



**UK Research
and Innovation**



New Deal for Postgraduate Research: Analysis of responses to Call for Input

**A report by Pye Tait Consulting for
UK Research and Innovation**

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Executive Summary

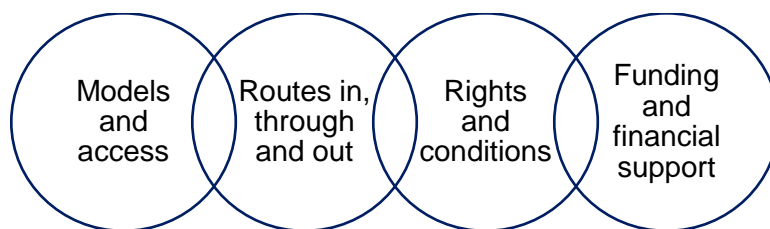
UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) is a non-departmental public body established in April 2018 and sponsored by the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT). It brings together the seven research councils, Research England, and Innovate UK.

UKRI is the largest single funder of postgraduate research (PGR) training in the UK, financially supporting around a quarter of the UK's postgraduate research students.

In 2020, the government set out its ambition to grow the UK's research talent pipeline by creating a 'New Deal' for funding postgraduate research.¹ The R&D People and Culture Strategy in 2021 that followed set out how a New Deal for postgraduate research would be developed including undertaking a UKRI-led cross-sector consultation about how students are supported and developed both practically and financially.²

This report sets out findings from the UKRI led Call for Input (CFI) consultation following an objective and comprehensive analysis of all responses received. The CFI asked respondents what they felt the purpose of contemporary PGR should be, before asking what work should be prioritised around four focus areas (detailed below) and gathering thoughts on future engagement relating to the New Deal.

Four focus areas



Approach to the Call for Input and analysis

UKRI launched the CFI in February 2022 (ending in May 2022) to gather input, perspectives, and experiences from across the research and innovation community. Participation by anyone interested or involved in research and innovation was encouraged to give everyone the opportunity to participate with access being open to all individuals and organisations/groups (including postgraduate researchers, supervisors, support staff, universities, industry, representative bodies etc.). As a result, the views expressed in the report cannot be viewed as representative of the research and innovation population as a whole, rather the small subset who responded to the CFI.

In total, 422 complete responses were received of which just over one quarter (27% or 112) were submitted by organisations or groups and just under three quarters (73% or 310) were from individuals including 194 students. Around 58% of organisational responses were from HEIs, from across all English regions, Wales, and Scotland, and who, between them, exhibit variations in their percentage income from research activities.

Pye Tait Consulting, an independent research agency, developed a coding framework and then checked it for inter- and intra-coding consistency. This was finalised in collaboration with UKRI. Responses were then coded according to the agreed framework to identify frequency of themes overall. The main report is structured according to the four focus areas listed above interwoven with suggestions for action put forward by respondents that might be considered.

¹ BEIS, 2020, UK Research and Development Roadmap

² BEIS, 2021, R&D people and culture strategy

Key findings

This section summarises the key themes arising, and acknowledges instances where there is a range of views on certain topics. As a consequence of overlap and synergy between the findings across the four focus areas, ten core themes have been created and detailed below. More nuanced information and additional views raised by fewer respondents are detailed in the main report.

1. REVIEWING FUNDING



Respondents from all backgrounds raise concern about the level of the UKRI stipend current to the time the CFI was live (February to May 2022). Around one third note how PGR students are struggling to make ends meet as the cost of living escalates, and as inflation in the UK accelerates. The current level provides insufficient financial support and directly impacts students' wellbeing.

After the CFI closed, UKRI announced an increase in its minimum student stipend by 10% on the previously announced level for the 2022 to 2023 academic year.

Around one quarter of respondents discussed the level of broader financial support available to PGR students. They suggested remuneration could be increased, funding periods extended, and wider funding arrangements reviewed. Individuals and organisations raised concerns about the perception that stipends and funding options are "one size fits all". Respondents suggest funding options should be flexible and account for personal circumstances, including caring responsibilities, disabilities, geographical location, and international students.

Funding disparities between disciplines and institutions are seen as a limiting factor for PGR accessibility to social science and arts and humanities subjects. Respondents stress the need for a balanced approach to funding different disciplines and institutions.

2. INCREASED FLEXIBILITY IN PGR MODELS



Besides flexibility in funding, around one fifth of respondents would welcome greater flexibility in PGR models and suggest several elements that would benefit from review, to ensure that individuals from all backgrounds (including those with caring duties or disabilities) can complete their studies and are fully supported to do so.

In particular, there is concern that PGR is not sufficiently flexible to accommodate part-time or distance learners and many feel this should be explored to support new PGR students, and to aid pre-existing students who may be struggling. There is also concern that there is little flexibility in duration of funding, with many stating three years is not long enough for a doctorate.

3. ACCESSIBILITY AND OUTREACH



There is recognition that more work is required to ensure that PGR programmes are truly accessible to any individual, regardless of their background. Over one third suggest widening access routes to help boost representation (ordered from most to least frequently mentioned) of minority ethnic students, those with disabilities, those with mental health issues, as well as women, neurodivergent students, and mature students. Respondents believe that improved recruitment practices and wider promotion of PGR programmes is needed, including more information for any potential prospective student, irrespective of background. Some comments reference a need for EDI training among students and higher education staff.

Respondents from all backgrounds believe that greater clarity is warranted to set out expectations of what is involved in: PGR funding applications, decision-making processes, and actual PGR study. This increased transparency of opportunities, and evaluation criteria, will – respondents argue – allow for a more informed and less biased application process.

4. CONSISTENCY IN SUPERVISION



Supervisor relationships are key to students' PGR experience, but issues are raised by around one in five respondents relating to the perceived need for training and support for supervisors to ensure students are protected and treated consistently. Such training, suggested by students and supervisors themselves, could cover the topics of EDI, mental health and wellbeing, misconduct, and bullying and harassment, to raise awareness of issues and ensure students are treated equitably.

Consideration could also, it is suggested, be given to instances where PGR students have multiple supervisors, to ensure there is accountability and support in place.

5. BOOSTING SUPPORT



The physical health and mental health and wellbeing of PGR students is a key concern noted throughout the CFI. Over one quarter of respondents advocate for better support for PGR students and for parents and carers undertaking PGR as well as increased mental health support, suggesting that the current levels of support can have a negative impact.

Individuals and organisations would like to see a more robust system of support in place possibly through UKRI creating and promoting formal networks of support run by institutions and/or by students themselves. Around one in six respondents suggest that working conditions such as work/life balance and working hours within academia for PGR students should be examined.

Consideration should be given to individuals experiencing changing circumstances during their period of study. Greater consistency across the sector is welcome, to ensure that the support available for, and being provided to, people from all backgrounds is on an equitable footing.

6. SUPPORT FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS



Increased support for international students – both financial and non-financial – is suggested by around one in ten respondents (inc. both HEIs and students). Such additional support could assist with onboarding and bureaucratic issues (e.g. visas) to ensure they have access to the same opportunities as domestic students.

7. PREPARING FOR THE FUTURE



While the preparation for, and potential employability within, either academic or non-academic roles is viewed by respondents as one primary goal for modern doctorate courses, around one quarter of respondents perceive the quality of careers information, advice and guidance to be currently insufficient, either in terms of its content, or being too heavily focused on academic routes rather than other options across the research and innovation system. Suggestions include higher quality careers information, advice, and guidance, earlier on in PGR students' period of study, to give a broader overview of possible options.

One quarter of respondents, comprising mostly students, believe it should be commonplace for transferable skills to be developed to increase their employability. This includes equipping

students with high quality skills sets that extend across disciplines and build a well-rounded researcher. To that end, more opportunities and greater support for students to undertake training and Continuous Professional Development (CPD) to develop their skillset and to secure internship or placement opportunities outside of their home institution, to build up their skills (including soft skills) and confidence and boost employability would be welcomed by around one in five respondents. There may be benefit from a greater focus on destinations of PGR graduates so students can acquire transferable skills during their study to benefit the UK research and innovation sector as a whole.

8. FACILITATING COLLABORATION WITH EMPLOYERS



As part of securing more placement opportunities for PGR students, students and supervisors are looking for support and input to boost their networks and collaboration with industry and other non-academic potential partner organisations. Such enhanced collaborations would – it is argued – provide greater funding opportunities to boost the volume of studentships and sponsorships, as well as offer students the chance to gain valuable experience and increase employment opportunities.

9. REVIEWING THE STATUS OF POSTGRADUATE RESEARCHERS



There is extensive debate, among respondents, as to the relative drawbacks and merits of classifying students as staff, but without clear consensus. Classifying postgraduate researchers as staff will, it is perceived by some, improve the rights and conditions for these individuals (e.g. entitlement to pensions, parental leave, childcare, and sick pay), while others counter that this may present problems such as the loss of tax-free status and fewer students being funded. There is general consensus, though, that improved terms and conditions may be needed across the sector for postgraduate researchers. Organisations in particular suggest that further exploration on the topic of rights and conditions, in collaboration with stakeholders and partners, is needed to reach a clear outcome.

Around one in ten suggest that awareness of rights and conditions amongst postgraduate researchers is low and that more could be done to raise awareness among students.

10. LOOKING AHEAD



On the whole, respondents (particularly organisations) welcome UKRI's CFI on the New Deal, and the chance to provide feedback at this stage. Stakeholders note that continuation of communication will be extremely important to ensure that there is clarity in UKRI's decision-making process, and that everybody – no matter of their circumstances – is consulted at each relevant stage to ensure the development of the New Deal is fully inclusive.

UKRI will be responding to these findings separately.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) is a non-departmental public body established in April 2018 and sponsored by the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT). It brings together the seven research councils, Research England, and Innovate UK.

UKRI, through its councils, supports between 20 and 25 percent of the UK's postgraduate researchers through grants from its research councils. UKRI's Research England also supports postgraduate research (PGR) through the Quality-related Research (QR) Research Degree Programme (RDP) supervision fund. Funding councils in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland provide equivalent support.

Towards a New Deal

In 2020, the government set out its ambition to grow the UK's research talent pathways by creating a New Deal for funding postgraduate research.³ More concrete actions were set out in the subsequent R&D People and Culture Strategy in 2021, which outlined how a New Deal for PGR would be developed through cross-sector consultation led by UKRI, to review how students are supported and developed both practically and financially.⁴ In particular, this long-term work will focus on exploring how greater stability could be offered, diverse careers paths be made clearer, and sector-wide diversity be increased.

This long-term programme is being driven by wide-ranging engagement, discussion, and challenge from a variety of individuals and organisations across the research and innovation system. Based on its ongoing community engagement through a series of informal discussions, UKRI scoped out four focus areas to be addressed (detailed in section 1.3.1). It is recognised that these four areas are inter-dependent and carry interacting effects, and therefore it is important that a holistic approach is taken when developing the New Deal.

Call for Input

Following this initial scoping, UKRI set out a Call for Input (CFI) in February 2022 to gather input from individuals and organisations/groups (including postgraduate researchers, supervisors, support staff, universities, industry, representative bodies etc.) to gather a wider range of perspectives and experiences from across the research and innovation community. The CFI was split into three core sections:

1. Goals of postgraduate research training
2. Areas of focus (gathering views on the four aforementioned areas, as well as on the overall approach)
3. Future engagement

The CFI was live between February and May 2022 and open to anyone interested or involved in research and innovation, either as an individual, organisation, or group.

In Autumn 2022, Pye Tait Consulting, an independent research agency, was commissioned to analyse the CFI responses.

1.2 Aim and objectives

The aim was to undertake an objective and comprehensive analysis of all the responses received to the CFI and to report the outcomes to UKRI.

The conclusions of this report present a summary of the evidence received. UKRI will publish its own response to the findings summarised below.

³ BEIS, 2020, UK Research and Development Roadmap

⁴ BEIS, 2021, R&D people and culture strategy

1.3 Methodology

1.3.1 Approach to the CFI

UKRI developed the CFI questionnaire which comprised four core sections to seek views on different aspects of the New Deal.

1. Goals of PGR training
2. Areas of focus
 - a. Models and access
 - b. Routes in, through and out
 - c. Rights and conditions
 - d. Funding and financial support
3. Future engagement
4. About you

This structure of this report mirrors that of the CFI.

The primary route through which to submit responses was UKRI's Engagement Hub (an online portal open to all). Some responses were also received offline by email or letter.

In total, 422 complete responses were received, of which 412 were submitted through the Engagement Hub and ten offline responses by email/letter.

UKRI shared all the anonymised responses with Pye Tait Consulting who then undertook the independent analysis. This report contains the independent analysis of all responses received to the CFI.

The final CFI questions can be found in Appendix 3.

1.3.2 Approach to the analysis

Before undertaking a detailed analysis, responses were first reviewed and cleaned. This process involved checking for campaign responses,⁵ errors, or duplicate responses. None were found, and the 422 unique responses were taken forward for onward analysis.

Qualitative analysis of responses received to the open-ended questions was undertaken by Pye Tait Consulting in successive stages. Firstly, a high-level review of all responses was undertaken to identify broad themes and sentiment. Secondly, key themes and sub-themes were identified for each CFI question. Based on this, Pye Tait Consulting developed a coding framework, checked for inter- and intra-coding consistency, and this was finalised in collaboration with UKRI. Responses were then coded according to the agreed framework to identify frequency of themes overall.

Once coding was complete, codes were written up on a thematic basis. For example, if respondents raised points about funding under 'models and access', these are incorporated into the report section on 'funding and financial support'.

Generally speaking, the key findings (chapters 2 to 7) are structured from most to least commonly mentioned themes. Where they are areas of clear divergence between respondents' views, these are highlighted in the report. In addition, actions, considerations, and apparent gaps noted by respondents are drawn out – this gap analysis is undertaken throughout the report, with suggested actions highlighted in bold in the main text and summarised at the end of each chapter.

⁵ These are typically identical responses which are created when a respondent reproduces material circulated by a different individual or organisation and uses it as a consultation response.

In the final section (chapter 8), Pye Tait Consulting has drawn together the themes and considerations most commonly raised by respondents on the New Deal. UKRI intends to respond to these shortly.

1.3.3 Interpretations and limitations

UKRI is committed to involving a broader range of people and organisations in the design and delivery of research and innovation. The CFI was designed to be open to any organisation or individual that wanted to respond, while giving UKRI the flexibility to undertake additional work with groups that are not well represented at a later date. It was publicised on UKRI's website, through trade publications and on social media.

An open CFI of this nature does not seek to be a representative sample of the whole research and innovation population. The implication of self-selection bias is that an assessment of views can only be made for the respondents who chose to participate and will not represent the entire target population, but rather a small subset. The report, in places, quantifies the number of responses that support a point of view, but this should not be interpreted as a proportion of the sector as a whole. Furthermore, while some potential suggested actions are put forward by respondents, readers should bear in mind that it was outside the scope of this analysis to determine which party or parties may be best placed to take these forward.

It should be noted that some 'organisational' responses were collaborative responses with contributions from multiple organisations. In addition, some organisations spent a great deal of time and effort in organising, for example, workshops to gather feedback on the New Deal. This was welcome but it should be noted we can only report on the summary response provided as not all the material from those discussions was contained in organisations' consultation responses. Furthermore, it should be noted that some responses were received from representative bodies which therefore reflect the views of their community. Organisational responses have not been weighted in the analysis, but the report does, in places, highlight where there is a divergence of views, particularly where representative bodies may hold contrasting viewpoints. The reader is advised to bear these points in mind when interpreting the report.

Due to some small sample sizes, some codes developed during the analysis were noted by five or fewer respondents and these have not been subsequently included in this report due to suppression. UKRI has had sight of all responses and the final coding book developed by Pye Tait Consulting was provided to UKRI. This contains all coded responses, including those not included in this report due to suppression and will enable UKRI to review all points raised within the CFI. This report aims to capture the breadth of opinion within each subject area across responses.

Note that some anonymised quotations from respondents are included in the report. These extracts are included to provide examples which reflect the most common points being made. We have named some representative bodies in our analysis in instances where those bodies have published their responses to the consultation and it is beneficial to do so.

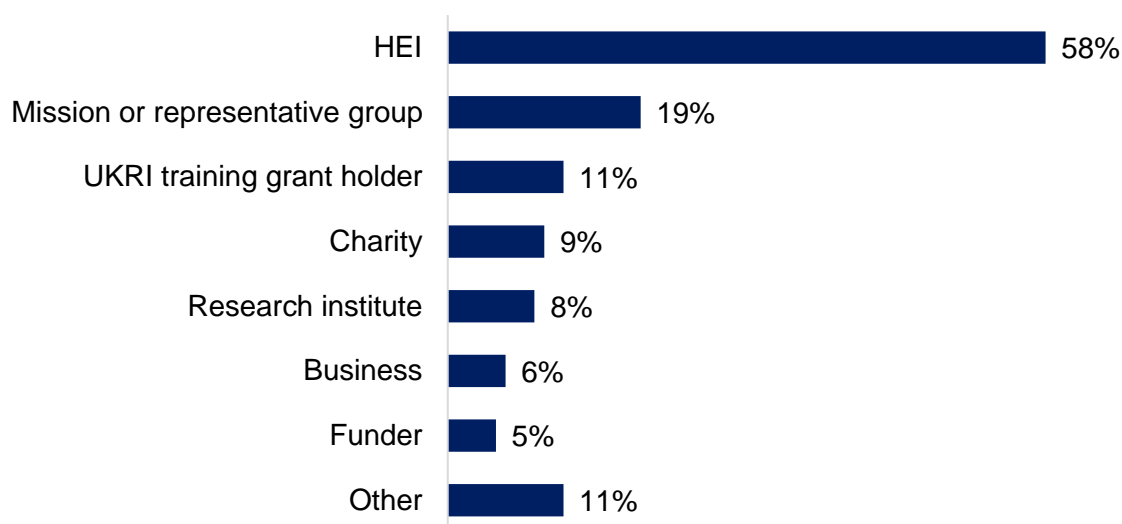
1.4 Respondent profile overview

Of the 422 unique responses received, just over one quarter (27% or 112) were submitted by organisations or groups and just under three quarters (73% or 310) were from individuals.

