

Postgraduate Researchers and the Cost-of-Living Crisis

UCU submission to the APPG for Students Inquiry into the Impact of the Cost-of-Living Crisis on Students

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March 2023

Introduction

The University and College Union (UCU) is the representative body for employees in post-16 education. It represents over 130,000 members, including lecturers, researchers, professional services staff and postgraduate researchers (PGRs) in universities, colleges, prisons, adult education and training organisations across the UK. Membership includes PGRs either as 'student' members or in their teaching, research and other staff roles.

The [*PGRs As Staff*](#) campaign was launched in November 2020. The campaign manifesto was developed by PGR members and includes recommendations for improving the rights and conditions of PGRs in both their PhD and teaching roles. PGRs often describe falling into a gap in between being 'staff' and 'student'. While our campaign is to afford them the same rights as staff, we acknowledge that there are both challenges and opportunities that come along with their current 'student' status. As such, we aim to improve current conditions, and campaign for a better deal for all PGRs in the future.

This report was written in response to a call for evidence from the All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for Students into [how the cost-of-living crisis is affecting students](#), launched by APPG Chair Paul Blomfield MP in January 2023. We wanted to make sure the voice of PGRs, holding 'student' status, was included in this inquiry, as they are too often left out.

About our survey

We launched a short survey for PGRs in February 2023 to inform our written response to the APPG. Mirroring the APPG's own survey, it asked about cost pressures and university hardship funds. It also asked about some specific pressures that PGRs may face but undergraduate and postgraduate taught students are unlikely too. Finally it asked about PGRs' experience of balancing their PhD role with other paid work both in and outside of the university. The survey received around 900 responses from PGRs across the UK. A copy of the survey and a breakdown of the demographics of respondents is available upon request.

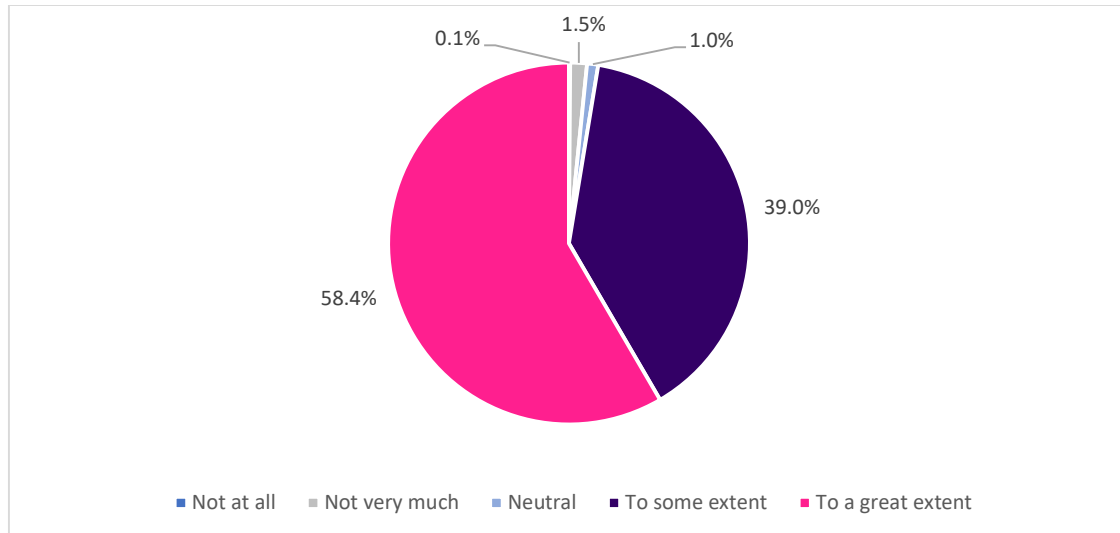
This report covers the key findings of the survey. This includes ways in which PGRs are experiencing the pressures of the cost-of-living crisis; how these are compounded by problems with stipend payments and lack of access to hardship funds; the experience of work alongside the PhD; and PGRs' priorities for action.

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PGRs feeling the pressure

Almost 60% of respondents told us they were feeling the pressure of rising costs to a great extent, with a further 39% answering 'to some extent'.

Figure 1: Percentage responses to question 'To what extent are you feeling the pressures of rising costs?' (n= 895)



The pressure was more pronounced for self-funded/unfunded PGRs, those classed as international or migrant, and disabled, chronically ill and neurodivergent PGRs, as Figures 2, 3 and 4 show below. The rate of unfunded PGRs responding 'to a great extent' was 10% higher than the overall results, and around 4 – 5% for international and disabled PGRs.

As a disabled student it is challenging in its own right to be able to study - studying is a very rewarding experience especially knowing it is taking me on a journey to advance my career and benefit others. I have had to take on additional employment to be able to pay for the increase of living costs and this is detrimental to both my health/disability and quality of study and work I produce. Prior to studying I had budgeted for everything but this has been blown out of the water with such drastic changes to everyday living costs.

Figure 2: Percentage responses to the question 'To what extent are you feeling the pressures of rising costs?', Unfunded/self-funded respondents (n = 145)

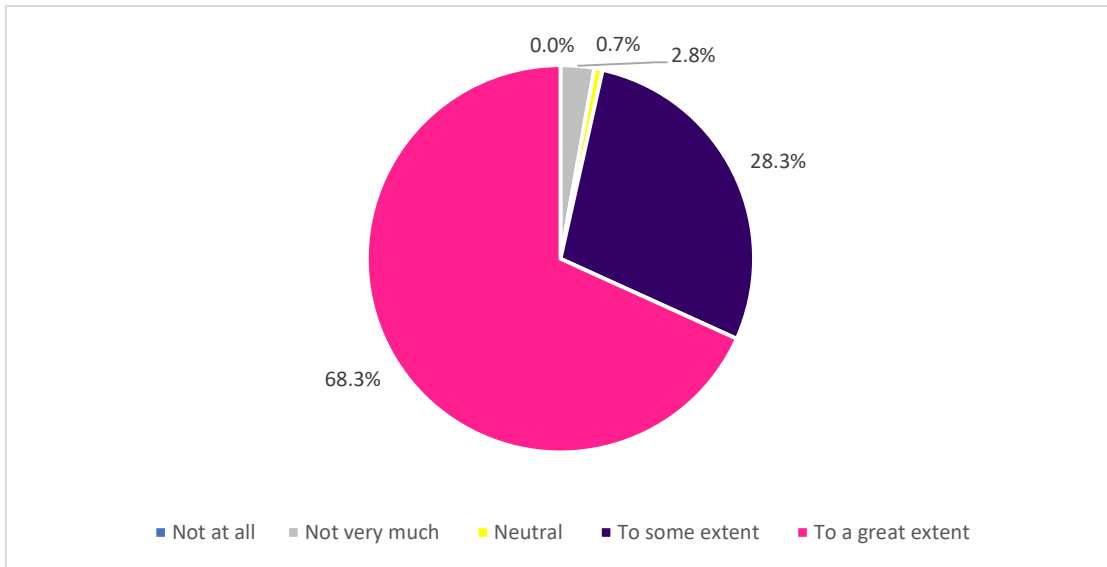


Figure 3: Percentage responses to the question 'To what extent are you feeling the pressures of rising costs?', International/migrant status respondents (n = 268)

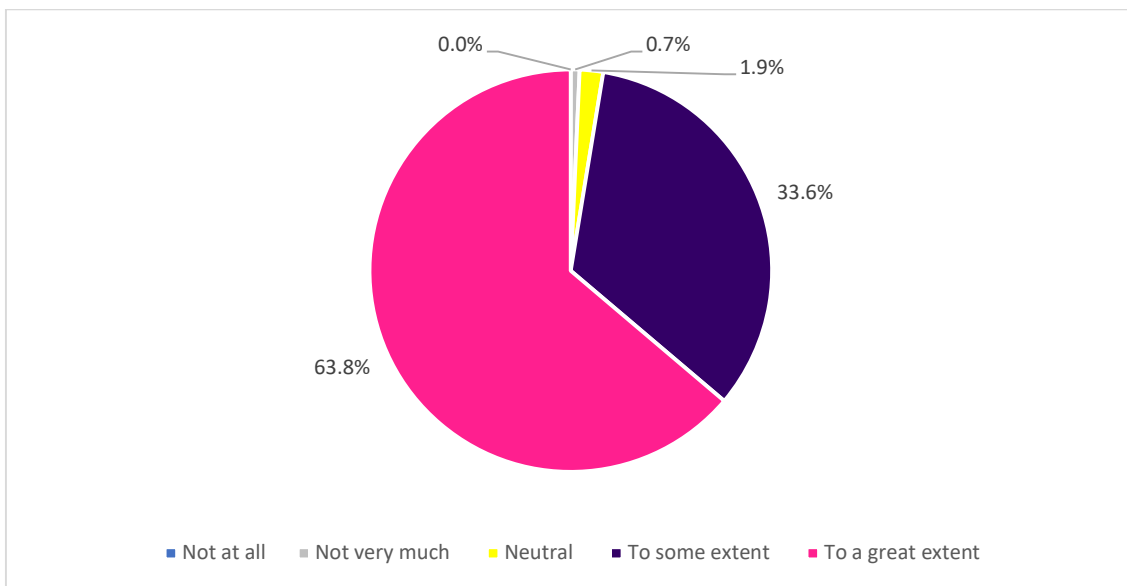
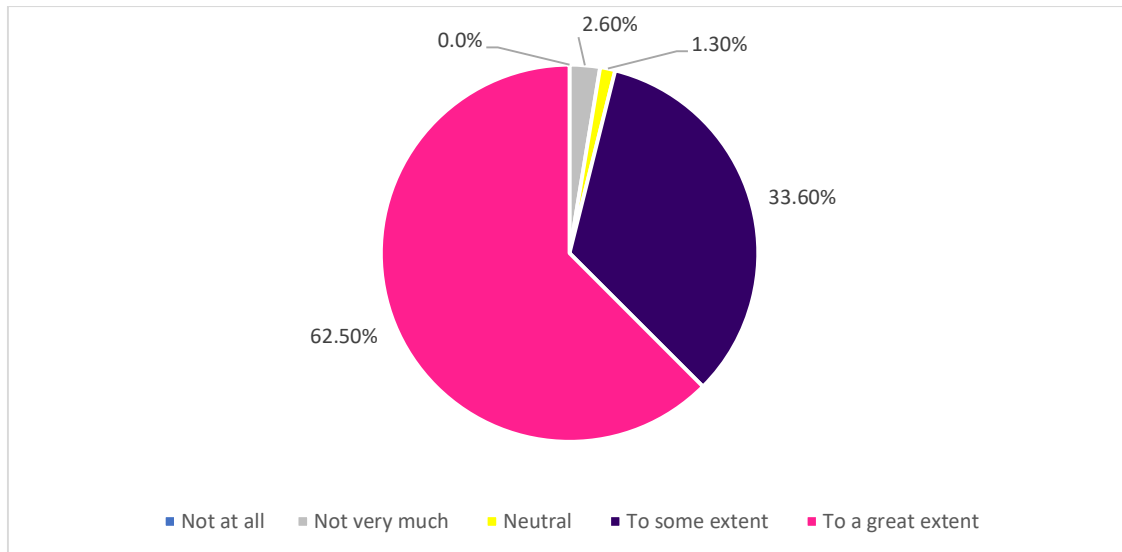


