3.5 years is unrealistic for many, and harmful for those with greater needs for flexibility.

The labour of postgraduate researchers is of far greater value than they are typically paid (or in some cases pay) to do. Postgraduate researchers will do the duties that they need to in order to get by, and, where they are able, they will likely also do those duties that they believe they need to in order to achieve their subsequent goals. In many cases, work went far beyond any idea of a 'student' role.

> *"I am currently the primary module tutor on a 12-week module, and have taught for approximately 100 hours this academic year, and provided student support and guidance on a one-to-one basis. This is in addition to completing my own PhD research, preparing articles for publication, giving conference papers and chairing conference panels, and gaining funding for cohort development projects that I am involved in."*

Having the capacity for valued duties to be formally recognised and flexibility integrated into PGRs' requirements with respect to pay, workload, and agreed funding period extensions will help to address some issues of required privilege in the UK PhD system. This could be achieved through universities being required to buy out PGRs' time, which would then, where applicable, entail a funded extension equal to the time required for the work.

SUPPORT: SUPERVISION, TRAINING AND FACILITIES

Overall satisfaction with the supervisory role and relationship was relatively positive, with 59% describing the role and relationship as good or very good. However, there were higher levels of dissatisfaction with training and facilities, with less than half rating these as good or very good.

Comments from respondents stress the importance of the supervisory relationship, and the dependence of many PGRs upon their supervisors. It was striking, however, how frequently people commented that while their own supervision was excellent or reasonable, they considered themselves 'lucky' to have such levels of support from their supervisor. Others, they felt, had not been so lucky. Having a supervisor with both the capacity and desire to

adequately support a PGR, through effective mentoring and investing time in their personal development, was described as a 'privilege', which PGRs were acutely aware of others not having. Some answers described a perceived lack of oversight and accountability into supervision, such that it is made very difficult for postgraduate researchers to do anything where their supervision is poor. 'Poor', in this instance, extends to bullying, exploitation, and neglect, although one commenter also noted that there is a lack of process for raising poor supervision performance that falls short of outright abuse. There is a clear need to have mechanisms to ensure accountability in supervision and for mitigating negative impacts on PGRs in terms of time costs, wellbeing, wider personal relationships, and access to opportunities. Without these, issues of dependency and inappropriate power imbalances will remain.

Another clear limitation was the time that supervisors are allocated for this role. 91.1% of respondents identified 'improving recognition of supervisory duties in staff workload allocation models' as either 'very important' (67%) or 'quite important' (24.1%). Comments in relation to supervision further described the need for improvement and/or regulation. Respondents suggested that universities do not sufficiently value the supervisory relationship, the time of supervisors, or the support that PGRs need.

Some respondents described how they felt the most valuable training was often the least accessible, and the most accessible was, conversely, the least valuable. This suggests that those without access to resources - primarily, the means of institutional and/or personal funding - may often be unable to engage in training that they perceive as useful. In general, respondents seemed to equate good training to that which was more specialised or advanced. Some respondents also told us they felt it was unfair that some PGRs could access training via individual or institutional funding, while others could not. Much greater consideration should also be given to accessibility issues, which can also occur in relation to the mode of delivery or scheduling of training, bureaucratic requirements and restrictions, gatekeeping, or workload. This is important for disabled, chronically ill and/or neurodivergent PGRs, and also for migrant or international PGRs who face additional barriers to accessing training.

In the case of PGR facilities, these were described by respondents as being highly dependent on the resources that institutions afforded departments. While plenty of people described the facilities available to PGRs as poor, many survey respondents stated they didn't have access to facilities in the first place. Limited budgets force PGRs to use outdated or substandard lab and fieldwork equipment. This can be an impossible barrier to overcome without sufficient funding support, or personal wealth. Respondents also highlighted the problem of inadequate or non-existent office space. These were described as things which limited PGRs from integrating with the rest of their departments, whether their PGR communities or, as was more commonly referenced, more senior staff.