Among individual respondents, 190 are from current or recently graduated PGR students, of which 107 state they are funded or part-funded by UKRI, 39 have another (non-UKRI) funding source, and 15 have no financial support (29 do not provide this information).

Respondents that said they represent the views of an organisation or group were asked about their organisation type and to assign themselves to category as defined by UKRI.⁶ Over half (58%) of organisations are higher education institutes (HEIs), while just under one in five (19%) are mission groups or representative groups, and around one in ten (11%) are UKRI training grant holders. A list of the 110 responding organisations that were willing to share their name is provided in Appendix 2.

Figure 1 Breakdown of organisational respondent types



Base: 107 respondents (multiple responses permitted). Source: UKRI CFI 2022.

As part of the analysis, HEI respondents were grouped into the six TRAC peer group categories from A to F which are categorised based on the percentage income a particular HEI receives from research activities from highest (A) to lowest (F). More detail is available in the footnote reference.⁷

A more detailed breakdown of individual respondents is provided in Appendix 1. As part of this, for reference and comparative purposes, data from the latest Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) data release are included, as are ONS population data.

⁶ UKRI website, Check if you are eligible for research and innovation funding. This series of pages details which organisations are eligible for funding within each organisational category (see: <https://www.ukri.org/apply-for-funding/before-you-apply/check-if-you-are-eligible-for-research-and-innovation-funding/>)

⁷ See <https://www.trac.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Annex-4.1b-TRAC-Peer-groups-2017-18.pdf>

2. Goals of postgraduate research training

Call for Input question

As stated in the CFI, the characteristics of the doctoral qualification are well established (see the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) Characteristics Statement⁸), and reasons for pursuing a research degree vary.

Recent reviews of postgraduate research have identified the need for balance between providing more taught training or continuous professional development (CPD) and time to focus on the research and outputs that will be assessed for the degree.

UKRI wishes to open the opportunity to the wider community to gather views on what the goals of PGR training should be. This section summarises respondents' views of their perceptions of goals for contemporary postgraduate research training.

2.1 Summary of common themes arising

The following themes are raised by respondents and are ordered from most to least frequently mentioned.

Preparation for future careers

The preparation for, and potential employability within, either academic or non-academic roles is viewed as one primary goal for modern doctorate courses by just under half of respondents.

Provides research skills and practical experience

The ability to undertake research and to build and extend their knowledge base and practical experience in a specific discipline is commonly noted by around two in five respondents.

Training and Continued Professional Development (CPD)

A primary goal of PGR noted by one quarter of respondents is for postgraduate students to continue their training and CPD, to enable individuals to become rounded researchers, proficient in multiple strands of research across different disciplines.

Produce innovative new research to benefit wider society

Producing new information and research that accelerates or improves upon the development of content within society is viewed as a significant goal of PGR degrees by just under one quarter. In particular, respondents believe this should include supporting and building the abilities and confidence of future researchers.

Collaboration with other researchers and organisations

PGR should directly encourage collaboration with industry, other universities, and large organisations to establish networks and prepare postgraduate researchers for their futures outside of postgraduate study – noted by just under one in five respondents.

Skills building

Besides core research competencies, soft skills such as communication, team-working, autonomous working, project management, and critical thinking are also rated as important goals and outcomes of PGR by one in six respondents.

⁸ QAA, 2020, Characteristics statement – doctoral degree (see <https://www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/quality-code/doctoral-degree-characteristics-statement-2020.pdf>)

2.1.1 Preparation for future careers

Slightly under half of respondents state that the main goal of contemporary postgraduate research should be to prepare PGR students for a future after their degree. Specifically, a quarter of the respondents, comprising mostly students, believe it should be commonplace for transferable skills to be developed to increase their employability. This includes equipping students with high quality skills sets that extend across disciplines and build a well-rounded researcher.

Additionally, around one fifth of all respondents – of which half are students – directly refer to the need for provision relating specifically to career progression outside of academia. They would like to see careers advice for those wishing to progress into industry, and would welcome facilities/opportunities to support networking and communications with industry partners to increase the likelihood of career progression post-PGR.

Just under one fifth of respondents (predominantly students and HEIs) would welcome greater information on how to progress into academic roles. This includes a stronger focus on ensuring researchers are prepared on how to navigate the academic environment. Several students believe there should be greater emphasis on perceived job market challenges within academia, and that one of the key goals of PGR should be to ensure all students have the capability to progress into such positions. They suggest this could be through supporting the continued building of academic and transferable skills.

Preparation for a career using research skills [should be the main goal of contemporary PGR], whether that be in the traditional, university based, academic sector or elsewhere...especially bearing in mind that in many fields the probability of gaining an academic university post is extremely unlikely. – Student, funding source not specified

Whilst the common primary goal across respondents seems to be that PGR should prepare students for potentially both academic and other careers in research and innovation, there are a handful of respondents (fewer than ten) that disagree. This small group of supervisors feel that the goal of PGR should be solely to develop future academics and innovative researchers, rather than to train students and use resources for non-academic paths.

To become first class academic researchers [is the main goal of PGR]. No other goals, please...modern studentships are already overloaded with additional and spurious training. – Supervisor, UKRI training grant holder

2.1.2 Provide research skills and practical experience

The ability for postgraduate researchers to come away from their degree with high levels of research capability and practical, discipline-related experience is a vital goal mentioned by two fifths of respondents, of which the majority are students or supervisors. They note that the fundamental goal of a PGR course is to offer opportunities to students to gain unique skills in new fields and to develop skills that allow them to contribute effectively.

As part of this, around one in ten respondents note that one goal for PGR training should be to provide individuals with an increased general understanding of their specific field. This could involve developing detailed, specific research capabilities that are relevant to their chosen discipline, with the overall aim of improving the current knowledge base, both among researchers and also among members of the public.

The primary goal of postgraduate research training should be to further knowledge at the forefront of the discipline. This should be achieved through a focus on subject specific expertise in both theory and methods, in the context of the wider need to be able to work in and across disciplines and with impact. – HEI, Peer Group A

2.1.3 Offer training and CPD to encourage continual improvement

Alongside subject-specific postgraduate training, a quarter of respondents feel that there should be new and/or improved training that is tailored to the needs of PGR students and which provides them with CPD and transferable knowledge that can be applied in a non-academic environment. Such courses, it is suggested, could cover both technical skills and wider, cross-discipline skills sets, as well as including soft skills. The response from one representative highlights that their HEIs offer such training opportunities, which they believe enables PGR students to join and thrive in their research community. UCU agrees with this sentiment, outlining that PGR students should have access to these prospects, regardless of whether they are funded by UKRI or not.

The opportunity to undertake placement courses, internships, optional extra courses to develop personal skills and non-academic excursions is noted to be a significant goal by a around one in twenty students and organisations. They believe it is vital to encourage individuals' development to build confidence and strong research capabilities.

Provide training for transferrable skills for both academic and non-academic jobs...training that is directly applied during the PhD [and] training in secondment and industry experiences. – Student, funded or part-funded by UKRI

Many respondents, including supervisors and students, commenting on training opportunities suggest that most elements should remain optional to alleviate potential stress for PGR students regarding potentially irrelevant content.

I think the training during the PhD should ensure that PhD students are capable of producing high quality research and gaining the essential skills for an academic research career, and this training should be mandatory for any recipients of UK public funds. Other skills and competencies should be optional, and geared towards the specific needs of each student. – Student, funded or part-funded by UKRI

However, a handful of respondents (fewer than ten) suggest that a mandatory approach for core, base themes (i.e., research methodologies and techniques) could be beneficial, particularly at master's and early doctorate level.

2.1.4 Produce innovative new research to benefit wider society

The benefit and contribution of PGR to society is noted by just under a quarter of respondents (including students, supervisors, and organisations). They suggest that the key goal for postgraduate study should be to ensure that research outputs are modern, effective, and overall advance academia and society more generally.

Around 20 supervisors feel that a goal of PGR should be to produce research that is novel, innovative and achieves "world-class research outcomes across the UK".

A further quarter of respondents comment that a key outcome of PGR should be to provide the next generation of primary researchers, public sector leaders, and policy leads who will be responsible for progressing the research and innovation sector in the future. They feel that this pipeline of talent should be inclusive, diverse, and highly knowledgeable in their fields, and that PGR should encourage this.

To provide the UK with new research leaders, capable of defining, executing, and (eventually) overseeing programmes of research which enhance the UK economy or quality of life...and to provide the next generation of academic teachers and researchers through a process not unlike apprenticeship. – Supervisor, UKRI training grant holder

2.1.5 Collaboration with other researchers and organisations

Just under one fifth of respondents, mostly students, feel that collaboration and communication are important aspects of PGR. They believe that researchers should be offered the opportunity to build networks and share their research with other institutes, industries, organisations, and researchers. They feel that such links are vital to develop communication skills and potential opportunities for future employment.

A small number believe that there should be more resources in place to allow for greater contact between students and supervisors (for example through closer working relationships with more meetings and, overall, more frequent communication), and more opportunities to collaborate with stakeholders both inside and outside of academia. Respondents highlight how some postgraduate researchers can feel isolated and that support frameworks should also be in place to enable interactions between students from other postgraduate disciplines. They believe that the postgraduate environment should promote inclusion and openness and provide a safe space for researchers to network and gain peer support.

Opportunities for career development, whether it includes things that make better academic researchers such as communication skills, networking and presenting opportunities etc, or opportunities for preparing to go into industry, should be available for all postgraduate researchers. – Student, funded or part-funded by UKRI

2.1.6 Skills building

Around one in six feel that there is a strong need for the PGR environment to support and develop softer skills (communication, teamwork, autonomous working, critical thinking, and project management are all mentioned). This may involve such activities such as group projects, presenting research findings, or discussions with supervisors, high-level academics, and peers.

Just over one in ten respondents note that autonomous research and independent working are important goals to strive for, arguing that these are integral to being a researcher and therefore vital to the PGR. This includes the capability to navigate research pathways, to compile research papers, and to present findings at large conferences.

Soft skills, such as communication and teamwork, are commonly noted by around 10% of respondents (almost all are students or supervisors) as a primary focus for individuals to develop within the contemporary PGR landscape. They note such skills are vital when presenting work, to be able to communicate research to others, to work as part of a group, and to offer and accept constructive criticism. This is primarily noted by students and supervisors.

The need to develop project management skills, including critical thinking, is noted by around one in eight respondents. These competencies are important to help management of personal research, especially novel content that may require alternative, non-traditional approaches to solve present issues. Respondents also feel that such skills are highly sought after within the job market, and will thus directly improve employability prospects.

To provide training in interdisciplinary and transferrable skills including (but not limited to) time/project management and organisation, collaboration and cooperation, archival training, and material handling (if applicable), laboratory skills (if applicable), ethics, leadership, funding, emotional awareness, and compassion. – Student, funded or part-funded by UKRI

3. Models and access

Call for Input question

'Models and access' is the first of four key areas that UKRI is focusing on within the PGR New Deal. As stated in the CFI, this includes consideration of current models and their respective roles in supporting PGR, including models of funding, supervision, and award. The two questions that drew the majority of responses on these themes were:

- Are there any additional areas that we should explore under models and access? Please state why.
- What challenges should we prioritise under models and access?

Some themes arising in response to these questions (for instance relating to funding models) are discussed in later chapters.

3.1 Summary of common themes arising

The following themes are raised by respondents and are ordered from most to least frequently mentioned.

Review of PGR models

Around half of respondents provide several suggestions for elements that would benefit from review. This includes improvements around supervision for PGR students and around models for part-time students. Other comments refer to PGR programme duration, greater inter-disciplinarity, stronger international collaborations, and partnerships between industry and academia. Several note a need to consider distance learning and define its best practice for future use. Alternative models are proposed that may potentially enhance accessibility.

Improving equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI)

Around one third of respondents suggest widening access routes for several groups, including international students, those with family commitments or neurodiverse students. Other commonly mentioned ideas include improved recruitment practices and promotion of PGR programmes, including providing more information to potentially interested students. Some comments reference a need for EDI training among students and higher education staff.

Support for PGR students

Around one quarter of respondents advocate for better support for PGR students, including providing networks focused on wellbeing and health, preparing students for careers outside academia, securing training or apprenticeships opportunities, and providing support in students' research – particularly fieldwork and research dissemination.

3.1.1 Review of PGR models

A large minority of comments suggest various areas that could be reviewed within the PGR models. This includes better regulated supervision for students, greater flexibility for part-time students, more options for PGR programme duration, enhanced interdisciplinarity, stronger international and industry collaborations, and remote learning.

Interdisciplinarity and partnerships

Around half of those commenting on this topic (predominantly HEIs) suggest that they would **welcome greater interdisciplinarity for postgraduate researchers, stronger international links, as well as more interactions between academia and industry.**

Many stress the importance of PGR programmes not isolating students from wider scientific networks. They **recommend encouraging interdisciplinary programmes or collaborations and strengthening partnerships with industry** which benefit both academia and industry by sharing knowledge, skills, research, and latest technologies.

Further, respondents (a mix of responding HEIs, research institutes, and students) discuss international networks and highlight a need for the UK to stay involved in international programmes and projects, particularly in light of EU Exit. International networks could be enhanced, respondents suggest, by adopting successful programmes such as Horizon Europe Marie Skłodowska Curie, or Marie Curie Innovative Training Networks, or by organising international joint degrees with universities across and outside of Europe (examples provided include the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS) in France and the Technical University of Munich in Germany that have developed UK-France and UK-German cohorts of doctorate students). In the context of international networks and partnerships, some add that international students are valuable assets who provide different, fresh perspectives and should be encouraged to study in the UK.

More flexibility to innovate in cross-sectoral partnership-working could leverage additional investment for doctoral education than has historically been available, increase the amount of challenge-focused, interdisciplinary and applied doctoral research undertaken, and may attract a more diverse doctoral community by enhancing job prospects outside of academia post-PhD. – HEI, Peer Group D

Student supervision

Around two fifths of those commenting on areas to review within PGR models (comprising both individuals and organisations) discuss student supervision regulation and practice, with respondents divided between a preference of one supervisor being responsible for a PGR student, or students having two or more supervisors. The latter group argue that being a single supervisor is too burdensome for academic supervisors already working to their maximum and having several other responsibilities such as teaching, undertaking research, and publishing papers. In support of this view, one representative body notes that:

supervisory teams can provide a more inclusive research environment for PGR students and supervisors,

and encourage interdisciplinarity. Meanwhile, the former group argue that multiple supervisors can present challenges, such as unclear responsibilities and workloads, and a lack of clarity in relationships, expectations, and management.

Respondents are, however, more unified in thinking that, in general, **supervision should be better structured to aid both students' and supervisors' work**. Improved regulations could include stating everyone's responsibilities, tasks and required time input more clearly, providing training for supervisors which will enable them to navigate more easily through their work, and ensuring that supervisors are up to date with PGR programme requirements that students need to fulfil, as these are likely to be refreshed regularly.

Around one quarter of those commenting on this topic mention **additional training for supervisors, for example in the field of EDI, and also around mental health and wellbeing, to support students who might need extra supervision and guidance at certain times**. Some (fewer than ten) suggest **supervisors could complete more rigorous training on different types of misconduct, including bullying or sexual harassment**.

The student experience might be significantly improved if the supervisor had been trained in how to navigate a supervisory relationship. Generally, this might be achieved by through enhancing the uptake of UKCGE |

Research Supervision Recognition Programme, and wider recognition of the scheme among providers and funders. Supervisors could also be trained on how supervision might differ for PGRs with disabilities or chronic illnesses, or other specific needs. – Representative body

Flexibility for part-time students

Around one in fifteen (mainly HEIs) advocate for greater flexibility for those studying part-time. Providing greater support would, it is argued, boost numbers of students signed up to part-time PGR programmes, particularly those working in industry or with family or caring responsibilities. Respondents would welcome exploration of how part-time models could be improved and/or expanded.

People have skills and personalities suited to different career sectors and also different personal circumstances, and so having a variety of programme models available is important for meeting these diverse needs. It's important that programmes account for this by being available with options for flexible or part-time delivery. – Student, funding source not specified

PGR duration

A handful of students and organisations (fewer than ten) commenting on the review of PGR models discuss the length of PGR programmes. **They mostly propose longer programmes (five years is most commonly suggested) or more flexible PGR programmes** in terms of duration and time allowed to complete the degree, which might then relieve pressure on students and enable them to think and work more creatively on their research and provide more freedom to explore other avenues, such as working in industry.

The PhD period in the UK is too short for a project to happen, especially when it comes to trans-disciplinary and participatory research. Funding should be secured for a minimum of five years in accordance with the complexity of doing real good research. – Student, funded on part-funded by UKRI

Remote learning

A handful (around ten, mostly HEIs) note that remote/online learning, which has become increasingly used and important during the Covid-19 pandemic, could become a standard part of PGR programmes. It is suggested this will increase flexibility, widen access to participation in PGR for students and therefore improve EDI, with the long-term advantage of improving the overall quality of the UK PGR offer and outputs.

Alternative models

UCU suggests that PGR could be improved by creating two separate tracks for doctoral research. These would provide more direct routes towards two different sets of aims or motivations for engaging in a doctorate: a) for the purposes of pursuing research or a career in higher education, and b) for the purposes of developing one's knowledge for its own end. Meanwhile, another representative body notes that the current models can limit the scope of opportunities delivered by small and specialist institutions and hence the potential benefit these postgraduate researchers can provide to their specialisms, local economy and the industries they are linked to. Therefore, it suggests an alternative model that embeds students in their local communities, with funding organised in a similar way to UKRI schemes that support PGR in businesses such as its CASE studentships.⁹ These two organisations believe that the alternative options they put forward could improve access to PGR and the

⁹ Also known as Industrial Cooperative Awards in Science & Technology, these provide funding for doctoral studentships where businesses and related organisations take the lead in arranging projects with an academic partner of their choice.

diversity of students enrolled, as well as enhancing geographical diversity by involving research organisations from different areas, including rural, small, or coastal towns.