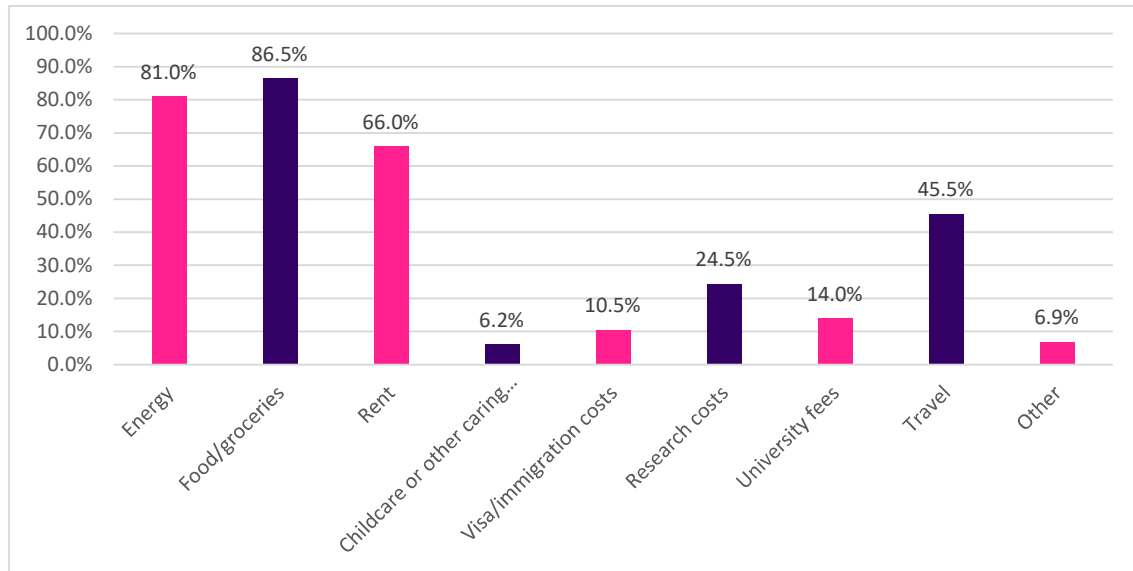
Figure 4: Percentage responses to the question 'To what extent are you feeling the pressures of rising costs?', Disabled, chronically ill and/or neurodivergent respondents (n = 232)



We asked PGRs what kinds of pressures they were experiencing, in terms of rising costs. We used the APPG for Students survey as a basis for this question, and added some options for issues that PGRs have told us they face in the past, including childcare costs, visa and other immigration costs, and research costs including equipment, books, conferences and so on. We also encouraged PGRs to tell us about other costs they were facing.

The three most common cost pressures were energy (81%), food/groceries (81%) and rent (66%). Several respondents also told us that mortgage costs represented a significant pressure. Transport was also selected by many respondents (46%), and 126 people (14%) told us they were struggling with university fees. Almost a quarter said they were struggling with research costs, and comments elsewhere highlighted the high cost of conferences, equipment, travel to research sites and more out-of-pocket expenses, which were either unfunded, under-funded or only reimbursed much later.

Figure 5: Percentage responses to the question 'What are your main cost pressures? (please tick all that apply)' (n = 902)



Smaller percentages of respondents selected childcare and/or other caring costs and immigration costs, but these must not be discounted. The proportion of respondents facing these costs, within the total number of PGRs, will be relatively low but they will face some of the most significant challenges from rising costs. As comments later in the survey show, PGRs are excluded from much of the financial support available from government for childcare because of their student status, and many are struggling to meet the cost.

Allow PGRs to access tax free childcare at a minimum would be a huge help. I am a full time PhD student and a [Teaching Assistant] and yet pay more for childcare than any other mum I know. My childcare costs exceed my stipend.

My PhD is full-time and I have children. I have all the expenses and no capacity to take on additional work. I do not want to have to defer my PhD

Many of us have young children, so more support around accessing affordable childcare, especially for the under 2s. As it stands I rely on a mix of family and paid for care for 3/4 days a week when I am a full time student, this is a huge struggle but it is all I can afford and it does affect my studies.

International or migrant PGRs face not only high visa fees (including the NHS surcharge) and other immigration costs, but also university fees up to four times higher than domestic PGRs. They also have greater restrictions on the number of hours they can work outside of their PhD than domestic PGRs, find it harder and more expensive to secure accommodation, and have fewer sources of funding for their PhD. These high costs erode any savings or personal safety nets PGRs have, and mean the impact of rising costs, emergencies or changes in personal situations can be extremely difficult to manage.

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Slim chance to be considered by property agents or even house owners when you are a foreign students. Last on the list of preferability. With housing crisis, even university and private accommodations are full. So, either we pay 6 months rent in advance (which is expensive!!), or go homeless.

It is crucial to recognise that the stipend is not enough for international students who have to pay tuition fees. Without taking on additional work, I was left with under £7k each year to live on.

I feel betrayed that I have to struggle alone after paying such high tuition fees yet getting no facilities to perform experiments for my research, having to find my research costs and training on specialist skills needed for my research!

These issues and more are discussed in more detail in our 2022 report, [Getting a Better Deal for PGRs](#). This considers the specific experiences and needs of PGRs including international/migrant PGRs, those with caring responsibilities, disabled, chronically ill and neurodivergent PGRs, Black and other underrepresented minority ethnic PGRs and others.

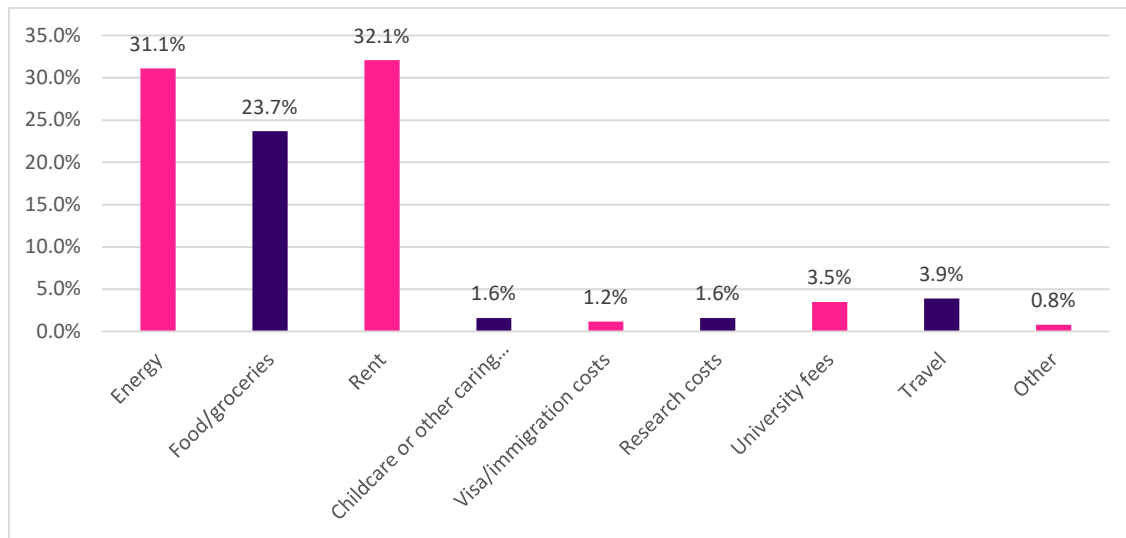
Other costs highlighted by respondents, alongside mortgage costs, included health and medical costs, clothing, paying off debt and leisure activities for 'time off' from the PhD.

We also asked respondents to indicate which one cost-pressure was having the most significant impact on them. As Figure 6 below shows, rent was most commonly selected (32%), followed by energy costs (31%) and groceries (24%).

Self-funded/unfunded PGRs more commonly selected university fees as the most pressing cost compared to the whole group, with 17% selecting this as their most pressing cost. Even for funded PGRs, fees can be a serious concern in the final unfunded 'writing up' year, and there is significant variation of the amount PGRs have to pay from institution to institution. The pressure this adds to the final stages of the PhD, and the significant variation in amount, deserve further research and action.

Cancel study fees - we are doing the research the outcomes of which the university loves to promote and put its name on, so why should we be paying fees in the first place?