"My funding body says the tuition they've paid includes department funding to cover my equipment expenses, but my department says my funding body needs to cover equipment expenses. In the end I've just had to use my stipend to buy equipment when needed, but this is not sustainable. I can't afford a new computer and the one I'm working with is outdated and doesn't have the processing power to do some of the necessary tasks for my PhD, so I have to borrow computers from others when they aren't using them. For my situation, we have been put in a large basement office away from everyone else in our school which physically disabled people cannot access. The lights and heating/air con don't even work properly. We have constantly complained but they might as well say 'we literally don't care, that's your problem."

Inadequate facilities can create serious barriers for postgraduate researchers which they often have to overcome themselves. These issues can all have negative implications for wellbeing, feelings of self-worth, and accessibility for PGRs.

Rights and conditions

We invited respondents to our survey to answer a series of questions relating to specific needs of different groups of PGRs. This included:

➡ migrant or international PGRs

➡ disabled, chronically ill and/or neurodivergent PGRs

➡ PGRs with parental or other caring responsibilities

➡ women (including trans women) and non-binar"y PGRs

➡ LGBTQ+ PGRs

➡ working class or "first generation" PGRs

➡ Black PGRs and other underrepresented minority ethnic PGRs

➡ self-funded or unfunded PGRs.

In addition we asked about the cross-cutting issues of taking leave and making complaints. Some respondents told us they felt we should have asked questions relating to the needs of older PGRs, who are also in a minority within the wider PGR population. This was an unfortunate omission, and we agree the needs of this group require further research and attention.

TAKING LEAVE

18.9% of respondents (n=702) told us they were not entitled to paid sick leave. 14.1% of respondents (n=693) told us they were not entitled to paid parental leave. 5.9% also told us they were not entitled to unpaid leave (n=693).

In all cases this is unacceptably high. The system is highly unfair, and highly discriminatory. It entrenches gendered parenting roles. It means that migrant disabled PGRs and migrant parents will face substantial extra barriers to PhD study in the UK, solely on the basis that they are not from the UK, and regardless of ability and talent. It leaves many PGRs at risk of serious financial hardship, which will be a considerable barrier for those without independent wealth and family support.

Respondents told us what they felt would make the experience of taking periods of leave better. Key themes included:

➡ having entitlement to leave in the first place, and improving equity and fairness of access

➡ having greater clarity and information about entitlement and processes, both for PGRs and supporting staff

➡ better, or any, support alongside periods of absence

➥ not being 'punished' for taking leaves of absence, for instance through removal of access to library services and university counselling and wellbeing support

➥ reducing pressure from supervisors and other staff to not take a necessary leave of absence

➥ removing stigma around taking leave

➥ improving systems for accessing entitlement to leave, including reducing evidence requirements for periods of leave, including reducing evidence requirements for periods of leave

➥ increasing flexibility of leave processes

➥ introducing better support to return to research

➥ changing the minimum period for sick leave entitlement.

Survey respondents strongly supported the introduction of bereavement leave, carers leave and entitlement to shared parental leave for all PGRs. These are essential reforms for improving the experience of PGRs when life events happen and they need more support.

MAKING COMPLAINTS

Systems for making complaints do not work for PGRs, and too many are unable to even raise concerns safely. This is an area that needs serious and urgent reform.

People highlighted significant problems with the complaints process. This included a lack of time limits that meant universities could 'run out the clock' on complaints, either because of visa expiry or the end of the maximum registration period. Universities insisted on seeing individual complaints made by PGRs in isolation, rather than together with other complaints made by staff and students. PGRs told us they felt the onus was on themselves to pursue lengthy complaints processes, or alternatively to change their project and find their own new supervisors.

> *"The majority of PGRs go through PGR without these issues. The problem is when it breaks down, whether that's the supervisor relationship or something like [abuse and complaints], there is zero safety net, zero protection."*

PGRs are more dependent upon an institution and a single academic or small team, who can affect their access to funding or paid work, or even threaten their visa status. As such, they are in a uniquely vulnerable position, with very few options and little autonomy.

MIGRANT OR INTERNATIONAL PGRS

36.9% of migrant or international PGRs said their needs were not met to some degree, and a further 13.1% said their needs were not met at all. Only 9.5% said their needs were very well met.