3.1.2 Improving equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI)

Around one third comment on additional areas and challenges under models and access refer to improvements of EDI aspects of PGR programmes. Comments focus on application processes and recruitment, encouraging participation from a diverse range of students by specifically targeting minority or under-represented groups, and supporting students, particularly those in need, throughout their PGR, as well as supporting university staff.

Widening access routes

Around two in five of these comments referring to EDI aspects, largely from students and supervisors, discuss different ways of widening access for participation in PGR programmes for greater and more diverse groups of students. Respondents suggest enabling access to PGR programmes at Masters or even undergraduate level by, for example, introducing more research modules which might interest students from variety of backgrounds to a PGR programme.

Further, around one third of those commenting on this topic **advocate for more flexibility in PGR programmes, or programmes that are not ‘one size fits all’, but which are instead tailored to students’ needs and specific circumstances**, such as different socio-economic backgrounds, individuals with caring responsibilities or other professional commitments, neurodiversity or coming from another country. Several respondents highlight that access routes for international students could be improved by changing current visa policies. For example, the Russell Group mentions it would welcome greater engagement between UKRI and the Home Office to ensure that immigration requirements and Research Council conditions are aligned.

Finally, some comments (fewer than 20) **suggest having simpler, more open, or less structured application processes that are applicable and accessible to prospective students of all backgrounds**. Such a change in the application processes may, it is thought, increase students’ chance of participation in PGR programmes and allow them to put forward their best application if they are free to tailor it to their field of work, and include information on their professional background and experience, rather than having to focus on qualifications primarily.

“Eligibility” should be addressed as an area because the current cap of 30% for international students undermines the premise of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion and, more importantly, it imposes a tangible obstacle to prioritising quality and potential of candidates over everything else. It shouldn’t matter where a person comes from, what matters is the motivation and potential. International students coming to the UK for their PhD contribute to the UK economy and, if their PhD training experience is good, they are likely to stay and further develop their careers. Turning down young international talent as a result of caps imposed by funders is a missed opportunity. – HEI, Peer Group A

Improved recruitment practices and promotion of PGR programmes

Around a quarter of those commenting on this topic (a mix of students, HEIs, and supervisors) believe that **enhanced EDI-specific recruitment and promotion of PGR programmes is required**, to increase EDI among the student population and in the HE and UK research and innovation sector more widely. Respondents suggest targeted recruitment campaigns aimed at under-represented groups of students, including (from most to least frequently mentioned) people with different socio-economic backgrounds, from minority ethnic groups, women, those with established careers outside academia who might be

interested in PGR study, those with caring responsibilities, anyone who would not fall in a typical PGR student profile but which might be 'traditionally' defined by academic achievements and published papers, people with disabilities, religion, and sexual orientation. Some (fewer than ten) propose targeted recruitment by field of research or research topics, to boost PGR student numbers in areas with relatively lower representation.

A good start would be to widely share information about what a PhD even is. As a working class woman, I had never even heard of a PhD until I had returned to study for a Masters in my mid-30s. This could be done by sharing the research of current PGRs, funding, and making shareable work. Most other postgraduate researchers that I know have a parent or friend that has 'done a PhD'. This, in my opinion, continues the silo of opportunities. – Student, funded or part-funded by UKRI

With regard to recruitment campaigns, some respondents argue they should be organised and delivered by UKRI research councils for greater effectiveness, arguing that people will be more encouraged to sign up for PGR programmes advertised by the overarching research council, rather than by one individual HEI. Additionally, several recommend holding widely accessible free events for potential students with the goal of promoting PGR programmes, offering information specific to each under-represented group, and signposting them to relevant HE organisations and other institutions which could offer support to students.

Several respondents think that UKRI could provide clear recruitment guidelines that outline EDI best practice (for context, UKRI's Natural Environment Research Council (NERC) already does this). Some believe that too much is delegated to individual doctoral training organisations, resulting in a lot of effort being expended in trying to make incremental changes to complex processes which could be enacted more efficiently and effectively from a central hub.

EDI training and awareness

Around one in five respondents commenting on this topic (mainly students) highlight the importance of raising awareness about EDI and what it means for access and the provision of PGR programmes, as well as for the quality and diversity of the UK's research and innovation population. Respondents suggest introducing mandatory EDI training that explores the issue in detail and shares best practices to ensure there is a standard level of awareness of the issues faced by those who may experience barriers to access, and to encourage a greater number of staff to tackle the challenges that exist.

Suggestions regarding EDI practices in recruitment include the use of anonymised application forms to remove unconscious bias from the PGR application process, contextual recruitment, or having a central interviewing activity to ensure fair and impartial outcomes for applicants.

The biggest challenge is the approach to EDI. We should be focusing on equality of opportunity, recognising differences between people at the outset, but not discriminating afterwards. – Supervisor, funding source not specified

3.1.3 Support for PGR students

Around one quarter of comments on additional areas and challenges under models and access focus on support networks for PGR students with specific focus on their health and wellbeing, support in their research, and their preparation for a career outside academia.

Support networks

This group, comprising mainly students, discuss particular issues which researchers can face through their PGR journey. These include financial issues, mental health conditions, high stress levels, and uncertainty around their research and future work. **Respondents advocate for developing networks of support which could involve students, supervisors, lecturers, and other academic and university staff, for example HR professionals. Several recommend introducing mandatory mental health and wellbeing training for students and academic staff.**

Respondents discuss how students can experience a lot of stress and anxiety relating to their research and their onward career after completing their degree, and would welcome more help from university, their supervisory teams and UKRI more broadly, particularly during the research fieldwork stage, a more challenging period due to time pressures and less resources. Such help could provide practical training on research, keep students better updated on latest research methods, or provide assistance with purchasing resources.

It is very rare that a PhD student reaches their viva and then fails it; it is much more common for them to abandon their studies part-way through. In some cases, this may genuinely be the right choice, and abandonment of studies is not by itself a proxy for (for example) poor mental health; nonetheless, any correlation between the rate of abandonment of studies and the research environment would be well worthy of careful study. – Organisation, other

One representative body highlights the importance of developing cohorts of PGR students, which, it believes, will support individuals' experiences and especially their mental health during doctorates. It adds that "bringing individuals together within cohort formats provides individuals with an inclusive environment to learn and grow as researchers", and believes that cohort models can enhance interdisciplinarity and collaboration between institutions, including organisations outside academia.

3.2 Respondents' suggestions for action

This section pulls together the key points of actions suggested by respondents in their response to questions on models and access.

- Improved supervision practice with more comprehensive training to ensure supervisors deliver consistently and are fully up to date.
- PGR programmes with greater flexibility in terms of part-time arrangements (for example around lecture attendance, deadlines, fee payments, and overarching structure of their study time), overall doctorate duration (anything up to five years as standard to ease pressures, and to boost creativity and quality of longer-term research), interdisciplinary and international collaborations, and partnerships with industry.
- Widening access to PGR programmes and therefore improving EDI, by adjusting existing recruitment practices, application processes and general PGR programmes to students' needs. This could be specifically targeted to boost uptake from under-represented groups, minority ethnic backgrounds, different socio-economic backgrounds, international students, students with disabilities, neurodiverse students, or those with caring responsibilities. Respondents suggest this could take the form of targeted recruitment campaigns at a national level, with a view to making applications

processes less burdensome and more accessible for individuals from all backgrounds.

- Introducing mandatory and optional training to increase awareness and understanding around issues pertaining to EDI, mental health and wellbeing training for students and academic staff, and to provide increased support for PGR students who face mental health issues during their studies.
- Establishing support networks for students, involving students, supervisors, and other academic staff. These could be more formal networks facilitated by HEIs, or organised by PGR students themselves, encouraged as part of the involvement in PGR.
- Preparing students for a career outside academia by providing increased access to apprenticeship and industry training opportunities, and by developing better connections and communication with industry stakeholders (although little mention is made by respondents to possible engagement strategies or existing networks/best practice).

4. Routes in, through and out

Call for Input question

'Routes in, through and out' is the second area that UKRI is focusing on within the PGR New Deal. As stated in the CFI, this includes consideration of the reasons why people do – and do not – enter into PGR training, and the types of support they receive, as well as how part-time modes of working support PGR students.

The two questions that drew the majority of responses on these themes were:

- Are there any additional areas that we should explore under routes in, through and out of postgraduate research? Please state why.
- What challenges should we prioritise under routes in, through and out?

4.1 Summary of common themes arising

The following themes are raised by respondents and are ordered from most to least frequently mentioned.

Under-represented groups

There was a common opinion, noted by one third of respondents, that there should be more route-in support for students entering into postgraduate study, and through-support for pre-existing PGR students who are a part of minority groups. This includes individuals (from most to least frequently mentioned) from minority ethnic groups, those with disabilities, those with mental health issues, as well as women, neurodivergent students, and mature students. This focuses on the routes into, and the support throughout, PGR.

Career options post-PGR study

The quality of careers information, advice and guidance constituted a common theme with around one quarter of respondents perceiving this to be currently insufficient, either in terms of its content, or being too heavily focused on academic routes rather than other options across the research and innovation system. This focuses on routes through, and out of PGR.

Training and placement opportunities for students

Around one in five suggest that there is room for additional, more tailored training for PGR students within their course. This includes placements, longer opportunities outside of home institutes, and training that aligns to research topics as well as providing softer skills that may improve employability. This focuses on the support throughout PGR.

Employability, careers, and the academic job market

Respondents would welcome UKRI continuing its focus on ensuring PGR students have the potential for a long-lasting, secure career, potentially in the form of post-PGR support and resources or providing students with opportunities to experience different areas. It is suggested that there may be benefit in greater focus on destinations of PGR graduates so students can acquire transferable skills during their study to support the UK research and innovation sector.

Flexibility within postgraduate courses

The concern that PGR courses do not have significant flexibility to accommodate part-time or distance learners is a topic area that around one in five feel should be explored to support new PGR students, and to aid pre-existing students who may be struggling. There is also concern that there is little flexibility in course length, with many stating three years is not long enough for a doctorate. This focuses on the support throughout PGR.

Student information needs

Specifically, the issue raised here by one in ten respondents centres on a perceived lack of information or context available to prospective students on what PGR entails. There is concern this has led to a lack of understanding and that learners are misinformed, and that this aspect should be prioritised for improvement to encourage a steady flow of prepared future researchers. Increased access to UKRI would also be welcomed. This focuses on all three stages – routes in, through and out – of PGR.

4.1.1 Under-represented groups

Over a third of respondents commenting on these questions – including HEIs, students and supervisors – raise concerns regarding low percentages of minority groups represented within postgraduate study. They particularly highlight the lack of representation (ordered from most to least frequently mentioned) for minority ethnic students, those with disabilities, those with mental health issues, as well as women, neurodivergent students, and mature students. They suggest that **wider, tailored promotion is required for the PGR landscape to become more visible to those from under-represented backgrounds**. Respondents suggest that such promotion could focus on the disparity between the higher level of under-represented groups undertaking undergraduate courses, and the lack of such groups progressing to postgraduate study.

Many refer to the narrow entry criteria for postgraduate positions as being restrictive to those from under-represented and/or disadvantaged backgrounds. Non-traditional routes into doctorates are suggested as a solution to this, with a focus on routes outside of completing a Master's degree (such as industry experience, internships etc.). As part of this, approximately a tenth of all respondents, including around 25 HEIs, note that additional funding support could be offered to help individuals from under-represented groups gain easier entry to PGR. They refer to ringfenced PGR funding pathways for the socio-economically disadvantaged as successful initiatives, particularly in reference to increasing visibility and access of application processes for minority ethnic groups.

Throughout postgraduate study, respondents feel there should **be continued support to understand, and where possible alleviate, barriers and challenges faced by under-represented groups**. Such support may include tailored networking opportunities or provision for under-represented and/or disadvantaged or minority group postgraduate researchers to reach out to similar students both internally and externally across institutes.

As a student, I have never met a university-based employment adviser that knows about disability, inclusive placements, or pathways to employment. Please create these pathways if they don't exist, and educate HEI workers around these pathways so students can get direction and support. – Student, not funded by UKRI

A few respondents comment that there should be more relevant **EDI training and measures in place to ensure staff and supervisors are consistently maintaining an inclusive and diverse environment for PGR students**.

There is large scale under-representation of many ethnic minorities which should be targeted. Supporting students from under-represented groups is not just restricted to decreasing financial and administrative barriers...there should also be active cultivation of networks of students who share similar characteristics for mutual support and to foster a sense of belonging...such a network might also have disciplinary factors to help to address, for example, the low fraction of women in physical sciences and engineering. – HEI, Peer Group A

4.1.2 Career options post-PGR study

Routes into a full range of careers

There is a perceived assumption, noted by around one quarter of respondents commenting on these questions, that postgraduate training leads predominantly, if not solely, to academic roles post-graduation. This was suggested by all types of respondent. Several students report being provided with little or no advice relating to alternative, or non-conventional career routes into industry and other non-academic roles. They note that no role models were made available to them, such as industry professionals, and they were not made aware of alternative careers outside of their academic field as a fellow or researcher, and would welcome more active promotion of opportunities available.

Some respondents feel that the limited careers advice presented is often given too late in PGR students' period of study, and therefore does not provide sufficient opportunity for students to adequately prepare for a working life outside of academia (although it should be noted that UKRI students should already have access to such advice). They suggest that **greater focus could be placed on boosting employability and soft skills, alongside careers advice, and offered at all stages throughout PGR study.** For example, one organisation notes that:

Most PGR [students] enter into careers outside research-active academic roles after completing their PhDs, such as research outside higher education, industry or non-academic HE roles. Clearer and more supportive UKRI guidance for PGR [students] could help facilitate paid industry internships and quality-related funding has an important role to play in improving careers support. – Organisation, representative body

A perceived lack of opportunities to interact with industry was a concern raised by respondents of all types, with specific mention of industrial placements, apprenticeships, university collaborations or directly working with industry on problems as part of their PGR. One university representative notes that this may be more significant for mature students, or for industry professionals coming into PGR study who wish to stay within their industry, as these individuals would be more aware of the lack of options, or funds, available to them during their course of study. As such, **many respondents feel that UKRI, coupled with host universities, could directly support, and fund, more collaborations between postgraduate researchers and industry.**

A few respondents believe that PGR graduates will be overqualified with little relevant experience to enter non-academic industry roles. They argue there is a need to gain exposure to industry throughout their degree to develop relevant unique skills, networks, and expand their potential career options. One supervisor referred specifically to the engineering doctorate as an example of integrating industry experience into a doctorate qualification with the result of higher levels of employment and greater salaries.

PGR [students] who did not plan on staying in academia were worried about the lack of career options available to them. They felt that it was difficult to transition from academia to other parts of the job market, and that some potential employers considered them overqualified and therefore are unwilling to employ them. Therefore, UKRI should explore ways to develop links between PGR programs and relevant industries e.g. lobbying for PhD graduate schemes in companies, introducing optional industry guided skills development programs into PhDs. – Organisation, representative body

Alternatively, a couple of supervisors believe that students should not be encouraged to pursue careers in large industrial businesses, and instead should be encouraged to continue on within academia or smaller start-ups.

I'm often frustrated that we seem in many cases to be training PhD students that then simply work for Big Tech. How can we incentivise students to consider alternative careers? Students feel good about start-ups, so that would be one way to motivate them, rather than joining Big Tech. – Supervisor, UKRI training grant holder

Routes into academia

Around one in ten respondents commenting on these questions, primarily organisations and supervisors, feel that there is not enough support or guidance for PGR students post-doctorate regarding academic career paths. They feel specifically that the academic job market at present is at capacity and is oversaturated; there are more doctoral graduates than academia positions available. They note that there needs to be significantly **more guidance provided throughout doctorates in order to help these students navigate the difficult and competitive job market terrain**. This would include encouraging the building of employability skills, the development of cross-institution networks and establishing university collaborations and events.

For researchers to remain in academia post-graduation, some organisations and supervisors have suggested that further incentives are required. Such incentives would involve **more opportunities to develop researching skills and expose the students to alternative research jobs**. One organisation suggests vocational, venture-led research could attract commercially minded postgraduates to remain in academia. Within this, they propose universities – with assistance from UKRI – could more actively promote a wider expanse of available job roles and develop dedicated career paths for aspiring entrepreneurs.

A key challenge is in how to increase awareness of different career pathways in research to reflect the wide diversity of potential starting points and career destinations of researchers. This would hopefully inspire a wider diversity of applicants to research. – HEI, Peer Group C

4.1.3 Training and placement opportunities for students

According to a little under one fifth of respondents to these questions, primarily students and supervisors, there are not enough funded training opportunities available to postgraduate students that encourage the growth of transferable, relevant skills to increase employment prospects and prepare students for life post-degree (although UKRI does provide some opportunities to students they fund). They note that such training would support the development of onward careers either in academia or beyond. In particular, one HEI notes that the availability of such opportunities would help to offer careers support to those who are most financially vulnerable.

Of these respondents, students also say they are eager to have **more access to training that encourages the building of networks and cross-industry collaborations**. A small handful (fewer than ten) feel many students are unaware of how limited pre-existing training is, and that there needs to be a stronger focus on ensuring postgraduate researchers have the opportunity to develop soft skills in multiple fields in tandem with industry partners.

This group of respondents also feel that **training made available should be specifically tailored to researchers' disciplines, demographic, personal needs and preferences**. Such training methods are noted to be beneficial to the mental health of the individuals, with one HEI commenting that providing quality and accessible education to meet diverse needs

can be a challenge if the training is a 'one size fits all' approach. It should be noted that UKRI students already have access to such training.