Figure 6: Percentage respondents to the question 'those options above, which is the one most pressing cost?'



Pay delays and problems

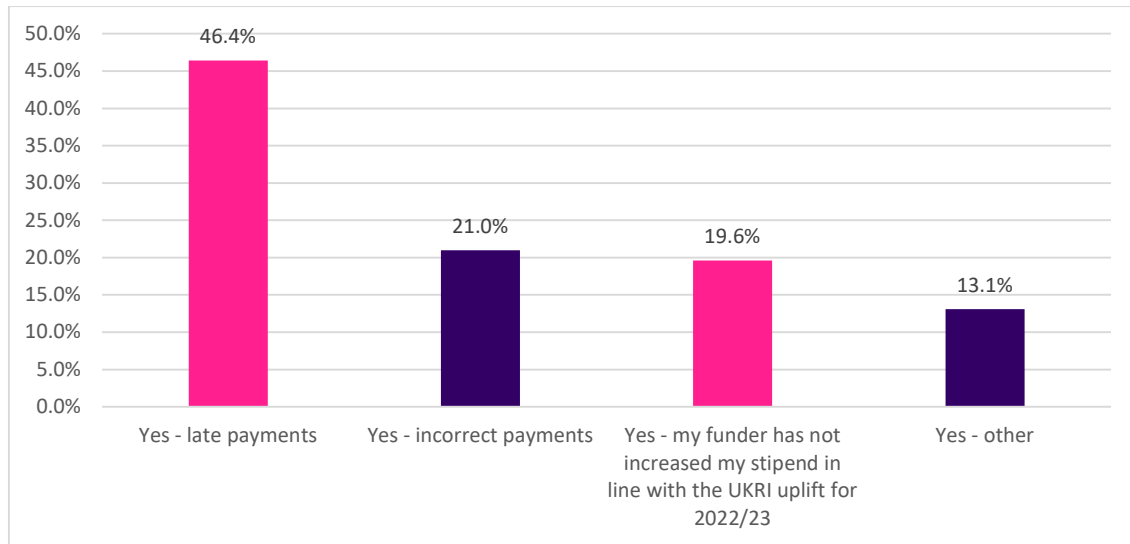
We asked PGRs if they had experienced any problems getting paid their stipends, as we know that this can be a serious issue for some.

Of 784 respondents who told us they were funded for their PhDs, 63% said they had not experienced problems, which is encouraging. However that still leaves almost 40% who have experienced problems.

291 people told us they had experienced some kind of problem getting paid. As Figure 7 below shows, 46% had experienced late payments, while around a fifth had experienced incorrect payments. Other comments elsewhere in this survey also highlighted problems resulting from an increasingly small number of universities paying their PGRs once every three months, rather than monthly. This practice should end for all PGRs across the country: doing a PhD is work, and as such should be paid regularly, sufficiently and on time on a monthly basis in line with many other jobs, and to help with monthly cycles of household payments.

57 people told us their university or funder had not raised their stipend to match the recent UKRI stipend increase of around 13% for the 2022/23 academic year. This included those in receipt of the Postgraduate Doctoral Loan via Student Finance England, which does not increase in line with UKRI PhD awards. This underlines the fact that many funded PGRs will still be struggling without a pay-rise, at a time of high inflation and rising costs.

Figure 7: Percentage responses to the question 'If you are funded to do your PhD, have you experienced any delays or problems in receiving your stipend?', excluding negative responses and unfunded respondents. (n = 291)



PGRs told us about the impact of problems with payments, which included both stipend payments and payments for other forms of university work such as Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTA) contracts. PGRs also reported that the delay in introducing the UKRI uplift caused significant hardship, compounded when some universities refused to pay the uplift immediately to those with start dates later in the academic year. Others reported that being paid a month in arrears meant that the very start of their studies was extremely challenging, especially if they had to relocate without any kind of financial support, or if they did not have savings to fall back on. Some international PGRs told us they were considering leaving the UK for the remainder of their study as they could not rely upon sufficient payment to meet rent and other costs, and one told us they had not been able to visit their country of origin for three and a half years due to lack of money.

Unsurprisingly, the impact was extremely serious for many.

Considered leaving multiple times. Lost all trust in university and colleagues. Incredible stress with psychosomatic symptoms. Unable to work due to physical manifestation of stress.

Overdraft fees build up. Have had to move to part time study to allow for more work hours as a result

Triggered a mental health crisis and anxiety in the last stretch of my funded period which meant I couldn't work for a week.

My first payment wasn't until almost a month after the term began, and nearly two months after I had used up all my savings to move... from the US. I was almost unable to find a place to live, since, as a non-resident, I have to pay 6 months rent in advance. After paying rent, the deposit, visa, and NHS fees, I had only \$100 to spend on groceries and necessities like

bedding and toiletries, which was almost impossible to make last for nearly 2 months.

It creates huge amounts of additional stress both in terms of having to identify the problem, report it, and pursue it with my university; and in terms of the financial stress caused by not knowing if my stipend will be paid correctly and if it will be paid in a timely manner. As I am reliant on both to pay my mortgage and household bills, it's a huge stressor and has led to countless lost hours from my research due to both chasing up/reporting issues and resultant mental health problems.

Serious stress, had to contemplate moving home before funding was sorted out. Consistent lack of communication and labyrinthine bureaucracy made it even worse.

i have had to remind the funding body to send my instalments and it's takes a while for the payments to get through. it is also difficult to budget for quarterly instalments rather than monthly ones

Surprisingly, I was 'over paid' slightly for 2 months, but most of the other PhD students in my department were not. It transpired that I was actually correctly paid, and that the others had been underpaid for those 2 months.

In October I had to borrow substantial money from my parents (who also didn't have any money) to cover my rent as the university hadn't paid me for 2 months. I was arguing with finance for almost a month to try and receive my money. It has really had a knock on effect as I am still paying off debts from my friends and family as well as credit cards / overdrafts.

Constantly having to borrow money from my partner and my friends to make up for late payments that would mean I would miss bills and get hit by additional charges and interest payments, even though I always pay it back I just feel so guilty. I also take on more paid work because the pay for this is more regular and reliable, so then I am exhausted and my PhD work suffers. I feel like I can't rely on my stipend and my doctoral college behave as if they are giving pocket money to children for sweets, not paying adults with families and caring responsibilities to live.

I haven't been paid correctly for the past 6 months. Every month I spend several days chasing up the university to remind them what my correct stipend amount is and I'm still actually owed back payment though not very much. They took several months to apply the stipend uplift, despite me being funded by UKRI, which means I went several hundred pounds into my overdraft to cover rent and bills. I'm nearing the end of my PhD and this is a ridiculous burden on time and huge additional stress which would be so easily remedied by paying me on time and at the correct amount.

Some examples may be one-off mistakes, but others are clearly long-running systemic problems in institutions. Either way, the impact can be significant, and there is very little alternative or emergency support available to help PGRs manage

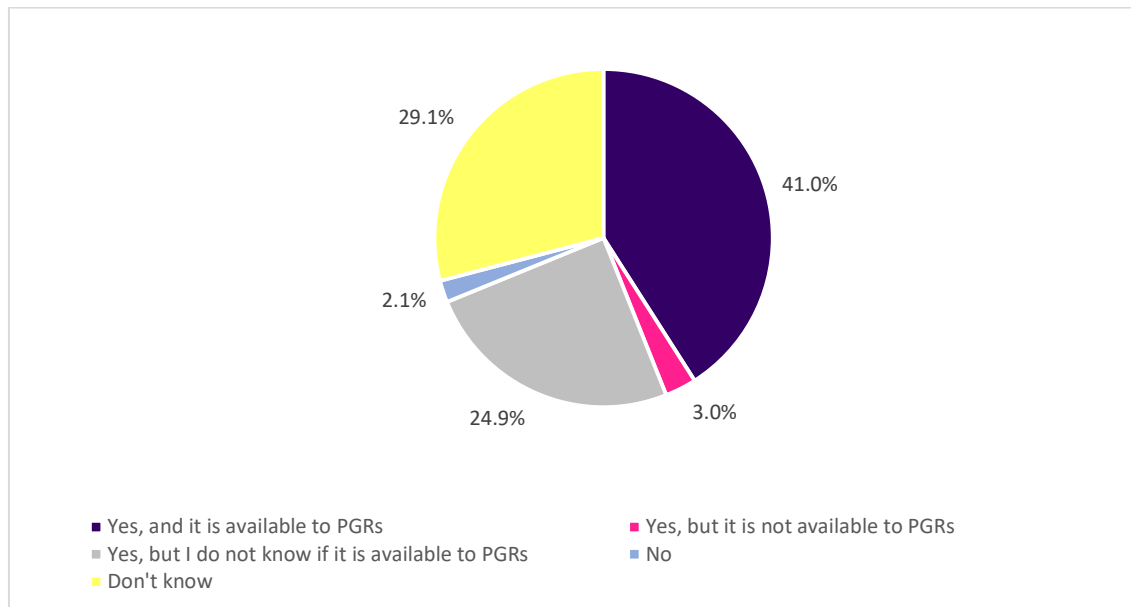
in the meantime. As one example above highlights, the attitude towards PhD needs to change; this is not pocket money, or a perk, but a wage that is necessary to meet costs at all times, and it is especially important to get this right during a cost-of-living crisis.

Hardship funds for PGRs

We asked PGRs whether their university had a hardship fund, and whether this was available to PGRs. We have heard examples in the past, especially during the early lockdowns of the COVID-19 crisis, of hardship funds that were only open to undergraduate students, and the results of this survey indicate that this may still be the case in some universities.