Migrant PGRs were more likely to be funded by their university than non-migrant PGRs (32.9% compared to 19.8%). This is likely to be because they were excluded from many other sources of funding. Migrant PGRs were also more likely to be unfunded/self-funded than non-migrant PGRs (20.1% compared to 10.7%), which, again, is likely to be a result of exclusion from sources of funding.

Respondents highlighted issues with funding and pay, high fees and other costs, visa issues and issues with culture and support.

"From the day I started my programme, I have considered giving up and going home at least once a week solely due to the visa regime and the unwelcoming attitude I am experiencing. If I had known before coming here, I would have gone to another country, and I will recommend to all other international students to avoid the UK. I cannot take a leave of absence or even visit home while working remotely full-time without losing my visa. It is unbearable."

DISABLED, CHRONICALLY ILL AND/OR NEURODIVERGENT PGRS

Only 3.9% of 102 disabled, chronically ill or neurodivergent respondents felt their needs were very well met. 48% felt their needs were either not met to some degree, or not met at all.

Respondents highlighted the need for improvements in areas including:

➡ training, combating ableism and improving understanding of disability, chronic illness and neurodivergence

➡ tailoring disability support to PGRs, rather than relying on provision for undergraduate students, which was not applicable to PhDs

➡ extending access to Occupational Health assessments, and providing recommended support

➡ improving understanding and information about what reasonable adjustments could be made for disabled, chronically ill and neurodivergent PGRs

➡ allowing more time for completion, both as a reasonable adjustment and in recognition of the extra time necessary to undertake additional disability- and support-related activities

➡ extending access to paid sick leave for all PGRs including migrant or international PGRs, making sick leave more accessible and flexible, and removing the bureaucratic burdens for medical evidence

➡ increasing funding for and access to individual mental health support

➡ removing additional barriers to support for visa holders

➡ improving accessibility of on-site and online facilities

➡ reforming processes for accessing DSA.

PGRS WITH PARENTAL OR OTHER CARING RESPONSIBILITIES

30% of 54 respondent who told us they had parental and/or other caring responsibilities said their related needs were not met at all, and 22% said they were not met to some degree. This is one of the lowest ratings among the different groups we asked about. The lack of support has been particularly stark during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, where childcare and other caring needs have increased.

We asked PGR parents and carers if they thought the introduction of a new form of Carers Leave would be a good idea. 95% of 56 people said it was, and the remaining three said they

did not know. The comments highlighted how this would help alleviate financial stress for carers, and end the need to choose between your PhD and your loved ones.

"PGRs should not be penalised for having caring needs. No-one should have to choose between their work/studies and caring for a loved one."

WOMEN (INCLUDING TRANS WOMEN) AND NON-BINARY PGRS

21.4% of 154 respondents to questions about the needs of women and non-binary PGRs said their needs were very well met, and 40.9% said met to some degree. This group was the only one across our questions about specific groups of PGRs that gave a majority positive answer.

However, women and non-binary PGRs still highlighted ways in which the PhD system failed to meet their needs, including:

➡ accessibility and funding in relation into health issues that commonly affect women (in addition to those in relation to paid sick leave)

➡ representation among more senior members of staff

➡ access to supportive spaces and relationships with women, particularly in the form of networks and mentoring

➡ hostile work environments and the barriers that are created in relation to access to opportunities, personal relationships, wellbeing and work.

LGBTQ+ PGRS

72 people told us how well they felt their needs relating to their identity as LGBTQ+ were met. People most commonly told us they felt neutral about this. Some people told us they did not feel they had specific needs relating to their LGBTQ+ identity. However, an equal percentage (29%) said their needs were not met to some degree or at all, as said they were met to some degree or very well, suggesting a very mixed experience.

Ways to improve the system raised by respondents included:

➡ creating more inclusive systems

➡ access to LGBTQ+ communities, social spaces and facilities, including integration within staff LGBTQ+ networks

➡ specific training for LGBTQ+ PGRs (e.g. while on fieldwork, social media usage, etc)

➡ specific training for staff in understanding LGBTQ+ perspectives, issues and making spaces accessible for these people

➡ greater representation within the curriculum, workplace, and academic culture.