Other training options that respondents believe could be more readily available include industrial placements, internships, cross-institute opportunities, collaborative training and training in disciplines outside of their doctorate remit.

Additional training provided to PhD students is variable as some programmes have extensive skills training, while others offer more technical training. Placements in industry as internships during the PhD (e.g. the Professional Internships for PhD Students, or PIPS) have been shown to prepare students better for future careers, help them contextualise their research, and understand the breadth of career opportunities available after graduation. – Organisation, other

4.1.4 Employability, careers, and the academic job market

Respondents (of which around two thirds are organisations) would welcome UKRI having a continued focus on ensuring PGR students have the potential for a long-lasting, secure career. This might be in the form of post-PGR support and resources or providing students with opportunities to experience different areas where their research expertise can be utilised, for example reflected through increased collaboration between HEIs and industry in the New Deal.

Respondents suggest that engagement between HEIs and other organisations could be directed by UKRI to encourage conversations about industry co-funding and collaboration. One HEI highlights that new or different sectors could be approached for these discussions to enable funding for different research needs.

Respondents raise concern that PGR students' experience and skills developed through their study are poorly understood by many outside of academia. Some respondents suggest that employers do not understand the PGR experience and how it can help potential workers, which impacts on students' employability and onward career trajectories.

In terms of the training that PGR gives students, one respondent indicates that a paradigm shift is instead required to instead focus on destinations of PGR graduates. By providing individuals with a broad range of transferable skills, the UK could realise the benefits through a strengthened research and innovation sector, they argue.

BBSRC runs a highly successful scheme known as the Professional Internships for PhD Students scheme (PIPS) where their PGR students are encouraged to spend three months working in an environment outside of their academic laboratory to broaden their experience. This has proved to be an excellent vehicle to expose PGR [students] to alternative career options. Other research councils should consider adopting this as a model of best practice. Placements might be with industry, PRSE's, trade associations or indeed government departments. Any scheme which increases porosity across academia, industry and government is good for future innovation. – Organisation, other

4.1.5 Flexibility within postgraduate courses

Approximately a fifth of respondents to these questions, including organisations, supervisors, and students, are **concerned that the current postgraduate model is insufficiently flexible to help those in part-time study.** They believe there is little leeway for students who may not be able to commit full-time to PGR due to personal circumstances, for instance having additional careers or jobs outside of their degree, illnesses or disabilities, caring responsibilities such as young families, and/or mental health concerns. Several note, in their

experience where part-time modes of study are restricted to 50%, this is often unviable. Some suggest that 60-90% part-time models should be made available to be tailored around individuals' situations, and indeed UKRI policy allows this within award flexibility, although some HEIs only permit 50% or 100% study.

The length of the degree and the associated funding period is also discussed. Based on their experience, respondents note that, in many scenarios, where they had a maximum of three years to complete their doctorate, this was too restrictive and often demands too much from the PGR student. One representative group notes that working hours can often exceed or surpass an average nine-to-five working day, which cultivates a norm of long, unhealthy hours. This overall puts up barriers and is prohibitive to students who are not prepared or able to dedicate such time. Respondents suggest further regulation should be in place to limit the amount of time that PGRs are allowed, or requested, to assign to their doctoral research.

A couple of supervisors and HEIs suggest it may be more ethical to extend the funding period of a doctorate to four to five years. They argue this may allow students to complete both their initial research and their write up phase for their thesis, viva etc. without the need to work significantly longer hours. A further couple of respondents feel that the submission deadline could also be more flexible to accommodate different student scenarios and reduce stress. However, UKRI students are generally encouraged to work together with their supervisors to ensure their research is feasible within their period of funding to help ensure that the student can submit in time. UKRI also provides funding extensions where justified.

Additionally, a small group of around ten supervisors and HEIs **believe the existing framework in place to allow PGR content to adapt to personal, societal, and industrial requirements is insufficiently flexible**. Specifically, one HEI (peer group D) notes that it wishes to support, via dedicated funding, the development of doctoral and postdoctoral training, and pre-doctoral research placements that can be tailored to the needs of the student. These respondents suggest a more flexible system could act as an incentive for postgraduate study and enable degrees to directly address needs of the economy and society.

The duration...is too inflexible and restricts the kind of project which can be undertaken. Postgraduate researchers must be able to see their project through from start to finish during their funded period, while maintaining a work-life balance...and where unexpected circumstances arise (e.g. the Covid-19 pandemic) funded extensions commensurate with the length of disruption must be provided. Part-time working allows access to PhD programmes for many who would otherwise be unable. This must be flexible in terms of hours per week (i.e. not limited to a min of 50% part-time). – Student, funded or part-funded by UKRI

4.1.6 Student information needs

Provide clearer information and context on what PGR entails

Approximately one in ten respondents to these questions comment that **clearer information is required regarding the content, context, and delivery of PGR**. This detailed information is noted to be missing in all key stages of the PGR process: throughout the application period, during the delivery of the degree, and following conclusion and migration to onward destination. A couple of respondents note this is the case particularly for students from disadvantaged backgrounds who have greater difficulty accessing such data, commenting that there is general uncertainty regarding final career options and goals that PGR offers.

A handful of HEIs (fewer than ten) note that students can lack a full understanding of what to expect prior to entering PGR. They see that students do not have a complete grasp of the topics of research available to them, what paths or options there are into postgraduate study, or what will initially be expected of them. More guidance should be offered within this area to all students prior to application and recruitment stages.

Some students additionally feel that they are left in the dark regarding research expectations and requirements throughout their degree and say they did not understand what research routes or disciplines were available to them. They highlight difficulties navigating the changing research landscape in terms of finances associated with higher education, teaching environments, and how to deal with workloads. A couple note that students are not informed about the demands of PGR, and believe they were not, on reflection, adequately prepared for the work involved.

In terms of routes in, postgraduate research and related career opportunities need to be discussed earlier and more regularly with undergraduates, college students, and school pupils. To make research more likely to become an aspiration, it needs to be demystified and clearly described. An understanding of research-based knowledge generation should also be promoted at an earlier stage. – HEI, Peer Group C

Better access to UKRI and improved networking

Improved access to industry collaborations and partnerships was a comment noted by around one in twenty respondents, including HEIs and students. They feel that, if such communications were directly encouraged, this would open doors to more lucrative placements and the development of entrepreneurship and employability skills throughout PGR. One organisation suggests this could be extended to international networks.

Several believe that developing more partnerships with external organisations (public bodies, charities, businesses in industry etc.) and universities would extend the reach of networks available to postgraduate researchers. This in turn would help nurture potential career links in both academia and industry.

A few respondents, including students and HEIs, feel there could be better channels of communication with funding bodies such as UKRI to receive knowledge and discuss important issues. This, it is argued, would be particularly important for socio-economically disadvantaged students who may need additional financial support and information from UKRI or other sources.

Embedding of mentor schemes / relationship within the PGR journey – encouraging collaboration, communication, peer support. This may particularly be helpful for international PGR [students]. – HEI, peer group B

4.2 Respondents' suggestions for action

This section pulls together the key points of actions suggested by respondents in their response to questions on routes in, through and out.

- Some suggest that UKRI could facilitate the promotion of careers advice and support for students pre-, during, and post-PGR study (although this is respondent misunderstanding of UKRI's role as defined by the Higher Education and Research Act 2017).

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- Improved connections to networks and industry links could be facilitated to improve employability post-PGR. Many comment on the lack of available connections, but did not go on to provide further suggested actions to remedy this.
 - Funding bodies should continue to develop ringfenced funding for minority groups to encourage routes into PGR.
 - PGR programmes should have direct, tailored promotion for individuals in under-represented groups who may not be aware of possible routes into postgraduate study.
 - The flexibility of PGR models could be reviewed to explore whether longer funding periods are required to allow for easier part-time access. This is a common concern raised.
 - Training opportunities throughout postgraduate degrees could be funded and include tailored placement options. The content of these training models could cover general or soft skills, transferable and employability skills, cross-discipline and/or discipline-specific skills.

5. Rights and conditions

Call for Input question

'Rights and conditions' is the third key area that UKRI is focusing on within the PGR New Deal. As stated in the CFI, many universities seek to ensure equitable rights and conditions across their PGR population. However, an individual's rights and conditions may be influenced by their source of funding, their particular legal situation (for example, their immigration status or if they are a worker or employee), or other contributing factors.

The two questions that drew the majority of responses on these themes were:

- Are there any additional areas that we should consider in our work on rights and conditions? Please state why.
- What issues should we prioritise in our work on rights and conditions?

5.1 Summary of common themes arising

The following themes are raised by respondents and are ordered from most to least frequently mentioned.

Viewing postgraduate researchers as staff

Classifying postgraduate researchers as staff will, it is perceived by some respondents, improve the rights and conditions for these individuals, while others suggest that this may present problems such as the loss of tax-free status. There is extensive debate as to the relative drawbacks and merits of classifying students as staff, and there is no clear consensus among respondents. There is generally consensus, though, that improved terms and conditions may be needed across the sector for postgraduate researchers.

Respondents also discuss how to define the status of postgraduate researchers, separate from being staff, in the sense of needing a different status from undergraduate students, while still retaining the benefits of student status.

Reviewing support

Respondents suggest there is a need, firstly, to ensure there is adequate support in place for international students, and secondly to ensure there is sufficient support more generally for all PGR students. On this latter point, one in ten respondents would welcome greater support for parents and carers undertaking PGR, and a similar proportion would welcome increased mental health support, suggesting that the precarity of PGR can have a negative impact in this regard. Some suggest an independent mediator or third-party sponsor is required to ensure student voices are heard (without being aware that such a body already exists). Respondents also suggest greater consideration be given to individuals who experience changing circumstances.

Ensuring sector-wide equity for PGR

Around one in six respondents would like to see greater consistency across the sector with respect to rights and conditions, in particular to ensure that the support available for, and being provided to, people from all backgrounds is on an equitable footing.

Examining the PGR working environment and culture

Around one in eight respondents suggest that working conditions might be examined to consider the working environment within academia for PGR students. Concerns are raised about work/life balance, working hours, and the overall remuneration that postgraduate researchers receive for the work they undertake outside to their studies (e.g. teaching duties).

Increasing awareness of postgraduate researchers' rights

Approximately one in ten respondents suggest that awareness of rights and conditions amongst postgraduate researchers is low and that more could be done to raise awareness among students.

Review of supervisor-student relationships and associated training

Supervisor relationships are key to the PGR experience, but issues are raised by around one in ten around the perceived need for training and support for supervisors to ensure students are protected and treated consistently. This aspect is touched on in chapter 3.

5.1.1 Viewing postgraduate researchers as staff

The most common theme in response to these questions, raised by around one fifth of respondents, is whether PGR students should be viewed as staff members, as opposed to students. Multiple reasons are given for this as detailed in the sub-themes below. Of the respondents that mention viewing PGR students as staff, over half are students, and approximately one fifth are supervisors, with consensus among this latter group that it is beneficial to view PGR students as staff. One organisation notes that “the inclination to view PGR [students] only as students is outdated and flawed”, while another thinks that postgraduate researchers fall into a “grey area” between students and academic staff, meaning their “voice is not heard in either capacity”.

Respondents point out there are a number of ways that ‘staff’ or ‘de facto staff’ status could be achieved, and that there must be serious consideration of how any change may positively and/or negatively impact access to PGR.

PGR students themselves tend to believe it would be beneficial to gain ‘staff’ or ‘de facto staff’ status, arguing it would go some way to addressing structural problems in the current system relating to payment, workload, and living conditions, as well as increasing capacity for interpersonal support and integration at a university.

On the other hand, concerns are highlighted regarding the potential loss of perceived benefits of student status, such as access to disability support allowance, the ability to access postgraduate research in a self-funded capacity, the impact on those studying on Tier 4 visas, and having access to student networks and associations.

There is extensive debate as to the relative drawbacks and merits of classifying students as staff, and there is no clear consensus among respondents. This is acknowledged by respondents themselves, who would welcome involvement in any future engagement on this aspect.

Equivalent employment rights

Equivalent employment rights is an area that respondents suggest the UKRI could examine in greater detail. Many of these comments are subsumed into other themes, but it is worth noting here that – while respondents may have been referring obliquely to wages, or the working environment (both discussed elsewhere) – they primarily state that, without the protection of employment rights that all contracted employees gain benefit from, PGR students may continue to experience problems with their status. Supervisors, for example, suggest that the example of other EU countries viewing doctoral candidates as staff means they are paid sick leave, maternity leave, and have better working conditions.

Employment rights that are commonly mentioned include sick pay and leave, maternity/paternity pay and leave (all of which UKRI-funded students have some entitlement to), and the right to a pension. PGR students surveyed by UCU as part of its submission, and a small number of other respondents, report how students were not able to qualify for a mortgage, or were unable to have union representation. This, it is argued, means PGR

students have little social security, which has a knock-on impact for the other aspects of rights and conditions (discussed below).

Additionally, respondents incorrectly suggest that PGR students with health assessments, which mean they require reasonable adjustments, cannot ask for these without employment status. Without employment status, PGR students also state they are unable to apply for carers allowance or other state support. This, respondents suggest, will reduce the volume and diversity of PGR applicants.

One respondent links to a manifesto of the University and College Union (UCU) which lays out the desire for postgraduate researchers to be labelled and treated as staff.¹⁰ UCU itself acknowledges that there are ways that 'de facto staff' status can be conferred on students that does not amount to an official change, putting forward recommendations such as: ensure that workload assessments and pay cover the full extent of the work a PGR student undertakes, ensure that supervisors do not use PGR students as unpaid research assistants in the absence of other funds, and ensuring that all funded students, regardless of funding source, have the same access to paid periods of leave.

Comparison with the situation in other countries is not explicitly mentioned here, but it seems potentially important. In Germany, for example, we believe that most if not all PhD students are now employed on fractional contracts, as a route to giving them access to sickness benefits, parental leave, and pension contributions. We would encourage broad evidence-gathering on this point as part of the 'Rights and conditions' area. –
Organisation, UKRI training grant holder

Clarifying PGR students' status

There were broader calls to examine postgraduate researchers' status on a wider scale. While many specifically mention that PGR students should or could be seen as staff, alternatives are mentioned.

Around one quarter of respondents commenting on this topic believe that there are other ways to achieve a similar outcome to UCU's demands (sick-leave, parental leave, contracts for teaching) while still classifying postgraduate researchers as students. Additionally, there are some key benefits that students could gain including the prioritisation of their progression in their studies, the right to training and supervision, and the rights of complaint and appeal.

For example, one respondent suggests that there might be an "employee equivalent" status for PGR students that does not require the researcher to become a contracted employee, but instead sees a boost to their rights and conditions without losing the benefits of the student status (which would align with what UKRI's terms and conditions provide to students to some extent). Those that suggest there are benefits to the student status mention the lack of council tax payments, the lack of income tax on stipends, and the risk of being made redundant when funding for their studies finishes.

There are some concerns that any move away from the status of postgraduate researchers as students will impact key quality assurance mechanisms that underpin the delivery of PGR programmes. For example, a move away from supervision to line management could fundamentally change the nature of supervision, or the delivery of PGR within an HR setting may radically change the approach to PGR activities.

¹⁰ UCU, 2021, Postgraduate researchers as staff Manifesto 2021 (see https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/11623/Postgraduate-researchers-as-staff-manifesto-2021/pdf/UCU-PGRs_as_staff_manifesto_Jun21.pdf)

The delivery of PGR activity within an HR framework rather than a quality assurance framework might impact (either positively or negatively) the experience of PGR candidates. – HEI, Peer Group A

The relative benefits and drawbacks of employed status are also discussed in relation to stipends, which on becoming salaries would lose their tax-free status, meaning increased investment would be required maintain the same level of support for postgraduate researchers, and may result in fewer total opportunities being available. Pension contributions could also result in a lower income for postgraduate researchers, though would also contribute to a higher pension later on in life.

On the other hand, respondents outline how postgraduate researchers can be treated as staff in terms of their duties as researchers or teachers, which differ from their duties as students. Respondents note that UKRI students are already given some benefits such as parental leave and short-term sick leave.

Postgraduate students occupy a strange situation between being students (in the traditional sense) and staff. They do not have the rights that staff employed by the university have but are often expected to perform the work that staff themselves do. This leads to so much uncertainty in regards to illness, maternity leave etc. – Student, funding source not specified

5.1.2 Reviewing support

International PGR support

Around one in ten respondents say that support for international postgraduate researchers is something that should be examined closely by UKRI in its work on rights and conditions. Both students and supervisors discuss the conditions of PGR for international researchers as being something difficult for the researchers in question.

Both organisations and individuals feel that **greater support could be available for international postgraduate researchers to provide equity of opportunity compared to home students, for example to undertake internships or placements, travel overseas, or employment alongside studies.** There are situations where an international researcher's future prospects are restricted due to Tier 4 visa rules, for example reporting that they are unable to take on the same internships that a home student can. Additionally, visa rules may prevent, or make it extremely difficult for, international students to conduct fieldwork outside of the UK, something that home students can take for granted. This can have a direct impact on their ability to complete their studies.