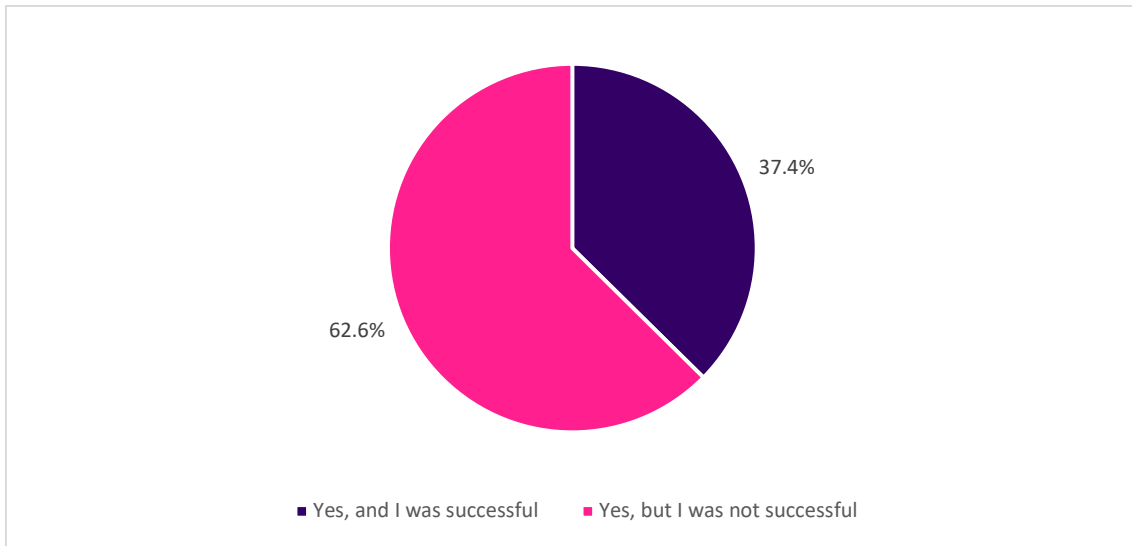
Encouragingly, only a small number of respondents indicated that their university's hardship fund is not open to PGRs – 27 in total – although any number is clearly too many. However, 25% did not know whether their local fund was open to PGRs, and a further 29% did not know whether their university had a hardship fund in the first place. This indicates that, at the very least, universities are not reaching PGRs with information about potentially vital financial support available to them in times of crisis.

Figure 8: Percentage responses to the question 'Does your University have a hardship fund, and is it available to PGRs?' (n = 912)



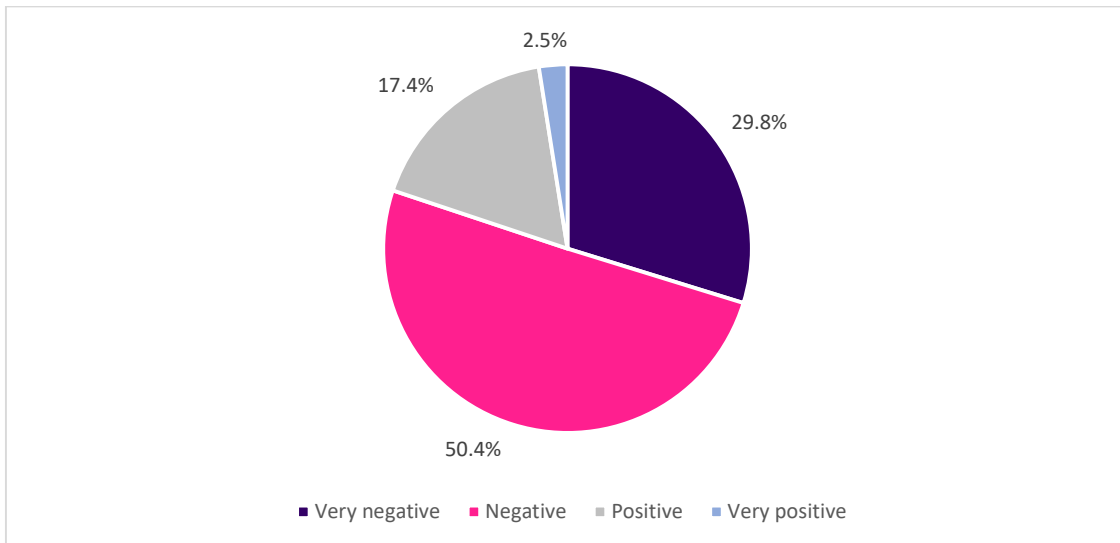
We asked PGRs if they had tried to access their local hardship fund. The vast majority (87%) had not, with 123 individuals reporting that they had. Of those, two-thirds were unsuccessful in securing financial support.

Figure 9: Percentage responses to the question 'Have you tried to access your University's hardship fund?' (n = 123)



We also asked how PGRs had found the experience of applying for hardship funding. Their experience was overwhelmingly poor, overall, with 80.2% of 121 respondents rating it as negative or very negative.

Figure 10: Percentage responses to the question 'If you have tried to access your University's hardship fund, how was this experience?', excluding 'neutral' responses (n = 121)



Limited support

PGRs told us more about their experiences in comments. They most commonly referred to a lack of availability of funds, either because there was no fund at all,

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the overall pot was limited, there was no information about the fund and how to apply, or the amount was insufficient to meet needs.

Hardship fund is only used for exceptional or one off circumstances not cost of living pressures and they made me feel like I was irresponsible

I haven't tried to access the hardship fund because I have seen three other PGRs in my department get rejected from it.

The amount was not enough to cover my rent, which is what I needed help with.

It was a one off £500 during COVID lockdown in 2020, which did next to nothing. No other support since then for international students.

Impossible criteria for access

PGRs also highlighted restrictive rules that meant many were not able to apply, or were rejected when they did. This included funds that are either explicitly unavailable to international PGRs, or that would require an international PGR to take out the maximum available private loans before they would become eligible. Understandably, many are unwilling to go into this high level of debt, and so are ruled ineligible in practice.

As my income is linked to a foreign country scholarship, they argued my external funder should pay for the inflation. And they said it was not their problem if my country's currency plummeted during the pandemic, saying that I should've planned that before applying for the PhD. They wanted me to forecast 2019 that there would be a pandemic and a crisis.

As I am an unfunded US student, in order for me to be able to access any kind of hardship funds I have to max out the available student loans (approx £50k/year). So if I need an emergency £200 or £2000 (that funded and domestic students can get easily), I have to first go into debt, while others without as much debt can access money that possibly comes out of my pocket. I pay £70k in tuition for a PhD and to get any help is basically a non-starter while those who make £50k over that time (funded students) can access what I cant. It's shameful.

I am not eligible for the new hardship fund because of my 'household' income, however, this does not take into account the fact that I only have access to my own (part-time) income and not my partner's, nor the different levels of rent or energy prices, etc in the area that we live for me to actually be able to work to fund my fees.

The university blocked me from accessing the hardship fund because they considered my funding (Commonwealth Scholarship) inadequate and argued that I - and other Commonwealth Scholars - should not have started our degree programs knowing we were underfunded. The Commonwealth Scholarship Commission has refused to raise their stipend in line with inflation.

The answer to this request was that I was an international student, hence I should have proved economic solvency for my visa, and that my boyfriend's salary was high, consequently they wouldn't consider my request. It is important also to bare in mind that international students have limitations in the amount of hours we can work, on addition to the limitations the university defines (which are even more restrictive).

PGRs told us they were ineligible because they were in their fourth year, commonly known as 'writing up' or 'thesis awaited/pending'. This is particularly frustrating given the fourth year is generally unfunded for PGRs previously in receipt of funding. During this fourth year, much of the support PGRs would have previously had access to as students is withdrawn, and they are usually required to pay fees which vary in amount between different institutions. Despite having no income, they are still required to continue working on their thesis, and are not able to change to part-time status if they are not already, meaning any paid work they acquire has to be done alongside the full-time expectations of a PhD. This leaves them particularly financially vulnerable, unable to access much previously available university support, and still unable to access government welfare benefits due to their student status.

I was unable to apply for the hardship fund due to being in thesis pending.

I'm outside my funded period and in my fourth year, and the uni has recently changed their guidance about paid work during the writing up period (you shouldn't do any) so I don't feel encouraged to apply for support from them

Issue funding/salaries that at least match the legal living wage and are paid for the duration of the work, not for a maximum of three years forcing PhD researchers to take on multiple additional jobs just to stay out of poverty all whilst attempting to produce high quality research.

The universities themselves acknowledge that a PhD takes roughly four years by default, and my university has acknowledged that the average time to PhD internally (at my uni) is 4-7 years, yet no one gets funding for more than 3.

PGRs also commonly highlighted that they were excluded by qualifying rules around income and savings. This included funds that required a person's balance to be less than a certain amount, some that ruled out anyone with any savings, some that excluded anyone with a salary from a paid job and some that assessed household income (but not necessarily household outgoings). Anecdotally, we know of [at least one fund](#) that requires applicants to have over a certain amount of money in order to qualify.

My university has a hardship fund that is available to PGRs but if you are also a GTA, your salary (despite totaling less than the real living wage over the course of a year) automatically rules you out for access to the fund.

It was set up that you had to have so little money that I did not qualify. Essentially it's really only there for those in severe poverty. It should absolutely serve those in such circumstances, but means it is underused because it does not allow for applications those those on low income, but had more than a few hundred pounds in savings, for example.

Because they will only pay out the hardship fund if you are in dire need of money right there and then for something pressing. They do not take in to account issues such as feeding your family etc

I have not tried to access the hardship fund as it requests going overdrawn before an application will be considered. I do not think this is fit for purpose and have tried to provide feedback, but no changes have been made yet

Because my financial situation involves a partner and family, the University decided I did not meet the criteria for the hardship fund, showing a complete lack of understanding of mature students, PHRs and others with caring responsibility or financial responsibility for others.

Because I had a source of income, they wouldn't help, even though I was only making £400 a month Couldn't pay rent or bills or fees. Ended up having to ask a parent. Which was humiliating.