"Given the frequently heightened debates around trans issues, I did not always feel that there was sufficient knowledge or support of that context available within my institution. E.g. lots of the generic advice on social media use as a PhD student was emphasising the benefits of sharing knowledge, getting it out there etc. There wasn't really much sign of understanding or appreciating that actually, entirely neutral, appropriate tweeting about trans people and health services, by me as a trans person, could be a risky thing to do.

Nor was I at all sure that the university would have my back if (say) the right wing press leapt on something I'd researched and frothed it up into a media controversy. I felt that I was navigating this kind of situation as a PhD student largely alone."

WORKING CLASS OR "FIRST GENERATION" PGRS

23% of 139 respondents who identified as working class and/or 'first generation' told us their needs were not met at all, and 24% said they were not met to some degree', compared to 9% and 19% who answered 'very well met' and 'met to some degree', respectively.

Themes in comments included:

➨ lack of income and other available sources of financial support

➨ lack of clear information about requirements to successfully navigate higher education

➨ dependence on interpersonal support to navigate higher education

➨ lack of privilege in relation to ability to develop crucial interpersonal support and personal networks

"Recognition of the extremely precarious financial position working class PGRs are in – I have had to work part time throughout my entire PhD to get by financially, but my supervisors have treated this like a lack of commitment rather than a financial necessity."

"I felt so much impostor syndrome, guilt for feeling burnt out despite being more privileged than my family, felt in the dark about 'unwritten' rules."

BLACK PGRS AND OTHER UNDERREPRESENTED MINORITY ETHNIC PGRS

35 people answered the question 'If you are a current or former PGR and identify as Black or from another minority ethnic background, how well do you feel your related needs were met during your PhD?'. 40% answered 'not met to some degree' or 'not met at all'.

We also asked respondents what they felt would make the situation better. Mentoring and role models came out strongly, along with career support and networks of other Black and underrepresented minority ethnic PGRs. Comments also recognised the extra workload burden on the small number of Black academics in leadership roles in UK Higher education, however. Others highlighted the need for a more inclusive environment. Respondents told us ringfenced funding for Black and other underrepresented minority ethnic PGRs would recognise the extra labour done by Black PGRs during their career, and would show a meaningful commitment to improving access. It shouldn't stand alone, however.

These results should be considered alongside previous research into the experience of Black and other minority ethnic PGRs, including:

➨ Dr Jason Arday produced a report for UCU in 2017 on Exploring black and minority ethnic (BME) doctoral students' perceptions of an academic career

➨ Paulette Williams, Sukhi Bath, Dr Jason Arday and Chantelle Lewis produced a report in 2019 for Leading Routes, an organisation supporting the next generation of Black academics, called The Broken Pipeline: Barriers to Black PhD Students Accessing Research Council Funding.

SELF-FUNDED OR UNFUNDED PGRS.

The results of our survey suggest that self-funders are more likely to come from more marginalised groups. This runs contrary to the assumption by some respondents that self-funded PGRs have significant degrees of privilege. They are further marginalised by their lack of PhD funding and being positioned within comparatively underfunded subject areas. It should not, therefore, be surprising that self-funded PGRs are the least likely group least likely to report that their needs were well met: 24% told us their needs were not met to some degree, and 38% said they were not met at all. This should ring alarm bells for any university that is actively seeking to recruit self-funded PGRs.

The additional barriers that PGRs can face in their capacity as being self-funded were described at length by respondents. These can all ultimately be attributed to a lack of resources and the implications that this has on access to training, development opportunities, and other useful forms of formal and informal support.