Another impact on international researchers is the complexity of the British settlement and visa requirements, making it difficult for skilled researchers to stay in the country and find employment once their studies are complete. One organisation notes that international postgraduate researchers require information on “global mobility” (i.e. to ensure they hold skills which are transferable to countries outside the UK), and help applying their skills and building a research portfolio in a way that makes the UK an attractive place to do research. Another respondent says there is often insufficient information about onward study routes for international students in their home countries, which means they come to the UK without full knowledge of the requirements involved. Students who discussed visa issues said that it would be **helpful for international postgraduate researchers if there were support in place for visa applications, and information for routes to settlement or for routes to work post-graduation.**

An issue raised by multiple respondents, both students and HEIs, is that individuals on Tier 4 visas are placed in an extremely difficult position when they become ill or suffer other circumstances affecting their study. Unlike home students, these PGR students are unable

to take a break from their studies without leaving the UK, putting a larger strain on their return to studies. International students were also hit hard during the Covid-19 pandemic and, with no access to public funds, were forced to search for other means of support.¹¹

One organisation highlights research that suggests migrant students have difficulty accessing welfare guidance and hardship support from their universities.¹²

Due to Brexit, even more students are now subject to the rules governing international students. They experience particular precarity and added stress due to rules about their residency, employment and travel. UKRI should advocate for more straightforward and easier visa application processes for international students coming to study at a UK institution. International students should also be allowed to travel in and out of the country more easily. – Student, funded or part-funded by UKRI

Parents and carers

Meaningful support networks could also be put in place for PGR students with caring or parental responsibilities. There is concern that, without such support, potential PGR applicants coming to research later in life with existing caring responsibilities may act as too great a barrier. Furthermore, and linked to the earlier point on employment status, without this status, parents are unable to access statutory parental leave or support. Respondents additionally indicate that those with caring responsibilities often require flexible working and funding arrangements that are not always available currently.

Proposed support suggested by respondents predominantly focuses on financial aspects, which is covered in more detail in the following chapter. However, some respondents would welcome additional non-financial support, for example in the form of support networks.

As noted in Watson and Turnpenny (2022),¹³ ‘PGR wellbeing cannot be separated from the working conditions and practices in the higher education sector generally and the wider labour market’. Careful attention should be paid to the ability of student parents to access benefits including universal credit and rights such as shared parental leave. – HEI, Peer Group B

Support for those with additional needs

When discussing support for students with additional needs, respondents suggest that **extra flexibility and financial support for living costs and disability-related costs are important so that these individuals have the same level of access and standard of living as other postgraduate researchers.** It is inevitable that individuals with physical and/or mental health problems will need support to provide them with the best chance to complete their studies. While in many cases this is linked to funding, respondents outline that non-financial support is also needed for these individuals.

For example, greater flexibility may be needed to provide such individuals with an approach that best suits their circumstances, particularly if circumstances change during the period of study, for example to extend their funding period, to switch between full- and part-time study,

¹¹ CGTN Europe, 2021, Foreign students in UK forced to turn to food bank because of COVID-19 (See <https://youtu.be/rNj17WcwzNc>)

¹² URBC & MRN, 2020, The effects of covid-19 on tier 4 international students. The Effects of Covid-19 on Tier 4 International Students (See <https://migrantsrights.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/The-Effects-Of-Covid19-On-Tier-4-International-students-Report-Aug-2020.pdf>)

¹³ D. Watson and J. Turnpenny, 2022, Interventions, practices and institutional arrangements for supporting PGR mental health and wellbeing: reviewing effectiveness and addressing barriers, Studies in Higher Education (See <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2021.2020744>)

or to pause their study temporarily. The need for flexibility in this regard is recognised by both individuals and organisations.

Respondents suggest that **greater levels of support are needed for individuals that choose not to continue their studies**. These postgraduate researchers can drop out due to inadequate funding, support, or accessibility, perhaps to take up new opportunities, and respondents perceive that – currently – there is little support in place to ensure that individuals can transition successfully to working in different parts of the R&I system. Others flag that greater support and review is required around retention, to examine the current system and structure to help decrease drop-out rates.

Support for mental health

Around one in ten respondents – both organisations and individuals – specifically mention **mental health as a priority for greater support in UKRI's work on rights and conditions**.

One organisation points to prior research that shows how teaching staff are at high risk of burnout and the need to better understand how postgraduate researchers' mental health may be being impacted.¹⁴ Another organisation notes that international students, and particularly those from immigrant backgrounds, and refugee and asylum seekers, are likely to experience mental health issues as they attempt to navigate the UK's visa system and face the funding restrictions.

Students referencing health see this area as a critical issue that needs more support. One suggests specific funding for mental health (e.g. counselling), and others suggest occupational health needs including physical therapy, optical, and dental provision, for example. Some suggest that, if postgraduate researchers are considered as staff rather than students, this may go some way to improving mental health, because otherwise the precarity of being a student, coupled with challenging financial circumstances, can contribute to a decline in mental health.

The health (mental and physical) and wellbeing of postgraduate students should be an immediate priority. These may be very considerably and detrimentally affected by the challenges and isolation of postgraduate studies and, particularly following completion of graduate studies, stress created by financial challenges, conditions of precarity and instability, competition for jobs and the difficulties of short-term contracts and/or periods of unemployment. – HEI, Peer Group B

Much mistreatment towards PhD students takes place but they are not prepared (or protected). In such circumstances, PhDs internalise the mistreatment as failure of self, rather than failure of the system & depression rates increase. – Student, not funded by UKRI

Independent mediator

A small number of respondents (under ten) – both individuals and organisations – suggest that independent mediators or grievance systems should be in place to support postgraduate researchers should they wish to make a complaint. One respondent likened this to a PGR union, with another suggesting that a contact at UKRI to advocate on their behalf would be useful. It is not clear from the responses whether these comments had knowledge of existing ombudsmen in resolving student complaints.

¹⁴ S. Guthrie et al., 2022, Understanding mental health in the research environment (See https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2022.html)

An independent mediator, it is argued, would be useful for those cases where postgraduate researchers wish to make a complaint against bullying, harassment, or supervision without needing to involve (potentially biased) members of the same department, laboratory, or other working environment without fear of reprisal. This would assist with mental health by giving individuals a support system they know is impartial and available, no matter the circumstances in which they find themselves.

For UKRI-funded PhD programmes, institutions should have a robust and rigorous independent grievance system that can support postgraduate researchers should they wish to make a complaint. There should also be an orientation session or document detailing exactly what rights and conditions PhD students should expect and what they can do in the event that these standards are not being met. – Organisation, other

5.1.3 Ensuring sector-wide equity for PGR

Approximately one in six respondents to these questions (predominantly HEIs) believe that it is **important to focus on equity across all PGR routes** and suggest that UKRI could prioritise that in its work on rights and conditions. One HEI (Peer Group B) suggests that, currently, there are inconsistencies across the sector in postgraduate researchers' rights and conditions. Delivering consistency and quality/equality of PGR experience is something that organisations say is a significant challenge for the sector. Other organisations comment similarly that there should be fairness for all students and HEIs. An example suggested is the allocation of a minimum level of resources that any postgraduate researcher should have access to. Most such comments arise from HEIs and research institutes, with the remainder from students.

The student experience is very uneven and largely dependent upon your institution, your supervisor, and your funding. Whilst I have been treated fairly well by my university, I am aware anecdotally of friends within the same university who have been pressured to teach for free ('for the experience') and of others who have opportunities withheld because they refuse to comply with this ... the lack of any standardised PGR/GTA terms and conditions allows universities to exploit the labour and goodwill of PGR researchers and to package teaching and publications into the 'PG' experience rather than recognising these as 'staff' contributions to the university. As a result, the PGR experience at UK universities can often feel like a case of all give and no take for PG students. – Student, funded or part-funded by UKRI

Access no matter the background

Diving into a specific sub-theme within equity across the sector, one third of respondents that mention equity specify that prospective **postgraduate researchers should be able to access postgraduate opportunities regardless of their socio-economic background**, particularly when that background might change their funding approach. For example, a peer group A HEI suggested that there should be equity of experience for both funded and non-funded researchers, as there are differences in how those individuals might experience their time undertaking research (e.g. training opportunities, need to seek employment outside of studies). Respondents point out that the current system of rights and conditions needs to truly support students from a diversity of backgrounds. In this area, one respondent pointed

to the access and participation plan for the University of Lincoln as an example to provoke thought.¹⁵

5.1.4 Examining the PGR working environment and culture

Respondents mentioning the working environment are most concerned with remuneration, which is covered in more detail elsewhere. However, alongside comments about remuneration packages (such as including sick leave and pay, parental leave, and pensions, amongst other benefits employees see), respondents discussed the working environment more generally.

Responding students believe that the working hours of PGR are extensive and not enough recognition is given to the fact that they often work long hours. They would welcome support on this, either to assist in reducing hours spent working, or to ensure that their health, both mental and physical, is adequately looked after with those long hours.

This sub-theme in responses is closely connected with an overarching idea that there are systemic issues in academic culture at all levels. Students suggest that there are expectations within academia that postgraduate researchers will “just get the work done”, even if that means working through the night. Those individuals said that, with more rights, PGR working conditions could improve.

When respondents were asked more broadly what other areas could be examined besides the four focus areas, approximately one in six suggest that the academic culture should be reviewed, noting that researchers’ conditions may otherwise suffer.

Working environment is important to include in rights and conditions. Toxic supervision, unrealistic expectation of working hours and availability, limited annual leave, poor equipment and facilities are all massive factors influencing the productivity and mental health of researchers. The blurred lines between student and employee status are also a major concern as students are not aware of their rights and therefore feel trapped and unable to address problems that arise throughout their PhD. – Student, funding source not specified

5.1.5 Awareness of rights

Around one in ten respondents to these questions – mostly students and representative bodies – suggest that **awareness of postgraduate researchers’ rights is a challenge that should be prioritised**, and a similar proportion suggest this could be examined in greater detail, for example through research to understand existing channels of communication, and levels of awareness on particular issues. Students report that it can be difficult for them to know what their rights and conditions are, or what support is available to students in difficult conditions, particularly when seeking potential recourse for alleged bullying or harassment.

Meanwhile, representative bodies outline how postgraduate researchers are often unaware of their rights to, for example, access and organise in a trade union, particularly if they are undertaking teaching. Additionally, one organisation points out that the rights that an individual has depends on their exact role or status, and these can change on a regular basis depending if they are taking on a teaching role, for example.

¹⁵ University of Lincoln, 2020, Access and Participation Plan 2020-21 to 2024-25 (See https://www.lincoln.ac.uk/media/responsive2017/abouttheuniversity/governance/universitypolicies/UniversityOfLincoln_APP_2020-21_V1_10007151.pdf)

5.1.6 Supervision for postgraduate researchers

Supervisor and students' relationship

Some respondents comment that the relationship between supervisors and their students is one that should be reviewed as part of UKRI's work on rights and conditions. In particular, they feel there should be a **uniform approach across the sector to ensure supervisors are treating postgraduate researchers appropriately**, that working conditions are suitable, and that students do not experience harassment that affect their mental or physical wellbeing.

One supervisor notes that the power dynamic between students and academic staff can result in bad professional practice, while another believes this issue may be partially solved by classifying postgraduate researchers as staff.

Additionally, around one fifth of respondents to the earlier questions on models and access suggest that improved supervision for students is required. For example, a UKRI training grant holder organisation said that when PGR students are given "team" supervision of two or more supervisors there can be instances where there is no genuine engagement from the supervisory team. This can be problematic as students may then be studying without the full support of guidance from a primary supervisor. Respondents did not propose a direct solution in this regard.

It is vital that supervision is tailored to individual students and projects but underpinned by clear expectations around engagement with students and duty of care. We would welcome greater promotion of (and support for) co-supervision, especially between HEIs and organisations like [us]. –
Organisation, research institute

Training and support for supervisors

Additionally, students, supervisors, and organisations say that **supervisors need to be given access to more, or better, training in supervision** as not every person chosen to be a supervisor has the skills necessary to ensure they can provide the support needed. Supervisors can have a significant impact on postgraduate researchers' experience, and a few respondents report harassment and bullying problems within the supervision process, noting that one in four doctorate students in a 2019 Nature survey felt they had been bullied.¹⁶ The charity which shared this evidence says that bullying, discrimination, and harassment can affect students and staff at all levels of the research system. One supervisor notes that the power dynamic between students and academic staff can result in bad professional practice, while another believes this issue may be partially solved by classifying postgraduate researchers as staff.

It is important to consider how supervisors are supported as well as PGR [students] – it should not be seen as a "failure" or "wrong" when PhD supervision is difficult and supervisors should be given support and an environment which allows them to feel comfortable sharing their experience – HEI, Peer group B

Supervisor training and accreditation, career development programme. Supporting good supervisory practice by recognising the value of good supervision and acknowledging the time needed to do it well. – HEI, Peer group B

¹⁶ Independent, 2013, Teaching is not its own reward: Durham University in unpaid jobs row (See <https://www.independent.co.uk/student/news/teaching-is-not-its-own-reward-durham-university-in-unpaid-jobs-row-8894458.html>)

5.2 Respondents' suggestions for action

This section pulls together the key points of actions suggested by respondents in their response to questions on rights and conditions.

- Clear information for new postgraduate researchers that set out their rights and conditions during their period of study. This could be a concrete method to ensure that all PGR students are aware of their rights and standardised across all UKRI to ensure consistency in PGR experience irrespective of individuals' backgrounds. For those funded by other means, this could also provide a solid foundation for other postgraduate researchers, but would require a commitment from every institution and funding body to adhere to a standard contract.
- Consideration towards a sustainable funding model for postgraduate researchers in respect of their status within HEIs, where the researcher is compensated for their time in terms of teaching and ensuring equity across the sector.¹⁷ This is currently a substantial problem within Higher Education, and respondents were keen to highlight this as an area that they have a desire to see resolved.
- Mandatory supervisory training may be required for all supervisors, including supporting candidates from diverse backgrounds. Respondents of all types point out that supervisors have a large impact on postgraduate researchers' experience, but may not always have the skills required to maximise their input. Training provided by UKRI or another central body could ensure that supervision across the sector is more consistent and high quality.
- Potential funding to include provision of mental and physical health check-ups and treatment for postgraduate researchers. With many PGR students experiencing mental or physical health issues but being in a position where access to money for treatment is difficult, respondents would welcome a dedicated fund to provide support.
- Further consultation is required before proposals to major changes on postgraduate researcher status are made, particularly with regard to students funded from sources other than UKRI. Organisations in particular warn of the problems that could occur if postgraduate researchers' status is changed too quickly or too drastically.
- Respondents suggest greater professionalism for supervisors may be required, as this is not the "main" role of an academic, and some suggest the quality of supervision could be a more important metric in grant allocation. Some respondents suggest taking a harder stance against negative supervisor/student relationships.
- Supervisors could sign a Code of Conduct upon accepting a student to ensure accountability. This Code of Conduct could be a standard agreement used to promote a high quality PGR experience. Currently, some students believe there can

¹⁷ Independent, 2013, Teaching is not its own reward: Durham University in unpaid jobs row (See <https://www.independent.co.uk/student/news/teaching-is-not-its-own-reward-durham-university-in-unpaid-jobs-row-8894458.html>)

be little oversight of supervision and are uncertain of the best means of recourse, but suggest that a formal agreement could be a step in the right direction.

6. Funding and financial support

Call for Input question

'Funding and financial support' is a government-directed activity and the final key area that UKRI is actioning on within the PGR New Deal. As stated in the CFI, UKRI is the largest single funder of PGR training in the UK, financially supporting between 20 and 30 percent of the UK's postgraduate researchers. Meanwhile, universities invest their own resources in PGR training. They also receive funding from charitable or public sector funders. Other organisations from the private, public, and charitable sectors sometimes also support PGR students. Funding can therefore be complex, with several sources supporting one postgraduate research student, while others may be self-funded and rely on loans or income from other sources.

The two questions that drew the majority of responses on these themes were:

- Are there any additional areas that we should explore in our work on funding and financial support?
- What issues should we prioritise in our work on funding and financial support?

For context, readers should be reminded that inflation climbed rapidly while the Call for Input was open and, after it closed, UKRI announced it would increase its minimum student stipend by 10% on the previously announced level for the 2022 to 2023 academic year.

6.1 Summary of common themes arising

The following themes are raised by respondents and are ordered from most to least frequently mentioned.

Stipends and direct financial support for postgraduate researchers

The level of financial support provided to PGR students is a common theme across all consultation questions, with one in three respondents suggesting remuneration could be increased, funding periods extended, and wider funding arrangements reviewed.

Ensure funding reflects personal circumstances

Concerns were raised by around one in six about stipends and funding options being "one size fits all", and respondents suggest that funding options should be flexible and account for personal circumstances, including caring responsibilities, disabilities, geographical location, and international students.

Increased transparency of funding applications

Around one in six respondents (who come from all backgrounds) believe that funding applications and decision-making processes can act as barriers for PGR applicants. They suggest greater transparency of opportunities, and evaluation criteria, will allow for a more informed and less biased application process.

Equity of funding for different disciplines and institutions

Funding disparities between disciplines and institutions was raised as a limiting factor for PGR accessibility to social science and arts and humanities subjects. Around one in ten respondents stress the need for a balanced approach to funding different disciplines and institutions.

Industry and institution collaborations

Enhanced collaboration between HEIs and industry to provide greater funding opportunities is welcomed to boost the volume of studentships and sponsorships by around one in ten respondents, as well as onward employment opportunities for PGR students.

6.1.1 Stipends and direct financial support for postgraduate researchers

Student stipends

Around one third of respondents (both individuals and organisations) believe that, at the time of the Call for Input, there was a need to increase student stipends in line with current increases in the cost of living and rising rates of inflation. A similar proportion of respondents note that this area of funding should be explored further, but also treated as a priority.

The rising costs of living and inflation are the two main factors that are cited in relation to increased stipends. Rises in food costs and household bills are areas of concern for PGR students, and they report that this concern is negatively impacting their mental health and wellbeing, causing undue stress, anxiety, and depression. They would welcome a stipend that reflects the living wage, which would ameliorate this impact.

Students note that the cost of living is not equal across the UK, with specific reference to studying in Bristol, Cambridge, London, and Oxford, and feel their current stipend does not sufficiently support higher associated living costs. This raises concerns for the growing proportion of PGR students that may be living below the poverty line.

Respondents further highlight the contribution that PGR students make to the research and innovation sector and argue that stipends should reflect this. They emphasise that a low stipend may reduce the quality of work and can result in postgraduate researchers ending their studies prematurely.