Finally, PGRs reported being turned down because the funds did not cover the kind of expenditure they required, including rent, energy, medical bills and university fees. Some had to fall back on friends and family members, while others went into debt. Many PGRs will not have access to financial support from other sources, whether private or personal, and the risk to their health, wellbeing and work is considerable.

They told me it wasn't allowed to be used for fees which is my biggest most pressing concern right now. I am in thousands of pounds debt because of fees. I had to put them all on my credit card. This all puts a lot of pressure on all the other costs I have (food/energy), but my situation isn't bad enough to warrant help. They also had no actual support for me more generally.

I tried to get a discount on my fees as I was homeless, they said that's not an important enough reason...

I have not tried because I was advised that energy bills did not qualify

I was informed I had used the service before and expenses such as mortgage/rent should have been foreseen in advance of taking on a Ph.D. Which of course, they were. However, in my opinion, to foresee such a high cost of living crisis would mean a magnificent crystal ball. The tone of the email I received has ended any future applications to the hardship fund - I am not at University to be humiliated due to a lack of money to get by.

The burden of evidence

The third most-commonly raised problem was the burden of evidence required for hardship fund applications, described as 'intrusive', 'invasive' and generating shame.

PGRs told us that hardship fund applications regularly required several months of bank statements, annotated to justify each expense listed, details of family and/or household incomes (but without necessarily taking into account outgoings), and even personal health information. Some described this as humiliating, anxiety-inducing and embarrassing, and some chose not to proceed with their applications as a result, despite their financial hardship. This must not be taken as an indication of lack of need, but rather evidence of how systems are deliberately constructed to prevent people in need accessing support.

I had to disclose an enormous amount about my circumstances, including details about my mental health and the financial situation of my family (related to increased care burdens), in order to 'make the case' that I was eligible.

I gave up halfway through as the process was very invasive and felt extremely embarrassing, they wanted all of my outgoings / bank statements / bills / debts spanning 3-6 months. I was worried I would be shamed for having such little money, and spending on "unnecessary things". It is hard enough to reach out and admit you're struggling, but the fund felt like I was being shamed and embarrassed because of my situation. So I didn't go forward with the application, especially with the possibility I would still be rejected.

I have started the hardship fund process, but I found it extremely invasive. Sending details of bank accounts, and those of my unemployed partner is humiliating. I decided it wasn't worth the damage to my mental health to go through the process.

Criticised every bank transaction and claimed they were unnecessary when they weren't

It's pretty humiliating to have to send in all your bank statements to the University to scrutinise. Especially as someone in debt, especially as a disabled student who sometimes relies on food delivery as I otherwise wouldn't be able to eat, and feeling judged for that.

The evidence you have to provide is extensive so acquiring it is very stressful and anxiety-inducing. You have to account for nearly every payment and submit multiple accounts, as well as reasons why you're accessing the fund. The process makes you feel small: like you're getting out the begging bowl. You're also given helpful 'advice' about budgeting and getting a part-time job before you apply, which is very patronising when it's a last resort to apply. Plus it takes ages to review applications and pay out funds so isn't ideal for emergency hardship.

Universities should not be making their students, or their employees, feel ashamed of their personal circumstances, especially when hardship is the result of a system that provides low or no pay for research work, and expects fees in return. Hardship funds should not have to exist for any student, including PGRs who should be paid adequately and fairly for the labour they undertake for universities. While they do exist, the evidence collected here demonstrates they are in urgent need of reform.

Systems problems

Finally, a number of PGRs reported problems with systems for administering hardship funds. This included severe delays, lack of response, information or explanation for decisions, long and complicated processes and a system that does not understand the personal circumstances of PGRs.

Apart from the obvious humiliation in disclosing bank statements and other personal misfortunes to a general email address of strangers, the staff involved apparently ignored my query over their calculation for over six weeks during which time my health deteriorated considerably. In the event they had taken a rather over-optimistic reading of my figures which had to be recalculated when my query was eventually dealt with. Despite losing my father to Covid & this causing an extension to my PhD project beyond the 5 year funding period allowed by the Doctoral Student Loan, have been told I will not qualify to apply to the fund next academic year. As things stand, I do not know how I will fund myself to complete my PhD beyond this date without access to such assistance. As a part-time student my extension date will fall outside the time limit for the designated extra funding for PGRs who have been adversely affected by Covid-19.

The university expects me to receive more family support than I do, and this is not within my power to change.

I get very frustrated during a cost of living crisis that a University would take into account household income, and means test against this whilst not taking into consideration the outgoings and having the responsibility of a house and 3 children to care and provide for and the unforeseen costs that arise every month. For example most days I can't afford to use my car or get a bus to university as I have to prioritise spending, and it is more cost effect to stay at home and work. However, this increases my electricity and heating costs. The system of hardship funds etc needs urgent review especially the issue of assessing applications against household income.

Pockets of good practice

A small number of PGRs reported good experiences when accessing hardship funds, albeit sometimes mixed with the kinds of systems problems described above, and often for limited amounts of money.

I was awarded some money during covid from the hardship fund which involved a massive long form and collating bank statements etc all for £500. We also were giving a cost of living grant before christmas which we just

had to write a statement as to why we needed it which was much easier to claim. The difference was one was arranged by the Graduate School and the hardship fund was arranged through the student support

It was quite a simple process, students could apply for up to £200, we were required to write a paragraph of why we required the money and were given a sum of money dependent on how much they felt it was needed. I was given £160.

I applied for some money to buy an office chair during lockdown via the hardship fund and it was very easy- just an application, no need to demonstrate income or need

PGRs who are self funded (like myself) were offered a one time amount of £500 which has helped cover about a month of energy bills and some food. We were offered this amount around early October but did not actually receive it until late November. I worry about how other PGRs are handling this.

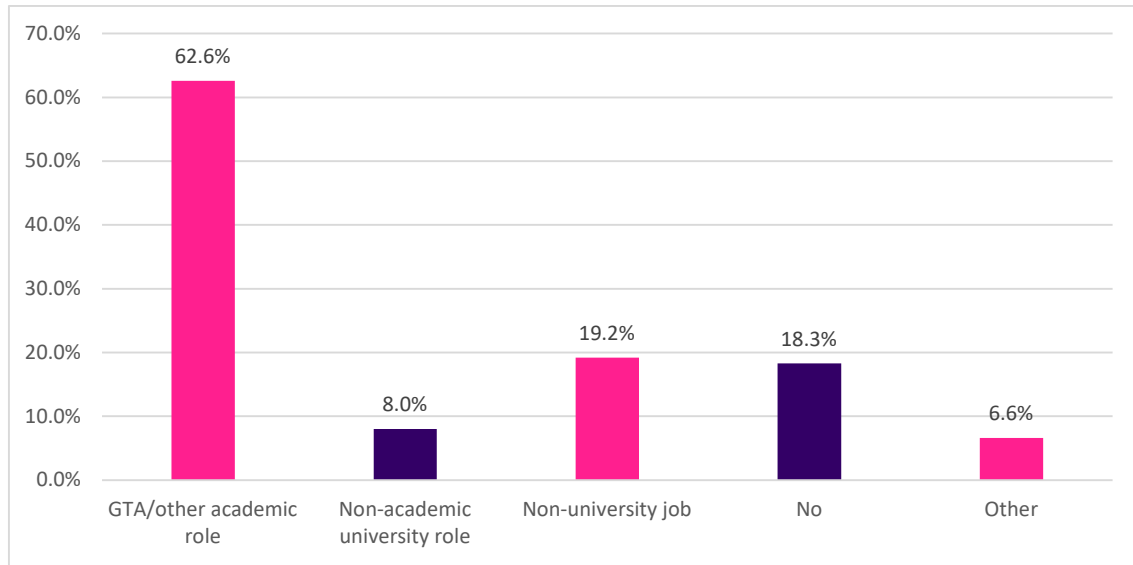
It is important to acknowledge these as they demonstrate that more positive, helpful and compassionate approaches by universities are possible, and can make a real difference to PGRs in need of support.

Work alongside the PhD

Almost 80% of PGRs told us they had some form of paid work alongside their PhD, and some had multiple jobs. This is unsurprising given the low rate of pay for PhD scholarships, the number of self-funded or unfunded PhD places, and the pressure of rising costs.

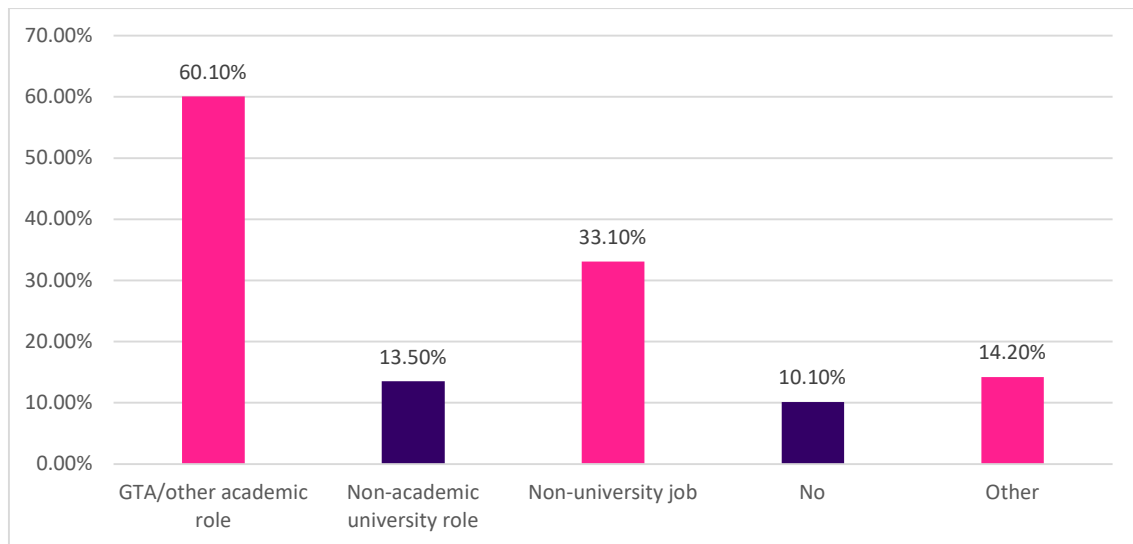
As Figure 11 shows, PGRs work in academic roles, non-academic roles and in roles outside of the university.