> *"I feel there is very little recognition of the difference in experience between funded and unfunded PGRs. I recognise that being funded is far from a golden ticket, however, it does afford opportunities that as someone who is unfunded I simply do not have access to. When am I meant to attend and speak at conferences when I have to work three days a week or more to cover my living costs? If I attend a conference I have to potentially lose a day of work, so whilst I may be able to claim back the cost of the ticket I can't claim back the money I have lost by not working. When am I meant to have the time to attend networking events? I miss out on so many internal opportunities to make contacts and to promote my research because they take place during the working day. Often by not attending these kinds of things, or having to turn down speaking at events, I get the impression I am being perceived as difficult or inflexible but I really cannot fit these things into my day."*

Urgent needs for PGRs

We recognise that restructuring the PhD to create a better deal for PGRs will take a long time, and require more in-depth work to understand all of the implications for different groups of PGRs. However, we also know that PGRs need change now. These recommendations represent urgent demands for change, to create a better deal for all PGRs in the current system.

FAIR REMUNERATION AND WORKLOAD ALLOCATION

➡ Increase pay for all PGR stipends and ensure future pay rises keep up with the rising cost of living.

➡ Ensure equal access to teaching and other work opportunities for all PGRs, and ensure universities monitor key demographics relating to who is and is not able to take up these opportunities.

➡ Ensure all additional work outside of PhD research is properly workloaded for PGRs, and that extra commitments come along with compensatory funding and time extensions for the PhD.

➡ Ensure workload assessments and pay both cover the full extent of work undertaken by

PGRs, including adequate preparation and marking time, and reform graduate teaching assistant roles in line with Appendix 2 of UCU's PGRs as Staff manifesto

➡ Ensure all PGRs undertaking university 'improvement' work outside of the PhD, including but not limited to strategy meetings and Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) initiatives, are paid for that work, and compensated through time and funding extensions to their PhDs.

SUPERVISION

➡ Ensure that a clear set of expectations is created for supervision, which details the specific forms and quantities of support that supervisors should be responsible for providing to PGRs

➡ Ensure that supervisors have engaged in training and have the support that they need to provide expected supervisory duties. This should include Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) training.

➡ Provide role-specific line management for supervisors in order to provide them with support and accountability.

➡ Ensure that the workload allocation provided for supervisory duties is increased to a level that enables supervisors to adequately provide expected support.

➡ Provide all PGRs with structured personal development mentoring as a means of ensuring an additional channel of interpersonal support outside of all supervisory relationships.

➡ Provide transparent and accessible processes for changing supervisor alongside funding and time extensions for PGRs who change supervisors to cover any time lost.

➡ Ensure that PGRs have adequate autonomy over their own research projects.

➡ Ensure that supervisors do not use PGRs as unpaid research assistants in the absence of departmental (or other) funds made available to this end.

TRAINING

➡ Ensure all PGRs, regardless of funding or visa status, are able to access the same PGR training.

➡ Ensure personal financial cost is never a barrier to accessing training for PGRs.

➡ Ensure all universities have protected and sufficient funds to allow all PGRs, including self-funded/unfunded PGRs and migrant PGRs, to access training.

➡ Conduct an accessibility audit on all online and in-person PGR training, to ensure it meets all access requirements for disabled, chronically ill and neurodivergent PGRs.

➡ Ensure training provision includes sessions at times of day that are accessible to those with caring responsibilities, who are part time or who are distance learners.

➡ Ensure training for PGRs includes a mix of basic and specialist skills training, as well as training for transferable skills, EDI and other relevant topics.

➡ Ensure career support services have targeted provision for postgraduates, which

includes support for both those who wish to pursue academic careers, and non-academic careers.

➡ Ensure all PGRs have clear information about the training available to them, and how to access it.

FACILITIES

➡ Ensure all PGRs have access to dedicated office space that is appropriate, safe and accessible.

➡ Conduct an assessment of all spaces for PGRs to ensure they are accessible for disabled, chronically ill and/or neurodivergent people, and act to improve spaces where necessary.

➡ Ensure all PGRs know who to contact about health and safety concerns regarding their work spaces.

➡ Ensure all PGRs, supervisors and other relevant staff have clear information about what funding is available for facilities and equipment, from which source, and through which processes.

➡ Extend existing research support grants from both funders and universities so they can be used to cover equipment costs.

TAKING LEAVE

➡ Ensure all funded students, regardless of funding source, have the same access to paid periods of leave, and that funding extensions are accompanied by extensions to maximum registration periods.