UKRI should prioritise increasing the PhD stipend in line with increasing living costs in the UK. For many students, postgraduate research is becoming increasingly financially unsustainable. I fear the increasing void between the stipend and the cost of living will have significant impact on the quality of research postgraduate researchers are able to conduct and will drive current students to have to end their postgraduate research. – Student, funded or part-funded by UKRI

Respondents highlight across all consultation questions that increasing stipends relative to the national living wage should be treated as a priority. They emphasise that the current stipend does not adequately support living costs and has a negative impact upon students' mental health by increasing stress and anxiety, taking focus away from their studies.

Funding and financial support (e.g. stipends and fieldwork funding) is grossly inadequate, particularly for those who have caring responsibilities. Most researchers I know have multiple other income streams and cannot afford to live on their stipend. This results in poor mental health. – Student, not funded by UKRI

In addition, **the level of stipend is viewed by some as a barrier for applicants considering PGR**, and current students report struggling to support themselves throughout their study. The topic of access is discussed in more detail in 6.1.2.

As previously noted, after the Call for Input closed, UKRI announced an increase in its minimum student stipend by 10% on the previously announced level for the 2022 to 2023 academic year. This largely addresses immediate inflationary pressures by keeping the real-

terms value of the stipend fairly consistent. However, this does not mitigate concerns entirely, and other responses specifically raise concern about the level of funding in the longer term.

Additional work

Respondents say that stipends do not currently provide sufficient financial support for some researchers, who can subsequently be forced to source extra income or funding elsewhere. Postgraduate researchers can face limitations in the number of working hours they can undertake due to restrictions in their funding contracts, for example, one NERC funded student reported that they were only allowed to work six additional hours per week to gain earnings – this aligns to Research Council guidance that stipulates teaching should be compatible with training, with a maximum of six hours per week recommended.

One UKRI funded student notes that additional work (e.g. teaching or demonstrating) is not guaranteed for all PGR students as it varies by department. A representative body furthers this, reporting that there is often no formal procedure to recruit PGR students to teach which can result in supervisors approaching individuals with work offers and in “some PGR students being unfairly disadvantaged which can hamper access to routes out of financial hardship”.

Offer salaries with workers’ rights, including sick pay, maternity leave, and national insurance eligibility

Around one in eight respondents commenting on these questions (mainly students and supervisors) note that, in their view, PGR students should be regarded as full-time contracted staff due to their long working hours, limited student benefits, and their contributions to research efforts and teaching. They also raise concerns that, when compared to graduate roles and opportunities, undertaking PGR is less financially attractive, especially after studying at undergraduate level while not earning a salary.

Salaried opportunities could, some respondents argue, provide postgraduate researchers with workers’ rights and offer greater financial security, allowing them to take paid sick leave, parental leave, and have holiday entitlement. Contracts may also allow postgraduate researchers to contribute national insurance payments, pension contributions, and have to have their income source recognised by mortgage providers. This was emphasised by mature students who have entered their PGR from industry and feel they cannot afford to miss these payments and lose benefits over the duration of their studies.

Concern was also raised by students around the level of support being provided, particularly if circumstances change. One comments that:

We conduct the vast majority of the research in universities, yet we are all really worried about being able to afford the cost of living and most certainly have no financial reserves to pay for unexpected things (like dental surgery if we broke a tooth). – Student, funded or part-funded by UKRI

Students report how the current stipend arrangements limit the amount they can spend on childcare, thus impacting on time they can devote to studies. Parents outline how, because the stipend is not recognised as income from employment, in England and Scotland they are only eligible for 15 hours of free childcare and cannot claim additional tax-free childcare. This can also act as a deterrent for some students to become parents whilst studying due to fears of not being able to afford childcare, disproportionately impacting women.

Some students, supervisors, and HEIs reflect that the introduction of salaried PGR positions should be aligned to the dissolution of self-funded applicants. On this point, one

representative body highlights that a high proportion of its students enrol in part-time study, and subsequently have to self-fund due to limited funding opportunities. Meanwhile, another representative body discusses postgraduate researchers' reasoning behind self-funding their doctorates, outlining how some minority ethnic students may not pursue a funded doctorate as they are not offered in topics they may be interested in. Moreover, within its response, UCU acknowledges that a higher proportion of self-funded students are from marginalised groups. In addition, current students note frustration that self-funding can limit the training and support they may receive, and note that salaries could open opportunities to ensure that existing self-funded students receive the same training and development opportunities as their funded peers.

In its response, the Russell Group,¹⁸ which represents 24 research intensive universities and receives the majority of UKRI's funding for PGR, notes that "making postgraduate researchers employees in respect of their doctoral research would have major financial implications, which would have to be fully funded". Taking account of pension contributions, income tax, national insurance and council tax, it calculated that PGR students would receive at least £832.61 less income pro rata during their studies, and HEIs would incur £5,373 additional costs per student through employer contributions, if they were to become employees receiving the full-time national minimum wage. Under its calculations, UKRI would incur additional costs of £3,107.¹⁹ It argued that available funding was better invested in directly increasing support to students.

However, the Russell Group also states that:

more can be done to mirror good practice around sick leave, parental and care leave and working conditions and to align PGR and staff rights wherever possible. UKRI has moved a fair way towards improving the conditions of PGR stipends within the current model, notably with parental and sick leave: this is an area which could be developed further in collaboration with other funders via BEIS' Funders' Forum. Different entitlements to childcare support, while ultimately an issue for Government, could also usefully be raised by UKRI and could assist in supporting a wider range of candidates to pursue further study.

In 2021, University College Union (UCU) published its 'Postgraduate Researchers as Staff' manifesto. In its response to UKRI's consultation,²⁰ UCU suggests that:

[Our] campaign's manifesto sets out some of the initial ways in which universities and funders should provide PGR [students] with stronger rights, better respect, and the protections and benefits of staff members within UK universities. UCU's ultimate primary campaign objective here, however, has to be balanced with its other objective: that any change must be of no detriment for any already marginalised groups of PGR [students]. Put similarly, in relation to BEIS policy objectives, any 'new deal' must be a 'better deal'. There are a number of different ways in which 'staff' or 'de facto staff' status could be obtained and it has been noted from the start that there must be serious consideration of how any change may positively and/or negatively impact access to postgraduate research in terms of both

¹⁸ The Russell Group published its response to the Call for Input. See: Russell Group (May 2022) [A New Deal for postgraduate researchers \(russellgroup.ac.uk\)](https://www.russellgroup.ac.uk/postgraduate-researchers)

¹⁹ To note, these figures were calculated in May 2022, before the UKRI increased its minimum spend in October.

²⁰ UCU also published its response to the Call for Input. See UCU (June 2022) [UCU - Getting a better deal: our submission to the UKRI consultation](#)

overall numbers of postgraduate researchers and for particular groups of marginalised people.

There appears to be a degree of alignment between the Russell Group and UCU, both that there is scope to further improve PGR students' terms and conditions and (to some degree) that employing postgraduate researchers has the potential to impact the researchers and sector in a number of ways, some of which may be undesirable. UCU does note, however, that such impacts may be part of a welcome trade-off in terms of rights, support and conditions for postgraduate researchers, and that the possible negative impacts on disabled, migrant, and self-funded students from loss of student status are dependent on policy and resourcing decisions by government and funders.

Extending the funding period

Around one in fifteen respondents (half of which are HEIs) comment that the **current funding period lasts three or three and a half years, depending on provider, but students note that this can conflict with an expected doctorate completion time of four years**. Some postgraduate researchers refer to a thesis "writing up period" between the end of their funded period and their HEI's submission deadline, and suggest that this should be funded too as it can result in taking longer to write up or not submitting the final thesis.

Some PGR students highlight that the current three to three and a half year funding period is not competitive internationally, impacts on the quality of the research delivered, and reduces the UK's standard when compared globally. On this point, one student suggests that "it may be helpful to convene a taskforce to consider international comparators and examples of effective practice in order to ensure the New Deal takes advantage of the latest thinking on doctoral education across the globe".

Such a funding period limits the accessibility of studying a PhD. The need to self-fund the final year of study contributes to the dominance of people from advantaged backgrounds in postgraduate research. – Student, funded or part-funded by UKRI

One student questions whether the three-year funding period that is commonly found in arts and humanities subjects is sufficient, given increased expectations around training and development for postgraduate researchers alongside their study.

A small proportion of students, supervisors, and HEIs (fewer than ten) suggest that the **funding period should not only cover the fourth year of study but should also provide wider support**. This could include providing five years of funding that incorporate other training and additional skills opportunities, an approach seen in funding models within the US and within some European countries (France and Switzerland are specifically noted). One HEI notes that a longer funding period would allow postgraduate researchers to continue contributing to future research endeavours and grow their CVs. Current PGR students agree with this as they feel there is an imbalanced ratio between the number of funded doctorate studentships and the number of funded postdoctoral posts available to researchers.

Review of wider funding

PGR students and institutions also apply for and receive supplementary funding to support research activities such as laboratory time, supervision, and training. Students may benefit from the Research Training Support Grant (RTSG), which supports expenses related to their research, through their research council. In addition, in England Research England provides funding as part of the Quality-related Research (QR) funding to institutions to subsidise such activities, namely through the Research Degree Programme (RDP) supervision fund.

Funding councils in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland have their own mechanisms to support postgraduate research.

However, 12 HEIs (mostly Peer Group A institutions) and the Russell Group feel that supplementary grants and funding are insufficient for the successful delivery and supervision of PGR courses. RDP QR funding is perceived by this group to be at an insufficient level to fully support the cost of PGR supervision as it is only provided for domestic UKRI-funded students. Two HEIs argue that providing QR funding that recognises all students would compensate for the home-overseas fee differential. The Russell Group states that:

An uplift in QR and its equivalents in the devolved nations would put UKRI-funded and other PGR [students] on a more even footing. This would allow universities to take on more PGR [students] themselves than they otherwise could and support PGR [students] better. It also makes it more viable for industry and charities to fund more PGR [students] – and, indeed, for some individuals to fund themselves. Because an uplift in QR improves available support for UKRI and non-UKRI PGR [students] alike and makes recruiting PGR [students] more sustainable however they are funded.

The RTSG is discussed by four respondents who believe the level of grant does not sufficiently cover the full costs of student projects, and subsequently requires additional contributions from supervisors, putting supervisors with less funding at a disadvantage.

6.1.2 Ensure funding reflects personal circumstances

Disadvantaged and under-represented groups

The need to adjust funding models to the needs of disadvantaged and under-represented groups is highlighted across all consultation questions. When asked directly about funding, around one in six respondents (both individuals and organisations) believe that funding is a great limitation as it does not cover full wider costs such as course materials.

HEIs, students, and supervisors report how the Covid-19 pandemic saw individuals from minority ethnic backgrounds, those with disabilities, from lower-income households and those with caring responsibilities be disproportionately impacted, resulting in increased applications for hardship funds. One HEI states that such funds could be prioritised within funding developments, emphasising that UKRI needs to consider the current distribution of research funding if it is to enable a diverse cohort of students across a wider range of institutions.

Respondents report socio-economic discrepancies that influence student access to PGR funding, particularly for minority ethnic students, and can discourage such applicants to apply for PGR study, or to withdraw from their course if additional time is required once their funding ends.

One HEI specifically notes that, currently, students from 'non-traditional' backgrounds can be less likely to gain a funded studentship as they have less to differentiate themselves when applying for competitive funding. In November 2021, UKRI's Research England and the Office for Students (OfS) announced the outcomes of a joint £8 million funding competition for projects to improve access and participation for Black, Asian and minority ethnic groups

in postgraduate research,²¹ which was seen as a “helpful first step” to increasing the representation of disadvantaged students and widening participation.

Some PGR students report that the current stipend level is insufficient to meet their needs and that they must provide their own financial supplement (for instance by seeking additional employment), however, they note that this is not always possible for people from disadvantaged and/or under-represented backgrounds. Respondents suggest this acts to reduce the diversity of PGR cohorts to those who can subsidise their living expenses, for instance if they are from a higher-income background, and ultimately reduces the diversity of the UK’s research and innovation sector.

Not only does this [the current stipend] mean that PhD students are struggling financially, thus negatively impacting their wellbeing and making them less able to produce quality research, but it also means students are more likely to end their studies altogether. Additionally, this discourages potential applicants, particularly those from lower-income backgrounds who cannot supplement their stipend. The overall result is smaller, less diverse, and less productive cohorts of postgraduate students, which is ultimately a detriment to national efforts in research and development. – Student, funded or part-funded by UKRI

Doctoral loans, open to postgraduate researchers beginning their studies from August 2022 onwards, provide an alternative funding mechanism, similar to undergraduate loans. One HEI highlights the need for an evaluation of doctoral loans’ impact on supporting access to doctoral education, noting that the 2019 Future PhD Student Survey recognised that such loans were insufficient to fund a doctorate in isolation, thereby potentially reducing their effectiveness to promote better access. This HEI also notes that such loans are not accessible for members of every community, particularly for some Muslim students as they are not Sharia-compliant.

Support for part-time postgraduate researchers

Part-time students are commonly carers or have disabilities that mean they study for a longer duration of time. Respondents, mainly students and charities, **feel that current funding models are not flexible enough to account for the needs of these researchers.**

Part-time funding models pay the same stipends pro-rate as full-time models. This means that part-time students receive less funding year-on-year which, respondents suggest, can leave some students unable to pay bills and support their cost of living. Students with disabilities and caring responsibilities are often unable to work alongside their degrees, so a higher stipend or cost of living support could allow them to have the same standard of living as other PGR students.

When asked about considerations in this regard, one PGR student states:

A huge issue for me as a disabled student is that I cannot study full-time or work alongside part-time study because of my disability. This means that I am always limited to part-time study only, and thus a 50% pro-rated funding towards living costs. This means as a PGR [student] at current research council rates I would have to live on less than £8000 per year. This is just not feasible, especially with escalating living costs. – Student, funding source not specified

²¹ See: <https://www.ukri.org/about-us/research-england/research-excellence/widening-participation-in-postgraduate-research/improving-black-asian-and-minority-ethnic-students-access-to-postgraduate-research-projects/>

PGR students who are parents report struggling with sourcing and affording suitable childcare in cases where none is provided by their institution. One respondent states that their university does not offer support for affordable or student-oriented childcare, thereby requiring them to source and pay for a private nursery which cost £16,000 of their £17,000 stipend.

There needs to be affordable childcare available in order for PhDs to finish. Only allowing 1.0 FTE or 0.5 FTE makes life incredibly difficult for parents too because having children means you may want to only work 3 or 4 days a week but this is not possible currently (or it is, your stipend just doesn't match it). – Student, funded or part-funded by UKRI²²

One HEI (peer group A) states that, based on their institution's data, part-time doctorate students are 20% less likely to complete their course compared to their full-time colleagues. This is a result of part-time students requiring to self-fund a higher proportion of their living costs, making the part-time route less attractive and accessible for those from disadvantaged backgrounds, and those unable to work alongside their part-time study.

One respondent states that funding for part-time study is harder to apply for due to limited options available. As well as this, such funding streams are not regulated as critically as full-time options, meaning there is less consistency across different providers. This is unattractive and provides barriers for students wishing to study part-time.

Respondents feel that part-time models should be flexible and adjustable in relation to the support required by each individual, for instance through extensions to their study period and funding. Although this will have an impact on resources, they believe students will feel more supported, and be more likely to successfully complete their studies.

Support for international students

Around one in ten respondents welcome UKRI's announcement in 2019 that up to 30% of places on UKRI funded doctoral programmes could go to international students, which allows EU and global students to be funded, and provides greater diversity and perspectives within the UK research and innovation sector.

In addition, respondents feel that allowing 30% of funding to be allocated to international students is insufficient to allow the UK to develop a diverse and global research platform. It should be noted, for context, that this 30% figure is neither a target nor a quota.

One HEI (peer group B) believes that UKRI funding should be protected for UK students, as non-UK students score higher across DTP application processes, meaning that home students face very stiff competition to succeed. To resolve this, they suggest that UKRI should consider if Research England's research degree programme supervision funding should be paid to universities for UKRI-funded international students.

Some respondents (fewer than 20) feel that **greater efforts could be made to increase the collaboration between UK and international institutions**. One research institute suggests that the New Deal could consider whether existing international collaboration schemes for fellowships and professorships could be adapted for PGR students to improve international collaboration. Another HEI feels that funding could be considered to allow universities to develop dual-degree options with institutions across the globe. This, it is argued, will benefit students' experience, promote research collaboration, and allow students to study in the UK and their home countries.

²² It should be noted that UKRI's policy for part-time study is to allow anywhere within the range between 50-100% FTE, although some HEIs may limit this to 50% or 100%.

Some respondents (fewer than ten) feel that **comparatively high international fees impact on the affordability and accessibility of PGR programmes in the UK**. One HEI reports that international PGR fees are unregulated and has seen above-inflation rises in most institutions resulting in an increased funding gap between home and international students. Furthermore, some highlight that the higher fees they face in comparison to UK domicile students and the potential impact this has on EDI and a long-term reduction on the quality of the UK's research and innovation and its competitiveness on a global scale. Several, therefore, suggest decreasing fees to a similar level as for domestic students, or waiving fees for international students entirely. Visa application costs are substantial for international students and can be a limiting factor for those unable to afford them. Currently, international students may be forced to reject offers due to costs unknown to them prior to application – respondents highlight factors such as health insurance, travel, and other on-boarding expenses also play a part. Respondents suggest that **funding providers could consider providing support for these applications through relocation grants to cover these expenditures to reduce their financial and bureaucratic burden**, either through increasing stipend allowances, or by offering interest free loans.

Funding should consider location of study

Minimum UKRI PGR stipend rates are fixed across the country, except for a London weighting for those living in the centre of the capital, and respondents – students and HEIs – raise concern about the differential in the cost of living across the country which may result in PGR students using a higher proportion of their allocated stipends for rent and bills, thereby limiting them financially as a result of where they chose to study.