Figure 11: Percentage responses to the question 'Do you work alongside your PhD?' (n=912)



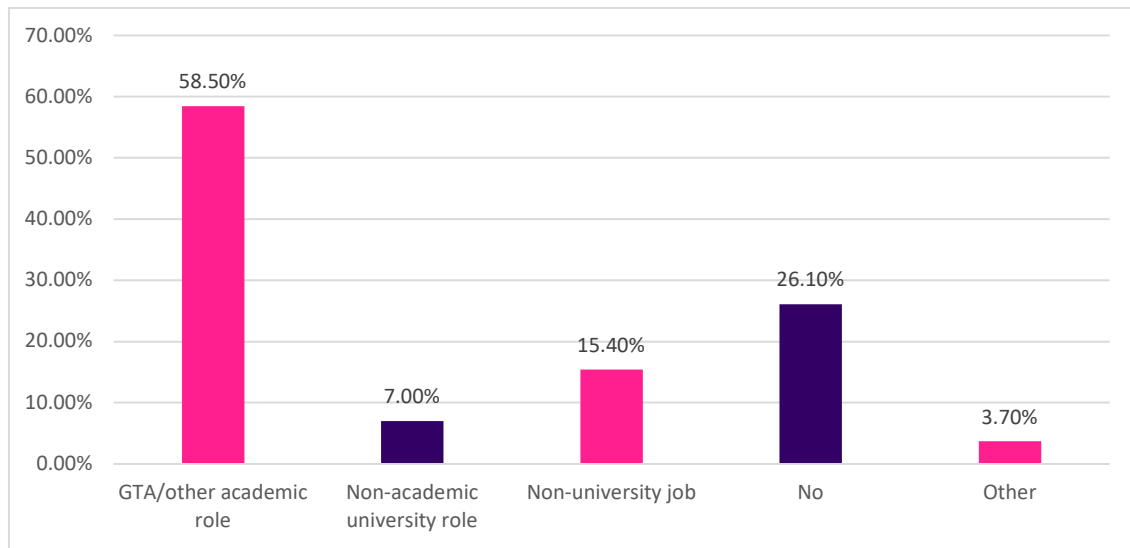
Only 10% of self-funded/unfunded PGRs told us they did not have another job alongside the PhD, and the balance of work was slightly different compared to respondents overall, as Figure 12 shows.

Figure 12: Percentage responses to the question 'Do you work alongside your PhD?' (Self-funded/unfunded respondents) (n=148)



In contrast, the proportion of international/migrant PGRs who did not work alongside their PhD was much higher than respondents overall, in all likelihood because of visa restrictions, and possibly greater difficulty in securing jobs than their UK colleagues.

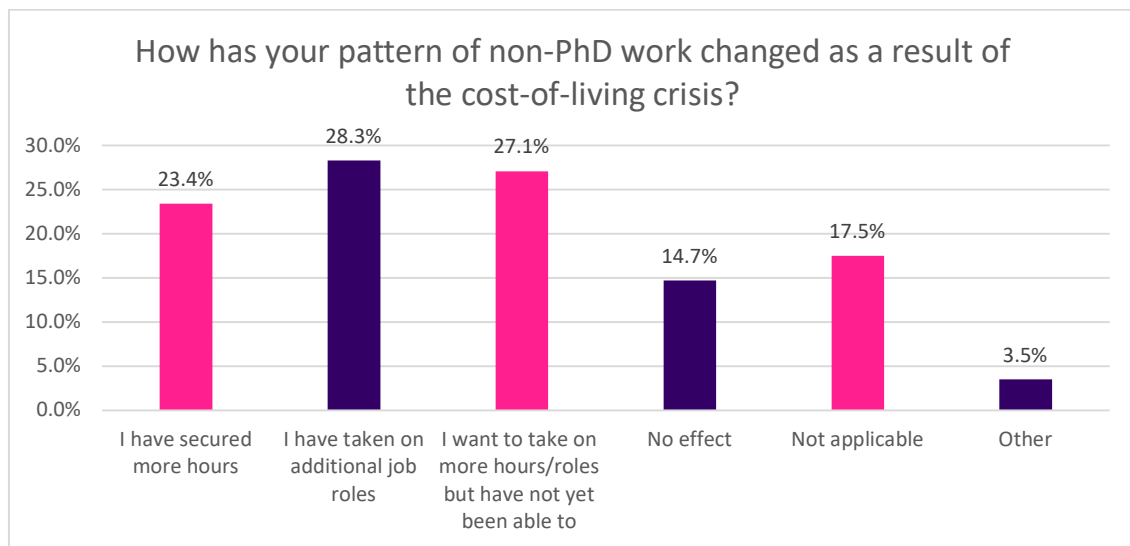
Figure 13: Percentage responses to the question 'Do you work alongside your PhD? (International/migrant respondents) (n=272)



Changing patterns of work in response to crisis

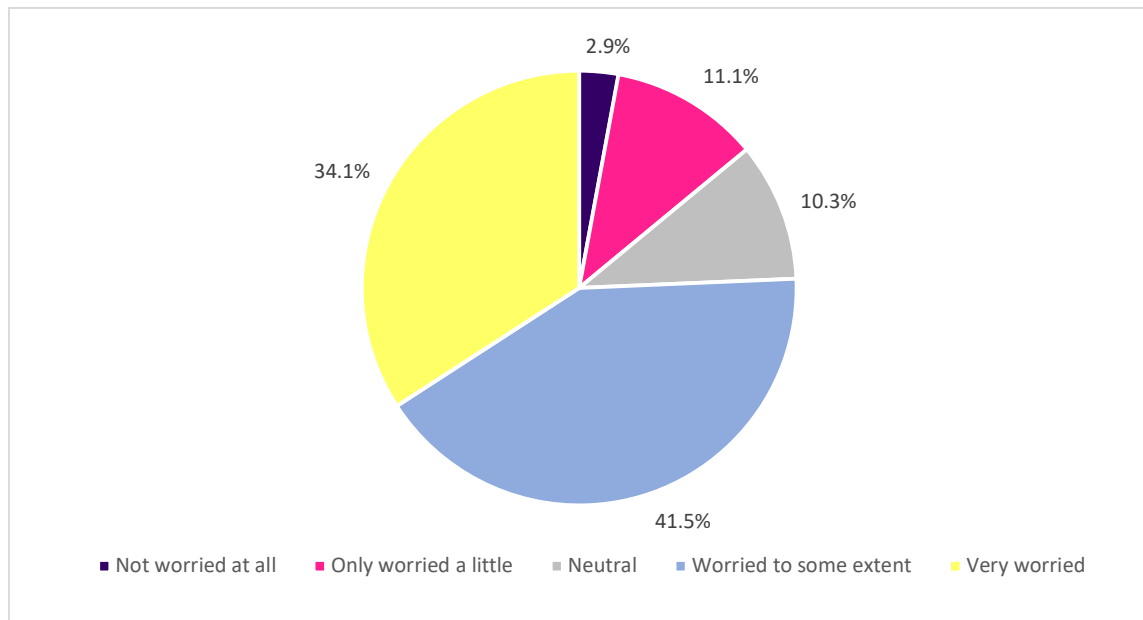
Many PGRs reported they had either already taken on extra work, or were looking to do so in response to rising cost pressures, as Figure 14 shows.

Figure 14: Percentage responses to the question 'How has your pattern of non-PhD work changed as a result of the cost-of-living crisis?' (n=897)



They also told us they were worried about the impact this would have on their PhD work – the principle reason why they were at university. Over a third told us they were very worried about being able to balance their PhD with other work responsibilities, and 42% said they were worried to some extent.

Figure 15: Percentage responses to the question 'To what extent are you worried about being able to balance your PhD with other work responsibilities?' (n=882)



PGRs should be paid enough that they do not have to take on second and third jobs to make ends meet. Ultimately, we want to see a system where all PGRs are able to focus on their PhD because they are paid a liveable wage, and are able to take advantage of a range of opportunities to help begin their academic careers.

I only recently started my PhD but I am already contributing to my research unit's outputs and working long hours. I also have to work part-time 20 hours a week in order to make ends meet. I am therefore of the opinion that PhD researchers should be paid a salary which is sufficient to live off of without requiring additional jobs. In my unit, I've noticed that PhD researchers who are from affluent backgrounds/families tend to work full time on their PhD only as they either live with their parents or are financially supported by them. In contrast, I am from a working class background where my parents cannot afford to support me financially and living at home is not an option. I work at least 30hrs a week in my PhD and 20hrs a week in part time work. If universities/funders do nothing right now to support PhD researchers through this crisis, they will still have plenty of PhD researchers but they will be from increasingly narrow, privileged backgrounds.

In the meantime, for those who want or need to take on additional paid work such as teaching, research and non-academic university roles, universities must ensure they are making opportunities available equitably, and that all paid work is offered on the basis of a formal contract, with clear and guaranteed hours, pay commensurate to workload, and the same entitlements as any other member of staff. Restrictions on working hours for international/migrant PGRs should be

removed, not only so that migrant PGRs are able to earn enough to live, but also so that they are able to take advantage of the same career-developing opportunities, including work placements, visiting lectureships and more.