➡ Ensure all students have access to adequate time extensions in order to account for periods of disruption and leave.

➡ Introduce bereavement leave for all PGRs.

➡ Introduce carers leave for all PGRs.

➡ Extend entitlement to Shared Parental Leave to all PGRs.

➡ Extend equal rights to periods of leave, including but not limited to sick leave, parental leave, bereavement leave and other leaves of absence, to all migrant PGRs. Ensure periods of disruption and leave are permissible reasons for visa extensions.

➡ Reduce the burden of evidence for eligibility for periods of leave.

➡ Join up leave systems with those of disability support, such as DSA, in order to reduce needless duplication of evidence requirements.

➡ Reform existing periods of leave to allow for greater flexibility and a 'phased return' system.

➡ Reform entitlement to sick leave to allow for greater flexibility for people with chronic, fluctuating conditions, who may not qualify through illness over one calendar month (as commonly required by university regulations), but accumulate considerable 'lost' days as a result of their condition(s).

➡ Ensure universities have clear systems of support for PGRs during their periods of leave, including regular check-ins where appropriate.

➡ Ensure all PGRs, supervisors and other staff have accurate and up-to-date information about PGRs' rights to different types of leave, and the processes for accessing them.

➡ Ensure clear communication about rights to periods of leave, both to PGRs and their supervisors. This must include the importance of taking leave when necessary, in order to reduce stigma around absence and pressure from staff to avoid periods of leave.

➡ Ensure all PGRs have equal entitlement to holiday leave, are aware of their entitlement, and are encouraged and supported to take it.

➡ End the practice of suspending access to university services, including but not limited to library and wellbeing services, during periods of leave.

MAKING COMPLAINTS

➡ Extend access to university HR complaints procedures to all PGRs, in recognition of their distinct role compared to other students.

➡ Overhaul all complaints procedures to ensure they deal with complaints in a robust and timely manner, taking into account the existence of multiple cases by single perpetrators, ensuring investigations are independent, transparent and thorough, and that the onus is on the university to take action, not the PGR.

➡ Ensure the anonymity of PGRs raising complaints is upheld in all cases, and that they are protected from any form of retribution, included but not limited to threats to visa status, withdrawal or denial of funding, or further instances of abuse.

➡ Ensure supervisors who have had complaints raised and upheld against them are not in a position to supervise new PGRs.

➡ Ensure that, where a supervisor is responsible for accountability or complaints about supervision in their department, that relevant alternative provision is identified for those that they supervise.

➡ Ensure all PGRs and others have clear information about points of contact, processes, progress and time limits relating to complaints throughout their PhD, and for the duration of any complaints made.

➡ Ensure all supervisors and other relevant staff have clear information about complaints processes, understand their importance and are equipped to support PGRs where necessary.

➡ Ensure all university complaints procedures have strict time limits that are adhered to, so that migrant PGRs can have their complaints heard within the time limit of their visa, and so that for all PGRs complaints can be heard in a timely manner and within the period of maximum registration.

➡ Introduce clear mechanisms for all PGRs, including migrant PGRs, to be able to change supervisors and/or universities without loss of funding or visa status.

URGENT NEEDS FOR MIGRANT OR INTERNATIONAL PGRS

➡ Abolish fees for all PGRs and, in the interim, ensure that no migrant PGR is charged more than a domestic PGR for their period of study.

➡ Abolish the NHS surcharge.

➡ Ensure time conducting PhD research is counted as years towards securing indefinite leave to remain.

➡ Extend equal rights to Disabled Students Allowance and other forms of disability support to all migrant PGRs.

➡ Extend equal access to university hardship funds for all migrant PGRs.

➡ Extend equal access to UK welfare benefits to all migrant PGRs.

➡ Introduce greater flexibility and longer time limits to the current Tier 4 visa.

➡ Ensure every university has a dedicated point of contact to support and advocate for migrant PGRs with regards to visa issues.

➡ Ensure all university complaints procedures have strict time limits that are adhered to, so that migrant PGRs can have their complaints heard in a timely manner, and within the time limit of their visa.