A transparent mechanism for assessing the cost of living for PGR [students] in specific geographical locations would be a step towards improving on the hidden poverty that many researchers experience. – HEI, Peer Group B

Another HEI expands on this, suggesting that stipends should not only be relative to geographic cost of living, but match salaries of graduate opportunities in the area.

Students comment that developing funding models that are geographically weighted should be a priority, as this can negatively impact their health and wellbeing, especially with rising rates of inflation.

6.1.3 Increased transparency of applications for funding from UKRI

UKRI does not fund students directly. Instead, it provides funding to HEIs to support PGR students. The PGR funding through UKRI's research councils – known collectively as “training grants” are awarded through competitions.

Around one in six respondents to questions on funding **feel that UKRI could review the transparency of funding application processes**. They highlight a perceived need for an expansion of funding opportunities, clarity of available funding streams, and increased transparency of decision-making processes and application success rates.

For example, one training grant holder refers to the studentship funding application process as confusing, recognising that different funding models are available to support PGR study, but that varied application approaches across different models result in a lack of clarity. They would welcome greater transparency and a mapping of funding routes and opportunities available to students.

While the different models available to support doctoral study and funding offer a range of possibilities, it can be a highly complex and confusing landscape for students – and indeed HEIs, IROs and other partner organisations – to navigate these models and their different application

approaches. Funding within specific doctoral models needs to be more clearly explained and set out for all stakeholders. The format of a CDP [Collaborative Doctoral Partnership] and its funding, for example, is regularly misunderstood by research offices at HEIs. – Organisation, other

6.1.4 Increased transparency of applications for funding for doctorates from HEIs

Around a third of respondents that discuss application processes suggest that there should be an open register of available funding opportunities, offering **transparency in funding routes and ensuring students are aware of the routes they are eligible for** that are available to them, potentially classified by discipline. Another organisation indicates that this would allow funding bodies to maximise collaboration, thus increasing funding opportunities for students.

Increased transparency of the studentship application process, including the decision-making process and success rates would also be welcomed. Students would welcome being given more information on what criteria assessors are working against, which can sometimes be unclear. Respondents suggest that providing feedback for unsuccessful applications would be helpful for future applications.

One training grant holder notes how a lack of transparency within the application and decision-making process may, inadvertently, create opportunities for bias.

Strategies that seek to tackle bias in recruitment generally seek to remove bias within the process of selecting students only, e.g. blinding applications. However, if unconscious bias and other systemic barriers disadvantage candidates within the recruitment process it follows that these barriers will have been faced throughout a candidate's career to date. – Organisation, UKRI training grant holder

6.1.5 Equity of funding for different disciplines and institutions

Respondents (mainly HEIs, representative bodies, and supervisors) discuss the **need to assess where allocated funding is being spent. Some raise this with regard to fieldwork expenditures and resource costs, but most with a primary focus on discipline and subject funding divisions.** HEIs highlight that STEM and popular subjects receive greater grant funding to support delivery. Institutions that do not receive such grants and which cannot afford to supplement them can therefore face limitations in course delivery.

Current funding models, such as Doctoral Training Partnerships (DTPs) and Centres for Doctoral Training (CDTs) are discussed by around one in ten respondents. Some criticise the model, arguing that they do not provide enough flexibility and are limited to institutions that have a partnership which can diminish funding opportunities for institutions without partnerships, even if they have diverse PGR populations and strong research degree environments. One representative body believes these models to be limiting, and that funding that is matched by an institution and UKRI allows expenditure to go further, but can be restrictive for institutions with smaller research budgets. For context, it should be noted that matched funding is a requirement for some, but not all, DTPs and CDTs.

One organisation suggests that the New Deal should “deliver increased transparency in how DTP funding is allocated across the seven disciplinary research councils, and to protect funding for SHAPE²³ disciplines” – but does not specify what form such transparency might take. Another organisation highlights differences between funding for STEM and arts and

²³ Social Sciences, Humanities, the Arts for People, and the Economy

humanities subjects, stating self-funding is more common within the latter. Typically, greater transparency is welcomed around decision-making processes.

Students, supervisors, and organisations report that arts and humanities more commonly receive funding cuts, with one noting that “arts and humanities researchers are victimised because the industry funding that supports STEM students is not available to them”.

In support of this, one representative body states that “the pool of funding across HEIs should be diversified to support and strengthen pockets of research excellence, wherever they are found, particularly for institutions who remain locked out of DTPs”.

Another representative body applauds the DTP model as it allows institutions to select students and research projects to be funded by their allocation. They highlight that flexible funding approaches allow institutions to play to their strengths in supporting particular research areas and prioritise funding for projects in emerging research areas.

A small group of students and supervisors (fewer than ten) suggest that funding allocations could be merit based and reflect students’ and institutions’ academic achievements.

6.1.6 Industry and institution working collaborations

Collaborations between HEI and industry collaborations are highlighted – predominantly by organisations – as an area to explore when developing funding streams and strategies. Collaborative funding such as Cooperative Awards in Science & Technology (CASE) are discussed as successful methods for providing flexible funding that engages with industry.

The perceived benefits of institution and industry collaboration include: the potential for increased investment to HEIs from external sectors thereby reducing their financial burden, opening employment opportunities for PGR graduates, and higher quality research and innovation outputs. Studentships and funding awards allow PGR students to work closely with industry while delivering research that can be applied to their business needs. Respondents do, however, raise concern that such relationships have the potential to create bias in research outputs, especially in areas with conflicts of interest.

Another HEI states that enhanced collaboration will open internship and industry study group opportunities that further augment industry input and employment opportunities for graduates.

Students and organisations state that **this area could be prioritised within UKRI’s funding development process, to open opportunities to studentships and more collaborative awards for businesses**. Respondents note, however, the importance to retain a balance of funding between PGR and research and innovation investments to ensure a diverse UK research output.

6.2 Respondents’ suggestions for action

This section pulls together the key points of actions suggested by respondents in their response to questions on funding and financial support.

- Provide flexible funding options that are, at least, equivalent to relative living wages. This includes offering stipends that are geographically weighted beyond the London weighting and are reflective of rising costs of living and inflation.
- Extend the funding period to cover at least four years of study to fund PGR students for their maximum completion time of four years, but also to provide wider support for other training opportunities to allow researchers to grow their CVs and transferable skills.

- Review the level of funding provided through the RTSG and RDP QR funding to ensure this is at a sufficient level to ensure the successful delivery and supervision of PGR courses for all students.
- Provide funding based on personal circumstances, with increased support for those with caring responsibilities, disabilities, and for those from low-income backgrounds. This could include providing further financial support, providing a more inclusive admissions model for funding, and greater flexibility for students with disabilities.
- Support international students, for example, through relocation loans or grants for visa applications, insurance and travel which can act as barriers for PGR study in the UK and collaborate with international institutions to develop dual-degree options across the globe, allowing students to study in the UK and their home countries.
- Offer an 'open-book' approach to funding applications by publishing a centralised database of opportunities and providing criteria for, and feedback on, applications. This would clarify available funding streams and offer transparency to decision-making processes and success rates so students are aware how to improve their applications.
- Refocus discipline and institution funding allocations based upon emerging research topics across social sciences and the arts and humanities, as well as the sciences. Provide flexible funding approaches and cross-council opportunities which step away from DTP models that may require partnership and matched funding.
- Increase industry and institution collaboration through internships, funding awards, and industry research input. Respondents suggest UKRI could achieve this through implementing models that last the full duration of a doctorate course to attract industry investment. Studentships could also be explored in a similar vein.

7. Future engagement, and other considerations

Call for Input question

Respondents were asked which areas UKRI could usefully focus on, or other questions that should be explored that were not covered in the four focus areas. Respondents were also asked what other factors UKRI should consider as it develops its engagement plans for future New Deal work.

7.1 Summary of common themes arising

The following themes are raised by respondents and are ordered from most to least frequently mentioned.

Communication and collaboration

Two in five respondents reference an open communication network between UKRI and PGR students as a factor to consider during the development of engagement plans. This includes providing accessible active communication frameworks with PGR students and prospective students to ensure a diverse intake. Additionally, respondents would welcome more communication by UKRI within and without academia, as this lends itself to other areas aspects such as employability and PGR support networks.

EDI considerations and accessibility in communication

Around one in three respondents would like to see communications designed to be accessible to individuals from all backgrounds, delivered through such channels that are proven to be most successful, and to include a diverse range of views. Succession planning should be integrated within engagement plans to ensure continuous feedback and engagement from PGR students.

PGR experience and feedback frameworks

Around one in ten respondents – both individuals and organisations – emphasise the need for transparent stakeholder engagement throughout the development of the New Deal to ensure open communication and input is facilitated for institutions. The experiences of postgraduate researchers, which differ based on their background and context, also needs to be taken into consideration, so their feedback will be vital to take on board in future developments.

7.1.1 Communication and collaboration

Around two in five respondents commenting are keen to suggest that communication and collaboration are both important elements of PGR. Respondents suggest that UKRI could focus on guidance and communication, both within the academic environment, and in the broader research and innovation sector. Around one fifth of those commenting believe that engagement plans should incorporate open communication and collaboration with existing PGR students, and prospective students.

HEIs emphasise that direct engagement with the student community will be a key aspect of the New Deal's development. One student highlights that this allows for a collective pool of intelligence to be formed to brainstorm solutions. One HEI believes that current engagement with PGR students could be improved and that national networking is required to fully engage students with the New Deal plans, noting the challenge here given that every institution is unique.

Focus groups are suggested as a potential method of collaboration. One HEI highlights that these can help to understand existing PGR issues within both within institutions, but also

more widely across the UK. In person events are suggested (by both individuals and organisations) as the most accessible means of engagement for students, while surveys as a means of engagement are less popular, students remark. A small number of students and organisations (under ten) note that surveys and written consultations can be time-consuming and provide difficulties in response articulation and may risk engaging only with students who are already engaged.

Respondents also suggest the use of student representatives, or course representatives, to form a panel for UKRI New Deal engagement. This could provide direct lines of engagement with representatives in student bodies to provide specific PGR outreach and allow PGR students to be consulted throughout the development and treated as partners within the process.

One research institute discusses the prevalence of subject associations as communication channels for reaching research students in different disciplines. They suggest that research institutions could collaborate with UKRI to support engagement efforts through their communication channels.

Students emphasise the need for UKRI to use open communication methods, such as social media and email, so they do not miss important updates. One student notes they only heard of the New Deal consultation after speaking with their supervisor. Another was not aware of UKRI before participating in the consultation, and believe increased advertisement would enable greater engagement.

Interactive communication with stakeholders is suggested by individuals and organisations, due to some concerns that digital distribution methods, such as emails, may not be engaging enough, and lack authentic feedback opportunities.

It is also suggested that engagement could involve not just current PGR students, but prospective students too. This would allow an understanding of their views on how they could be supported through PGR study, why some students decide not to study, and awareness of research funding and opportunities.

Some comments around communication touch on the guidance given to prospective PGR students to ensure these point potential applicants to the most appropriate source of funding for each individual. Respondents also suggest that communication from UKRI to current students could focus on the student experience and voice. In addition, respondents would like to see UKRI provide clarity as it takes the New Deal forwards.

7.1.2 EDI considerations and accessibility in communication

Equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) considerations and accessibility were raised by around one third of respondents commenting on these questions as an area for UKRI to focus on for future engagement, to ensure that future communications are accessible to all. They suggest that updates are distributed to all PGR students through regular email updates and newsletters, methods that have proven most effective for communicating with PGR students. They also highlight that the language used should be inclusive and appropriate to the audience.

Nearly three in ten respondents to these questions emphasise that communication and engagement methods should have a diverse representation and should actively seek views from under-represented groups to portray an understanding of the diversity of student backgrounds. One HEI states that “without actively seeking out the views of under-represented constituencies no real change is likely to ensue”.

The consideration of embedding doctoral research groups nationally is recommended by one HEI. They suggest accompanying these groups with mentor programs that implement

links across disciplines and institutions. This will provide an accessible route to capturing advice from students from different backgrounds.

Respondents emphasise the requirement for succession planning to be integrated within engagement plans. They say that this will ensure continuous feedback and engagement from PGR students over time, allowing new students to be involved in future consultation processes. They also suggest that plans are made to continue gathering feedback from PGR students who complete their studies to gain reflective feedback upon their graduation. The use of exit interviews is suggested by one HEI for PGR students completing their studies, to provide objective feedback on their student experience to improve and support provision in the future.

One training grant holder notes that any future consultations could explore the motivations of those who choose not to apply for PGR. UKRI, it is suggested, could engage with leaders of minority communities to explore the best methods to engage and receive feedback.

Linked to this, HEIs and students emphasise the importance of directly engaging with people from non-traditional and/or more disadvantaged backgrounds. One HEI emphasises that methods used to gather diverse feedback require diverse collection methods. Collaboration with mission groups could support these approaches to understand the barriers to participation in PGR.

I think there should at least be some investigation into diversity and inclusion, not just race and sex but I think class/socio-economic background is important. I, for one, would like to see more support for working class individuals at earlier stages in science, this might be beyond the remit of the current proposal but I think it is something UKRI should be concerned with. Who knows how many brilliant minds are trapped in poverty-stricken areas and attending less than stellar schools? – Student, funding source not specified

7.1.3 PGR experience and feedback frameworks

Another issue raised by respondents is the overall PGR experience and the feedback frameworks they have access to. For future engagement in particular, respondents suggest that a personal approach to feedback and consultation is favourable, especially when this enables both large group and individual feedback. Around ten respondents explicitly note that wider stakeholders should be included in future consultation on the New Deal. One research institute suggests dialogue with professional societies to inform the New Deal development, while one student also suggests collaboration with the student union to ensure a wide range of feedback is gathered.

For future engagement, one supervisor suggests creating feedback streams with departments, schools, and faculty directors, as well as with supervisors and students, to collect well-informed perspectives from all individuals impacted by the New Deal.

A couple of supervisors stress the need to acknowledge negative feedback within consultations and engagements. They emphasise that being open to challenge and change is fundamental. One supervisor indicates that there are difficulties engaging students that struggle in the current system, and that developing a feedback framework that engages with them will be a useful resource for improvement in practice.

7.1.4 Looking ahead

Many respondents – predominantly organisations – say they are looking forward to hearing more about the New Deal in the future and how it is implemented, and some mention they are open to collaboration with UKRI around potential further development of the New Deal.

HEIs voice the need to maintain stakeholder engagement throughout the New Deal development, as one states that “universities often only have a chance to feedback about new processes after they have been announced to students”.

One mission group suggests the development of a high-level strategic document that outlines plans for all stakeholders in PGR with detailed plans tailored to groups of stakeholders that details actions and their benefits. They also suggest the publication of recommendations to key stakeholders on disseminating the details of the New Deal to members of their organisations.

I am pleased that UKRI is looking to develop a New Deal. I hope this is done in ways which truly benefit students, and we move away from the mentality that a PhD 'should be difficult' and that as previous generations 'had it tough' we should continue with this. I hope instead we see that a PhD should be intellectually challenging, but all other aspects should be as easy, accessible, and well-supported as possible. – Student, funded or part-funded by UKRI

A small number of additional comments reveal negative attitudes towards current PGR programmes and low expectations or no hopes for the future. A handful (four) believe the New Deal needs to be clearer, and more specific in its objectives and planned actions.

The current information provided about the New Deal and the phrasing of the questions itself in this Call for Input are all quite vague and non-specific. This begs the question: will the New Deal be vague and nonspecific? Any New Deal for postgraduate research needs to have clear, actionable, and measurable goals. And these need to be met. – Organisation, other

7.1.5 Other considerations

There were a range of other themes mentioned across all the questions by fewer than 5% of respondents who provided additional comment. These include, in order of frequency:

- comparing the UK PGR model with international peers – Germany, Spain, Switzerland, and Sweden are among countries highlighted
- sustainability – first to ensure that UKRI’s strategic decisions are made with the climate emergency in mind, and second, to ensure the UK’s PGR model is sustainable and nurtures good researchers and a strong research and innovation sector
- ensuring a consistent approach to teaching sector-wide, such that PGR students can find teaching opportunities and are supported to teach alongside their core studies
- ensuring that PGR students’ voices can be heard
- promoting collaboration among researchers both at home and internationally, to ensure the UK remains, and is viewed as, UK a leader in global research and innovation and
- including greater detail on governance in the New Deal to ensure sufficient scrutiny of plans against actions.

Other suggestions for future engagement include:

- collaboration with stakeholders within the devolved nations to create cohesive postgraduate models across the UK,
- communication with international comparators, and
- engagement with research councils to ensure implemented policies and actions are cohesive across disciplines.

8. Concluding remarks

This report has provided an overview of responses received to UKRI's Call for Input relating to the New Deal. It should be re-iterated at this point that, by its nature, this CFI is self-selecting in its response and cannot be said to be representative of the sector.

Based on the analysis of all 422 responses received to the CFI, this chapter draws together the themes and considerations most commonly raised by respondents on the New Deal, acknowledging instances where there is a range of views on certain topics. UKRI intends to respond to these shortly.

1. Reviewing funding

Respondents from all backgrounds raise concern about the current level of the UKRI stipend, at the time the CFI was live (February to May 2022). Around one third note how PGR students are struggling to make ends meet as the cost of living escalates, and as inflation in the UK accelerates, and that the current level does not provide sufficient financial support, directly impacting students' wellbeing.

After the Call for Input closed, UKRI announced an increase in its minimum student stipend by 10% on the previously announced level for the 2022 to 2023 academic year.

Around one quarter of respondents discussed the level of broader financial support available to PGR students. They suggested remuneration could be increased, funding periods extended, and wider funding arrangements reviewed. Individuals and organisations raised concerns about the perception that stipends and funding options are "one size fits all". Respondents suggest funding options should be flexible and account for personal circumstances, including caring responsibilities, disabilities, geographical location, and international students, or where situations change.