Messages for Government, universities and funders

We asked PGRs what one thing they would tell government, universities and/or funders to do to support them during the cost-of-living crisis. Responses most commonly referenced raising pay, increasing other financial support, offering help with housing including rent caps, extending rights and entitlements, including access to state benefits, to all PGRs, cutting fees and addressing the impact of heavy and stressful workloads coupled with financial stress on health and wellbeing.

Increase pay

The most common answer from PGRs was to increase pay. This included both pay for PhD stipends and pay for other university employment, such as teaching, research and non-academic roles. In the case of work outside of the PhD, it also included making sure PGRs got paid for *all* of their work, without having to do preparation and other extra work unpaid. Many comments also highlighted the inflexible length of funding, often for only three years, when there is a general acceptance that PhDs can take four years to complete, especially where people have to work alongside.

Just paying us more. The anxiety and depression I get from knowing I'll be spending the next 4 years scraping by and not saving barely anything has made me consider dropping out multiple times

Ensure that I am paid in full and in a timely manner for the work that I do. When factoring the unpaid overtime required for my GTA work, I make less than minimum wage.

Increase PhD stipends to be more in line with a typical graduate salary.

Ensure that stipends have to rise with the rate of inflation. Also make GTA hourly pay increase in line with inflation, and end the casualisation of GTAs for courses where they have a regular set of hours so that they can be contracted and be sure that they have these hours. Also actually account for illness, rather than just including sick pay in the original hourly rate - I have missed many hours from illness and then lost out on hundreds of pounds as I cannot time sheet those hours.

Universities could pay us accurately and on time and not treat students like their stipend is "pocket money" and take our concerns about needing to survive on this money seriously. The government could fine the universities when they fail to pay us.

Stop paying the stipend in 3 month blocks, pay it monthly to allow better managing of money. Pay us more when we teach. We do a lot of unpaid hours.

Contribute more towards PhD stipends, PGRs are expected to work more hours than required at stipends that do not reflect the amount of hours put in. The stipend itself should be liveable to not require an extra job on the side.

Pay a better stipend which recognises the experience and work that many post graduate researchers do. Recognise pgrs as employees

Make PGR a staff role, or in the meantime, fund for four years instead of three, and make funding extensions longer and easier to get.

Make us staff, increase the stipend, facilitate contract extensions for those who need it. To provide payment for self-funding PGRs as they are not immune to the cost of living crisis.

A stipend uplift relative to a PhD students circumstances. I work so much alongside a full time PhD to keep my home and my children alive that I don't have the time to actually write my thesis.

Additional stipend payments, the recent increase brought the stipend to a barely affordable level but does not solve the long term issue of underfunding for PhD students

increase hourly pay for TA work and RA work - also consider funding for 4 years as that is actually how long it takes - it is great that they increased the stipend but there will still be up to a year when I have no funding

Keep increasing stipends with inflation would be a great help but also to review the amounts - Why are they so low to begin with? The work PGRs do is valuable, it contributes to the wellbeing and progress of society, and the people doing the work are hard working, educated adults, why are we paid so little? So many incredible minds wont entertain the idea of doing a PhD because the thought of living for 3-4 years on such low pay is impossible.

Pay more basic salary. On my Graduate Teaching salary I earn £14,000 for "part time hours", and my university continually adds more responsibility onto my role to take the pressure of standard academic contract teaching staff. This creates a lot of pressure. I now work two extra jobs as an Hourly Paid Lecturer elsewhere otherwise I cannot afford rent and the travel to work. I am now leaving to take up a full time Job and switching to become a part time phd student because this is economically more viable, but will make it significantly harder to do my phd. My university claims it has no funds to increase our wage, but has recently put out adverts for 2 new professorial roles, and several other teaching staff.

Pay us more without having to ask for the hardship fund. To have to provide all of your incomings and outgoings for three months on top of other deeply personal information is degrading. We deserve to live in houses we can heat and environments which are safe without having to contemplate dropping out.

Adopt the funding model used by many European countries (e.g. Germany, Sweden, Netherlands): PhD researchers are salaried employees who are paid in a way that reflects their skills and roles. Review pay every year in line with inflation and maintain constructive dialogue with trade unions.

Provide a stipend for self-funded PhD students so we can focus on our research. Our studies contribute to the university. PhD student loans are ridiculous - there is no way the PGR student loan can cover both the living costs and university fees.

Offer other financial support

PGRs also told us they needed other forms of financial support to help them continue their PhDs during the current crisis. This included access to hardship funds, one-off cost-of-living payments, subsidized travel or support with travel costs, financial support for training, conferences and other research costs, and more support towards energy bills. This is important for all PGRs, but especially for those who are self-funded/unfunded and/or are restricted by visa conditions from taking on extra paid work.

More financial support to attend trainings and conferences - fees for those are going up and cost of travel is going up but the grants aren't, and they're a big part of the PhD that is just the first to be dropped when money is tight.

Provide structured financial help for students who are really struggling, particularly those who are self funded. For them this must be a bigger nightmare than they ever anticipated.

Provide easy access to funds e.g. through a one off payment or application based funds for hardship (ring fenced for PhDs and with fair criteria)

Provide monthly cost of living payments towards necessities such as food/rent/energy/transport to campus Provide additional financial support for disabled PGR's and PGR's with caring responsibilities who may struggle to work and/or earn enough to pay bills and undertake their PhD

More initial financial help when starting, making sure we have all the equipment/supplies we need, extra support for international PGRs with settling in the country (i.e. transferring prescriptions, getting a bank account, phone plan, apartments for rent).

Help unfunded international students with a hardship fund. We are struggling and isolated

Give PGRs the same travel subsidies that they give full time staff (at my university Lecturers and full time research staff are given a subsidy on bus passes but the lower paid PGRs don't get it and are still expected to be in person and do teaching roles.)

Communicate availability of hardship funds amongst all PGRs and be clear about eligibility.

Funders need to increase the funding limits for research events and activities (e.g. limits on travel/accommodation/food/venue costs when applying for funding to put on conferences and events) - the current quotes we are receiving are higher than these limits, and we cannot budget within the guidelines provided to us.

Provide support and funding to self-funded students/students funding via the doctoral loan scheme. We are typically overlooked but often experience more financial pressure than those supported with funding. We are able to fund our degrees but costs such as travel, conference fees, and books are often outside of our reach and for PhD researchers, especially those who need to use archives (especially archives located internationally), this can be catastrophic.

Develop an emergency one-off payment for unfunded PhD students with or without academic extensions to finish their programme. Universities need to understand that a substantial number of students went into extensions because of the impact of the pandemic and more recently due to the cost of living crisis.

Help with housing

PGRs specifically singled out housing costs as highly challenging. They mentioned a lack of available student and subsidized housing, poor quality housing, high rents and lack of rent caps, and lack of affordable housing within range of the university of study.

The rent increasing price alongside the energy bills is the most difficult expense to face. Currently, the government help with the energy bills is being of big help. However, I am concerned for when the government stop giving us this help. Also, rent is increasing every year and it gets more difficult to find a place to stay for a reasonable price. Any economic help that can be applied to the above issues is welcome.

Additional housing support as renting privately in my city is extremely difficult on the low wages given by the part time nature of GTA work

affordable student housing that's in good condition. Where I live the options are either insanely overpriced or unlivable.

Extend rights and entitlements

PGRs called on universities, government and funders to extend rights and entitlements to PhD researchers, including access to rights, conditions and payments afforded to members of staff, and access to state benefits. Many PGRs noted this was particularly important for disabled PGRs, PGRs with caring responsibilities, international/migrant PGRs, working class PGRs and other groups which are already underrepresented in postgraduate research, and for whom it will only become more difficult to enter into academia unless serious reforms are made. Others also pointed out that self-funded/unfunded PGRs needed extra support.

A number of PGRs commented that they had been excluded from cost-of-living payments made to other members of staff by their universities, because they were only temporary employees or on low teaching hours. Others highlighted that they weren't entitled to sick pay, maternity pay or other paid parental leave. They also highlighted that there is no extra funding component for those with childcare costs, who are also excluded from government childcare support. Likewise, as students, PGRs are excluded from receiving Carer's Allowance.

There have, rightly, been many discussions across the Higher Education sector about how to achieve greater equity in the academia, and how to open up the Academy to currently underrepresented groups, including Black researchers, disabled researchers and more. Many of the problems of access begin at an early stage in education, and are compounded by systems at the beginning of academic careers, including PhDs, that mean only those with independent wealth, knowledge of system norms, and existing support networks, are able to survive and succeed. This must change if we are serious about making academia more equitable.

As a mature student with 9 year old twins and a disabled husband who I care for alongside completing a self funded phd part time whilst working as a peer academic writing mentor and graduate teaching assistant, it is a lot to juggle so some extra money to relieve anxiety towards energy bills, food etc would give me more security and enable me to better focus on my phd.

My university has so far refused to give PhD students the cost of living payment as we are not staff (even if we work as PGTAs). However, we all found out about the cost of living payment because we are on several mailing lists for staff only.

PhD researchers are workers and we should be given the same rights as any other workers, especially SICK PAY.

The Graduate teaching fellowship contract seems to leave us vulnerable as it can be changed (no. Of teaching hours) without consultation, however we are not considered employees so seem to have less rights. It also leaves us in a difficult position if we want to respect the industrial action taking place but we are not balloted or considered employees.

I'm currently pregnant with twins and will soon have to suspend my study for a year. As someone who's on visa, I'm not eligible for any government support and I wish the funding can support maternity pay.

Students who are parents need more consideration/discounts/rebates on things like childcare, or to be given an extra childcare allowance. The cost of school lunches, school trips, and childcare have all increased along with other cost-of-living increases.

I'm disabled and this results in increased costs for many things in my life, which I'm currently not able to meet. I physically cannot work the extra hours needed to fund this and am not included in the govt help as I am a student and not on benefits. I'm worried I may end up homeless or have to drop out due to high housing costs and the university is not being helpful.