➡ End the intrusive surveillance and monitoring of migrant PGRs.

➡ Ensure all migrant PGRs have appropriate and comprehensive induction and ongoing pastoral care support throughout their PhD.

➡ Provide access to adequately resourced networks for migrant staff within universities.

URGENT NEEDS FOR DISABLED, CHRONICALLY ILL AND NEURODIVERGENT PGRS

➡ Ensure all universities can demonstrate they are meeting their current anticipatory duties under the Equality Act 2010 with regards to reasonable adjustments for disabled PGRs.

➡ Ensure all supervisors and other relevant staff are trained on models of disability, how to combat ableism and how to support disabled PGRs.

➡ Ensure every university has a clear strategy for ensuring its digital systems, physical facilities, training programmes, events, inductions, progress assessments, vivas and other systems for PGRs are suitable and accessible for all disabled, chronically ill and neurodivergent PGRs.

➡ Ensure all PGRs have access to Occupational Health assessments, and subsequent support.

➡ Extend access to DSA to all PGRs, including migrant or international PGRs.

➡ Ensure support through DSA is available for the full duration of the PhD for all PGRs.

➡ Overhaul the DSA system to make the application process fit for purpose.

➡ Remove evidence requirements for DSA applications, or ensure that universities provide

external or internal professional assessment in a timely manner that sufficiently meets requirements for evidence.

➡ Ensure support available through DSA and other university systems is tailored to the needs of PGRs, rather than relying on support for undergraduate students.

➡ Review what can be funded through DSA to ensure it meets the needs of disabled PGRs.

➡ Ensure any changes to the PhD system do not negatively affect provision for disabled, chronically ill and neurodivergent PGRs, including protecting existing entitlement to DSA.

➡ Ensure disabled, chronically ill and neurodivergent PGRs have flexible deadlines and more time for completion of their PhDs, both as a reasonable adjustment and in recognition of the extra time necessary to undertake additional disability- and support-related activities.

➡ Increase funding for and access to individual mental health support, and ensure university mental health services employ specialist and diverse counsellors to ensure appropriate provision for Black and minority ethnic PGRs, LGBTQ+ PGRs, disabled, chronically ill and neurodivergent PGRs and other multiply marginalised groups.

➡ Provide comprehensive information for both PGRs and staff about what reasonable adjustments could be made for disabled, chronically ill and neurodivergent PGRs, including for those who receive a diagnosis during the course of their PhD.

➡ Provide access to adequately resourced networks for disabled, chronically ill and neurodivergent staff within universities.

➡ Ensure disabled, chronically ill and neurodivergent PGRs who wish to pursue a career in higher education have access to mentoring, career support and staff support networks, that links them with disabled academics and leaders in higher education.

➡ Improve routes for accessing PhD funding across all academic disciplines for disabled, chronically ill and neurodivergent PGRs.

URGENT NEEDS FOR PGR PARENTS AND THOSE WITH CARING RESPONSIBILITIES

➡ Extend entitlement to tax-free childcare for all PGRs.

➡ Extend entitlement to 30 hours free childcare to all PGRs.

➡ Introduce paid carers leave for all PGRs who are funded, and carers leave time extensions for all PGRs.

➡ Ensure all universities have a policy and strategy in place for supporting PGRs with caring responsibilities, for instance through a carer's support plan, and a commitment to flexible and accessible work and events.

➡ Where available, extend access to university childcare subsidies or provision at a discounted rate to all PGRs.

➡ Ensure all universities have training in place for managers and supervisors around the needs and experiences of staff and students with caring responsibilities (including childcare and caring for other friends or family members).

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➡ Provide access to adequately resourced networks for staff within universities who have caring responsibilities.

URGENT NEEDS FOR WOMEN AND NON-BINARY PGRS

➡ Provide workplace training, support and adjustments in relation to menopause in universities such as those recommended by the Fawcett Society and the TUC.

➡ Provide workplace training, support and adjustments in relation to endometriosis in universities such as those recommended by Endometriosis UK.

➡ Provide access to free sanitary products for all who need them across universities.

➡ Address gender disparities among senior staff, including closing the gender pay gap and combating lack of representation in leadership roles.

➡ Provide a comprehensive programme of mentoring for women and for non-binary PGRs, especially in disciplines where they are underrepresented.

➡ Ensure access to adequately resourced gender-based staff networks within universities.

➡ Require universities to adopt adequate policies and practice on gender equality and healthy workplace environments as they pertain to supervision and training for PGRs.

URGENT NEEDS FOR LGBTQ+ PGRS

➡ Review all systems for PGRs across funders and universities to ensure they are inclusive of diverse sexualities and gender identities.

➡ Ensure all LGBTQ+ have access to well-supported and promoted staff and PGR-specific LGBTQ+ networks.

➡ Ensure all PGR training, including but not limited to field work, ethics, and social media and other communications, include elements relating to safety and appropriate support for LGBTQ+ PGRs.

➡ Ensure all supervisors and other relevant staff have appropriate training on issues facing LGBTQ+ PGRs, how to combat prejudice and discrimination, and how to support and champion LGBTQ+ PGRs.

➡ Ensure all LGBTQ+ PGRs have access to a comprehensive and relevant mentoring programme that links them with LGBTQ+ academics and leaders in higher education.

URGENT NEEDS FOR WORKING CLASS AND 'FIRST GENERATION' PGRS

➡ Create ringfenced departmental and/or institutional funding to enable all PGRs to meet up-front costs in relation to training, development and other research-related activities.

➡ Provide access to adequately resourced networks for working-class staff within universities.

➡ Provide a comprehensive programme of mentoring for working class and/or 'first generation' PGRs.

➡ Provide clearer information and support on the informal, cultural requirements of developing a personal network and CV building when attempting to access, navigate, and move on from doctoral research

➡ Provide adequate training to all PGRs on how to effectively develop personal networks and engage in CV building

URGENT NEEDS FOR BLACK AND OTHER UNDERREPRESENTED MINORITY ETHNIC PGRS

➡ Address the recommendations in previous research for UCU and Leading Routes on better support for Black and other underrepresented minority ethnic PGRs, including but not limited to:

　➡ providing a more equitable route into postgraduate study that values talent over previous attainment

　➡ a robust and structured mentoring programme for Black and other minority ethnic PGRs that links them with Black academics and leaders, and other academics and leaders of colour, in higher education

　➡ better information for Black applicants and potential PGRs on scholarships and other funding

　➡ targeted recruitment for underrepresented ethnic minority PGRs

　➡ training for university staff and recruiters on combating racism in their practice

　➡ ensuring all universities have well-supported BME networks, which include Black and other minority ethnic PGRs.

➡ Ensure all universities report on and address their race pay gap, and underrepresentation of Black academics and other academics of colour in senior leadership roles.

➡ Expand provision of ringfenced funding and scholarships for Black PGRs and other underrepresented ethnic minority groups (for example, people from a Gypsy, Roma and Traveller background, and others identified through disaggregated ethnicity data).

URGENT NEEDS FOR SELF-FUNDED OR UNFUNDED PGRS

➡ Remove or reduce the burden of paying tuition fees.

➡ Provide financial assistance to support self-funders with costs of living.

➡ Provide ringfenced departmental and/or institutional funding to enable all PGRs to meet up-front costs in relation to training, development and other research-related activities.

➡ Ensure fair provision and remuneration of additional paid work such that hiring processes are transparent and formalised and pay is fully reflective of the labour requirements.

➡ Provide paid time-on for all research and teaching activities that are included within staff members workload allocation models.

➡ Ensure there are clear mechanisms for providing flexibility in relation to time limits for

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completing the PhD without incurring additional fees.

➡ Introduce regulations to ensure that universities cannot take on additional PGRs with demonstrating the resources and capacity to adequately support them in line with agreed expectations.

➡ Introduce mechanisms to ensure that PGRs can effectively challenge inadequacies in relation to the above.

For more information about this report, or about the UCU PGRs as Staff campaign, please contact:

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