PhD is a job, we are making valuable contributions to the "product" of science: publications. We don't have basic worker rights which can be really serious if anything unexpected happens in life. Like long term illnesses etc. We have nothing to fall back on.

I have requested support for maternity pay as I am currently trying to have a baby, and have been told there is none available from my funder and the University won't help. I feel like this is massively contributing to inequality as female PGR students will have to choose between their career or having a child. This was less of an issue before the cost of living crisis, but now it is almost impossible to take the time off with no support.

I am a disabled PhD student. My scholarship has finished, but I've been granted an unfunded extension. With my disability I would have been eligible for ESA, but I am not allowed to claim universal credit because I am a student. So I am entirely reliant on my savings, support from my family, and if those run out university hardship funds. I am also not eligible for cost-of-living payments available to other people on a low income, because I cannot apply for universal credit. If I am forced out of my degree because of this, it will waste all the money that the government has spent on my training so far.

There was a separate cost-of-living payment offered to hourly-paid academic staff (which is the contract I'm employed under). However it required a certain number of hours worked to be eligible. I didn't meet the criteria as I don't work that many hours due to being a student as well. So I was unable to access it. I wish it would have been a fractional payment adjusted to hours worked.

International disabled students are having particularly hard time as we need to heat our properties more than others and engaging in additional works takes a high toll on our bodies plus we don't have access to public funds so we need to pay for support services like personal assistance.

The current situation is bad for everyone; but it is much worse for working-class students. Special funding opportunities need to be created for them.

They should also introduce family/dependents allowance for PGR students who have children/dependents

My biggest worry is that the government doesn't treat PhD students as staff which means that I am unable to claim UC [Universal Credit] (as my stipend is counted as unearned income, is therefore taken £ for £ from my entitlement) so I am unable to access support that working parents get. For example, tax free childcare or UC childcare top ups. Also it means that my household needs to pay council tax as my partner isn't working (he's a PT student and looks after our younger daughter) but cannot claim council tax support meaning we have to pay council tax out of my stipend... I wish the government would offer some more childcare support to PGRs rather than only supporting undergraduate students

Make us eligible for the forms of government support available to others on low incomes (e.g. benefits)

Give help towards childcare - PGRs with these costs are not eligible for tax free childcare or the schemes available for undergraduates as we aren't funded through Student finance or tax payers.

My university have provided a number of 'perks' to staff such as additional paid annual leave, and a cost of living payment but as a PGR we are exempt from receiving this. It's frustrating because we fall between the support for undergraduates and the support for staff.

Allow me to apply for universal credit now that my scholarship has finished, or otherwise allow students access to the things that UC passports access to, e.g. cost of living payments for energy bills.

Allow international students (tier 4, student visa) to work more hours and work as HMRC-Registered freelancers so we can take on more work and freelance work as needed

Cut fees

Many comments called for cuts in fees, or removing fees altogether. As mentioned previously, PGRs can be subject to a range of different fees at different stages of their PhDs, and this can vary considerably from university to university. International/migrant PGRs are subject to fees far in excess of domestic researchers, and are also required to pay significant fees for visa costs, including immigration health surcharge (IHS). We support calls to abolish all student fees, and in the meantime we must develop a better understanding of the level of fees PGRs are expected to pay in different parts of the country, and the impact of these on their work and wellbeing.

Cancel study fees - we are doing the research the outcomes of which the university loves to promote and put its name on, so why should we be paying fees in the first place?

visa should be waived by the funding bodies instead of being students' responsibility - £2.5k (or even more) is too much

Drop the continuation fees for late thesis submissions.

Discount/reimbursement of fees would be the biggest help. That would save ~£4500 a year to pay for other things.

Help with immigration visa/Surcharge would be so useful. This is a huge amount of money even as a funded student I had to raise on my own, which could have been used for cost of living.

Address work-life imbalances and long-term wellbeing

Finally, PGRs highlighted the impact of financial stress, low pay, high workloads and poor conditions on both their immediate and long-term wellbeing. Several commented that they had been or were considering seriously whether it was feasible to complete their PhDs, given the considerable pressures they were facing.

This system and situation, even before the cost-of-living crisis, is wasting research talent in the UK. We need proper investment in research at the very beginning of careers, to ensure that researchers are able to complete their projects to a high degree of quality, without sacrificing people's health, wellbeing and financial security from now into the future.

There's a lot of well meaning talk about PGR wellbeing and communities but, in my experience, very little effective action and support. PGRs get all the negatives of both being students and staff, with few of the benefits, and we're often the last people to be thought about during university strategic planning.

It isn't a matter of just paying your living expenses - surviving and not socialising or having hobbies because you can't afford them isn't living, and universities don't seem to realise this for PhD students - there's definitely a culture of your PhD being your whole life.

LISTEN to PhD students when we tell them what the problems are and what we need. Stop giving us resilience training or well-meaning but ineffectual advice, and put in place SIMPLE and ACCESSIBLE systems of targeted and effective support.

Simply by making us aware that support is available. When filling out this, I had to search for a few things as it wasn't something I knew immediately

Sometimes simple basic things make a difference - having access to decent kitchen facilities and a common area to sit and eat within our department

would simultaneously save money otherwise spent on take-away coffees/food and provide better opportunities for informal networking between staff and students! Also a system of re-distributing IT equipment within University so that if staff are upgrading their set-up, unused laptops, monitors etc. could be passed on to PGRs free of charge.

Experiencing precarity at such an early stage of academic career is highly discouraging. It sends a signal that we cannot afford to make any life plans. If one wishes to become an academic in the UK, one must sacrifice dreams of home ownership or sustaining a large family. The question that's before MPs is simple: how do you want to define the terms of social contract for researchers and teachers who boost the country's R&D standing and sustain its reputation as a world-leading provider of higher education?

The current situation has tipped my mental health over the edge. I don't care about my research anymore because I am scared my children and I will lose our home. The department at Bristol generally treats PGRs like lower life forms anyway, so I don't see the point anymore.

It's just ... stress I don't need. I'm currently in the last stretch of my PhD, and working out what I want to do next and being able to consider to take the time off I need for health reasons whilst existing is getting more expensive is in turn making my health worse. It's definitely a contributing factor to the rising feeling that staying in academia isn't sustainable and that maybe I should get out before it eats me alive. I love being a husk of a human being!!! I'm just so tired.

I am well aware the mental health of a lot of PhD students is directly impacted by the lack of funding and support available to us. I think at the start of the PhD you think 'I can manage', but after three years on such minimal money it does definitely begin to take its toll. I fully believe that doing a PhD will become much more challenging for those from disadvantaged backgrounds. I am aware of those more fortunate than myself who get houses or rent paid for by their parents, this makes the PhD experience a lot more comfortable than those that do not have this privilege. I think there will be an even greater shift in the demographic of people who are applying for PhD opportunities, less black and ethnic minorities and those from working class backgrounds, as the impact doing a PhD has financially makes it very difficult to support yourself and family members.

It is hard to work our best when we have such high levels of financial stress, in the short term and the long term. Pensions are something we need to think about for PGRs, we sacrifice years of pension contributions to undertake a PhD which has long term implications for us financially beyond the struggles of surviving on stipends.

Financial hardship is a genuine concern for me when thinking about whether or not I can finish my PhD. I can finish from an academic standpoint, but

have regularly considered that I may not be able to finish because I may have to withdraw in order to earn more money. This is not an acceptable situation to be putting people in, when I entered the PhD under the guise of pursuing a "fully funded PhD". Fully funded surely means providing someone enough money to live on, including supporting any dependents and having a reasonable standard of living.

It's exhausting working all hours under the sun and while juggling family commitments and I've decided not to continue in academia for the sole reason that it seems impossible to me to be a mother and work in higher education without doing a terrible job at home or at work or sacrificing my mental health.

Recommendations

These recommendations are based on what PGRs told us, and the evidence presented in this report. A longer list of urgent needs for PGRs is available in our previous report, [Getting a Better Deal for PGRs](#).

- Increase all PhD stipends, across all funders, to meet at least the real living wage
- Reform PhD stipend systems so that annual rises stay at least in line with inflation
- Increase government funding for PhD scholarships overall, so that more scholarships can be offered to fund PhD research
- Introduce emergency financial support for PGRs facing issues with payment and payroll
- Introduce financial support for PGRs to help with first-month costs, including relocation, rent deposits and other living costs. Consider changing the payment system to pay a month in advance, rather than arrears
- End the practice of paying PGRs quarterly, and ensure all PGRs are paid a monthly wage
- Reform hardship funds across the board to:
 - Increase access for all PGRs
 - Reduce the burden of evidence
 - Ensure international/migrant PGRs are able to claim
 - Reform or remove means testing
 - Better communicate with PGRs about their availability
- Ensure all funded PGRs, including international/migrant PGRs, have access to paid sick leave, paid bereavement leave, paid maternity, paternity, adoptive, shared parental and other carers leave, and paid holiday
- Extend access to government benefits available to employees, including but not limited to Universal Credit and the full range of disability, childcare and carer's support and allowances

- Introduce a comprehensive package of financial support for self-funded/unfunded PGRs, building on grants available through Research England during the COVID-19 pandemic
- Abolish the Immigration Health Surcharge fee, and provide support for other visa costs
- Remove restrictions on permissible work hours for PGRs on Tier 4 visas
- Abolish fees for PGRs, and in the meantime equalize fees for international PGRs
- Provide increased support for research costs for PGRs, including but not limited to conferences, travel, equipment and training
- Investigate the variability of fees across universities for different stages of PhD study, including but not limited to application fees, continuation or 'writing up' fees, thesis submission fees and viva examination fees.

For more information, please contact Ellie Munro, UCU PGRs as Staff Campaign Co-Lead, at emunro@ucu.org.uk.