Funding disparities between disciplines and institutions are seen as a limiting factor for PGR accessibility to social science and arts and humanities subjects. Respondents stress the need for a balanced approach to funding different disciplines and institutions.

2. Increased flexibility in PGR models

In addition to funding flexibility, feedback from both individuals and organisations (around one fifth of respondents) suggests that greater flexibility is required in PGR models more generally to ensure that individuals from all backgrounds, particularly those with caring duties, disabilities, or who study part-time, can complete their studies and are fully supported to do so.

In particular, there is concern that PGR is not sufficiently flexible to accommodate part-time or distance learners and many feel this should be explored (in conjunction with HEIs) to support new PGR students, and to aid pre-existing students who may be struggling, not only to avoid individuals having to study long hours, but to boost the quality of research outputs. There is also concern that there is little flexibility in duration of funding, with many stating three years is not long enough for a doctorate.

3. Accessibility and outreach

There is recognition that, currently, PGR students are more likely to come from 'traditional' backgrounds, and that more work is required to ensure that PGR programmes are truly accessible to any individual, regardless of their background. Over one third suggest widening access routes to help boost representation (ordered from most to least frequently mentioned) of minority ethnic students, those with disabilities, those with mental health issues, as well as women, neurodivergent students, and mature students. Respondents believe that improved recruitment practices and wider promotion of PGR programmes is needed, including more information for any potential prospective student, irrespective of

background. Some comments reference a need for EDI training among students and higher education staff.

Respondents from all backgrounds believe that greater clarity is warranted to set out expectations of what is involved in: PGR funding applications, decision-making processes, and actual PGR study. This increased transparency of opportunities, and evaluation criteria, will – respondents argue – allow for a more informed and less biased application process.

4. Consistency in supervision

To ensure that PGR students all have a consistent and positive experience, students, organisations, and supervisors themselves suggest that mandatory and optional training should be required of supervisors – raised by around one in five respondents. Such training could cover the topics of EDI, mental health and wellbeing, misconduct, and bullying and harassment. This would ensure supervisors hold awareness of these issues and – as a result – mean students are treated equitably.

Consideration could also, it is suggested, be given to instances where PGR students have multiple supervisors, to ensure there is accountability in place, and that no student falls between the cracks, and to ensuring there are clear and supportive processes in place.

5. Boosting support

The physical health and mental health and wellbeing of PGR students is a key concern noted throughout the CFI. Over one quarter of respondents advocate for better support for PGR students and for parents and carers undertaking PGR as well as increased mental health support, suggesting that current levels of support for PGR can have a negative impact.

Individuals and organisations would like to see a more robust system of support in place possibly through UKRI creating and promoting formal networks of support run by institutions and/or by students themselves. Around one in six respondents suggest that working conditions such as work/life balance and working hours within academia for PGR students should be examined.

Consideration should be given to individuals experiencing changing circumstances during their period of study. Greater consistency across the sector is welcome, to ensure that the support available for, and being provided to, people from all backgrounds is on an equitable footing.

6. Support for international students

Increased support – both financial and non-financial – is also suggested for international PGR students by around one in ten respondents (inc. both HEIs and students). Such additional support could assist with onboarding and bureaucratic issues such as visas to ensure they have access to the same opportunities as domestic students.

7. Preparing for the future

While the preparation for, and potential employability within, either academic or non-academic roles is viewed by respondents as one primary goal for modern doctorate courses, around one quarter of respondents perceive the quality of careers information, advice and guidance to be currently insufficient, either in terms of its content, or being too heavily focused on academic routes rather than other options across the research and innovation system. Suggestions include higher quality careers information, advice, and guidance, earlier on in PGR students' period of study, to give a broader overview of possible options.

One quarter of respondents, comprising mostly students, believe it should be commonplace for transferable skills to be developed to increase their employability. This includes equipping students with high quality skills sets that extend across disciplines and build a well-rounded researcher. To that end, more opportunities and greater support for students to undertake

training and CPD to develop their skillset and to secure internship or placement opportunities outside of their home institution, to build up their skills (including soft skills) and confidence and boost employability would be welcomed by around one in five respondents. There may be benefit from greater focus on destinations of PGR graduates so students can acquire transferable skills during their study to benefit the UK research and innovation sector as a whole.

8. Facilitating collaboration with employers

As part of securing more placement opportunities for PGR students, students and supervisors would welcome support and input to boost collaboration with industry and other non-academic potential partner organisations. Not only, is it noted, could this increase opportunities for students to gain valuable experience and boost employability, but this could also increase opportunities for co-funding research and long-term research and innovation programmes that will cement the UK as a world-leader in this sector.

9. Reviewing the status of postgraduate researchers

There is extensive debate as to the relative drawbacks and merits of classifying staff as students, and there is no clear consensus among respondents. On the one hand, if PGR students were employed they would likely be entitled to workers' rights such as pensions, parental leave, and sick pay. On the other, this will have a number of consequences for recruitment and training and potentially resulting in fewer students being funded. Some suggest a compromise where PGR students could retain benefits more similar to those of workers, e.g. with 'de facto staff' status. There is general consensus, though, that improved terms and conditions may be needed across the sector for postgraduate researchers. Respondents – particularly organisations – suggest that further exploration of the topic of rights and conditions is required, in collaboration with stakeholders and partners, to reach a clear outcome.

Around one in ten suggest that PGR students typically have low awareness of their rights and conditions, and that more could be done to raise awareness.

10. Looking ahead

On the whole, respondents (particularly organisations) welcome UKRI's Call for Input on the New Deal, and the chance to provide feedback at this stage. Going forwards, stakeholders note that continued communication will be extremely important to ensure that there is clarity in UKRI's decision-making process, and that everybody – no matter of their circumstances – is consulted at each relevant stage to ensure the development of the New Deal is fully inclusive.

Appendix 1: Detailed respondent profile

On completion of the Call for Input questionnaire, respondents were asked whether they were responding in a personal capacity or on behalf of their organisation. For those who were responding in a personal capacity, UKRI asked individuals to provide certain demographic information to help understand who had responded to the CFI, and where any gaps may need addressing. All questions were optional.

This section outlines a detailed respondent profile of individuals responding to the consultation. For reference and comparative purposes, data from the latest Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) data release relating to PGR student numbers are included.²⁴ As a reminder (see section 1.4), of the 422 total responses, 310 are from individuals, of which 190 are current or recently graduated PGR students. As not all individual respondents were PGR students, we have also included ONS population data.

Due to rounding, some percentages do not sum to 100%.

Note that base numbers do not add up to the total number of individual respondents as not everyone answered every question.

Age

In answer to the question “How old are you?”, the breakdown of responses is as follows.

Age	Total respondents	% respondents	UK population data ²⁵
18-29	122	40%	19%
30-39	76	25%	17%
40-49	58	14%	16%
50-59	34	11%	17%
60-69	6	2%	14%
70-79	3	1%	11%
80+	-	-	6%
Prefer not to say	7	2%	-
TOTAL	306	100%	100%

HESA reports that 56% of PGR students are aged 29 or under, and 44% are aged 30+.

Sex

In answer to the question “What is your sex?”, the breakdown of responses is as follows.

Sex	Total respondents	% respondents	HESA data	UK population data ²⁶
Female	163	54%	50%	51%
Male	118	39%	50%	49%
Prefer not to say	23	8%	-	-
TOTAL	304	100%	100%	100%

²⁴ Higher Education Student Statistics: UK, 2020/21 - Student numbers and characteristics

²⁵ ONS, June 2020, Mid-year population estimate. Note the percentages in this column are calculated based on the total population aged 18+.

²⁶ ONS, June 2020, Mid-year population estimate.

Gender identification

In answer to the question “Is the gender you identify with the same as your sex registered at birth?”, the breakdown of responses is as follows.

Gender identity	Total respondents	% respondents
Yes	269	89%
No	8	3%
Prefer not to say	24	8%
TOTAL	301	100%

Gender description

In answer to the question “What term do you use to describe your gender?”, the breakdown of responses is as follows.

Gender description	Total respondents	% respondents
Man	113	37%
Woman	155	51%
Agender	1	0%
Androgyne	-	-
Demigender	-	-
Genderqueer or gender fluid	2	1%
Non-binary	5	2%
Questioning or unsure of gender	2	1%
Other / Prefer to self-describe	-	-
Prefer not to say	24	8%
TOTAL	302	100%

Ethnicity

In answer to the question “What is your ethnic group?”, the breakdown of responses is as follows.

Ethnicity	Total respondents	% respondents	HESA data	UK population data ²⁷
Asian or Asian British	13	4%	9%	8%
Black, African, Black British or Caribbean	5	2%	5%	4%
Mixed or multiple ethnic groups	14	5%	4%	2%
White	246	81%	80%	85%
Other ethnic group	3	1%	2%	2%
Prefer not to say	23	8%	-	-
TOTAL	304		100%	100%

²⁷ ONS, Population estimates by ethnic group and religion, England and Wales: 2019. Note these figures are England and Wales only. Scotland and Northern Ireland report higher proportions of White individuals.

Disability

In answer to the question “Do you have any conditions, illnesses or disabilities that reduce your ability to carry out day-to-day activities?” (to which multiple responses were permitted), the breakdown of responses is as follows.

Disability, condition or illness	Total respondents	% respondents
An unseen disability	12	4%
Autistic spectrum disorder	9	3%
Blind/partially sighted	-	-
Deaf/hearing impaired	1	0%
Dyslexia	6	2%
Mental health difficulties	30	10%
Mobility difficulties	4	1%
Multiple disabilities	10	3%
Personal care support	-	-
Other condition, illness or disability	15	5%
No	176	61%
Prefer not to say	24	8%
TOTAL	287	-

HESA reports that 88% of PGR students have no known disability or condition, while 12% have a known disability or condition. UK-wide data suggest that 22% of the population has a known disability or condition.²⁸

²⁸ House of Commons, 2022, UK disability statistics: Prevalence and life experience, 2022 (based on DWP Family Resources Survey)

Appendix 2: List of responding organisations

Of 112 responding organisations, 110 shared their organisation name. These are:

- ACCE DTP
- AIRTO (the Association of Innovation, Research and Technology Organisations)
- Bath Spa University
- Birkbeck College Students' Union
- Birkbeck College, University of London
- Bristol Students' Union
- British Antarctic Survey
- British Society for Immunology
- Brunel University London
- BT
- Cardiff University
- Consortium for the Humanities and the Arts South-East England
- Coventry University
- Deep Science Ventures
- Doctoral College, University of Warwick
- Edge Hill University
- Edinburgh Napier University
- ESRC South Coast Doctoral Training Partnership
- Fast Track Impact
- GlaxoSmithKline
- Goldsmiths, University of London
- Graduate School at the Open University
- GuildHE
- GW4 Alliance (universities of Bath, Bristol, Cardiff, and Exeter)
- Imperial College London
- Institute for Advanced Studies, University of Stirling
- Institute for Medical Humanities, Durham University
- Institute of Mathematics and its Applications
- Keele University
- King's College London
- Leeds Beckett University
- London Interdisciplinary Doctoral Programme (LIDo)
- London School of Economics and Political Science
- Loughborough University
- Management team for the EPSRC Centre for Doctoral Training in Modelling of Heterogeneous Systems at the University of Warwick
- Manchester Metropolitan University
- Medical Research Council (MRC)
- MRC DTP National Student Representatives
- National Biofilms Innovation Centre (NBIC)
- National Physical Laboratory (Postgraduate Institute for Measurement Science)
- Northumbria University
- Norwich Research Park Biosciences DTP (NRPDTP)
- Nottingham Trent University
- P&G
- Queen Mary Students' Union
- Queen Mary University of London

- Queen Mary University of London
- Researcher Development Concordat Strategy Group
- Robert Gordon University
- Royal Botanic Gardens Kew
- Royal College of Physicians
- Royal Holloway, University of London
- Royal Society of Chemistry
- Royal Statistical Society
- Russell Group
- School of Advanced Study (University of London)
- Scottish Doctoral Training Centre in Condensed Matter Physics (CM-CDT), an EPSRC Centre for Doctoral Training
- Scottish Funding Council
- Scottish Graduate School for Arts and Humanities
- Sheffield Hallam University
- Staffordshire University
- The Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry
- The British Academy
- The Collaborative Doctoral Partnership Consortium
- The Institute of Cancer Research
- The Postgraduate Issues Network of the Society for Research into Higher Education
- The Royal Society
- The University of Manchester Students' Union
- UCL MRes/PhD in AI-Enabled Healthcare Systems
- UCL, Bloomsbury and East London Doctoral Training Partnership
- UK Bioindustry Association
- UK Council for Graduate Education
- Unis Resist Border Controls (URBC)
- Universities UK
- University Alliance
- University and College Union
- University College London
- University of Aberdeen
- University of Bath SU (Students' Union)
- University of Birmingham
- University of Bristol
- University of Cambridge
- University of Derby
- University of East Anglia
- University of East Anglia Student Union
- University of Edinburgh
- University of Edinburgh
- University of Exeter
- University of Hertfordshire
- University of Kent
- University of Leeds
- University of Leicester
- University of Lincoln
- University of Manchester (Manchester Doctoral College)
- University of Nottingham

- University of Oxford
- University of Portsmouth
- University of Reading
- University of Sheffield
- University of Southampton
- University of St Andrews
- University of Strathclyde
- University of Surrey
- University of Sussex
- University of Wolverhampton
- University of York
- Vitae
- York St John University

Appendix 3: Call for Input questions

The full question wording of the Call for Input, along with supplementary wording and context provided for respondents, is available below.

Overview

The New Deal for Postgraduate Research (“the New Deal”) is a long-term piece of work that aims to improve the experience and quality of postgraduate research training in the UK.

In this engagement exercise, we are focusing primarily on doctoral training (for example, working towards a PhD), but we welcome comments on other research-focused training and qualifications.

The government’s Research & Development (R&D) Roadmap first committed to the creation of the New Deal. In July 2021 the government published its R&D People and Culture Strategy.

The strategy aims to ensure that the UK has an outstanding research culture that truly supports discovery, diversity and innovation and that values everyone’s contributions. It seeks to enable varied and diverse careers that bring excitement and recognition, allowing talent and ideas to flow freely between academia, business and other sectors.

The R&D People and Culture Strategy set out that the New Deal would:

- consider how postgraduate research students are supported and developed, practically and financially
- consider how best to prepare postgraduate research students for rewarding careers, and address factors that contribute to precarity in early career research
- enable a more diverse range of people to consider careers in research
- consider how to attract and retain talented people within the sector and support the flow of people and ideas in the R&D system across the world.

The government’s ambition is that the New Deal should apply to as many postgraduate research students as possible.

By postgraduate research student, we mean anyone working towards a research degree or equivalent qualification.

Why your views matter

We want to ensure that everyone in the research and innovation community has the opportunity to contribute to, and shape our thinking on, the New Deal.

This includes, but is not limited to:

- current, previous and prospective postgraduate research students
- supervisors
- staff supporting research training
- university mission groups
- representative bodies
- funders
- employers
- universities
- others with an interest in postgraduate research training.

For the purposes of this exercise, by “universities” we mean all higher education providers.

This exercise is conducted by UKRI, but we welcome responses from and about all postgraduate research training in the UK, including where there is a different or no source of funding.

Different activities are already contributing to some aspects of the New Deal. Many postgraduate research students, supervisory teams, grant holders and employers have already given us their thoughts through:

- ESRC's *Review of the PhD in the Social Sciences*
- EPSRC's *Review of EPSRC-funded doctoral education*
- UK Council of Graduate Education's (UKCGE) *UK Research Supervision Survey*, which was supported by UKRI and The Wellcome Trust.

UKRI is also engaging with a wide range of stakeholders through other means. This includes, for example, the upcoming engagement on the future of AHRC's doctoral provision.

Further information on the government's strategies, the New Deal and projects supporting this work is available on UKRI.org: www.ukri.org/our-work/developing-people-and-skills/new-deal-for-postgraduate-research

In this exercise, we welcome views on what the goals of postgraduate research training should be and set out an approach to the New Deal for comment. We also ask how we should engage with the community going forward.

The deadline for responses is 17 May 2022.

We will review all responses and publish a summary of our findings.

General guidance

The information you provide is held securely by UKRI and will not be used to identify any individual. Your data is used for monitoring processes, to help us analyse results accurately and ensure people are treated fairly and according to their needs. Information on how we use your information can be found in our [privacy notice](#).

If you would prefer to participate in the exercise in another format, please email: talent@ukri.org

You can download all the questions at the link below. Responses should still be submitted via the Engagement Hub.

We are working with colleagues across UKRI to ensure that evidence collected in related exercises is also used to inform the New Deal. This includes evidence submitted to the exercises above, and the consultation on the draft UKRI Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy. Please [contact us](#) if you require clarification on which work we are able to take into account.

Please:

- Keep responses concise.
- Provide a summary of, and links to, supporting evidence where possible.
- Feel free to answer only the questions where you want to input. You do not need to respond to every question.
- If you are responding as part of an organisation or group, discuss your intention to respond with others and submit a single response.

Section one: goals of postgraduate research training

In our engagement to date, we have heard different views on the goals and expectations of postgraduate research training, for the individual and for the wider research and innovation community.

The characteristics of the doctoral qualification are well established (see the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) [Characteristics Statement](#)), and reasons for pursuing a research degree vary.

For some, postgraduate research training is primarily a route into an academic research career. Over recent decades a research degree has become increasingly valuable for many technical, research, and other careers, across the public, private and third sectors.

Recent reviews of postgraduate research have identified the need for balance between providing more taught training or continuous professional development and time to focus on the research and outputs that will be assessed for the degree.

We want to open the opportunity to the wider community to tell us what the goals of postgraduate research training should be. For example, this might be from the perspective of:

- postgraduate research students themselves
- employers in different sectors
- organisations involved in postgraduate research training
- others who wish to contribute.

Question 1: What should be the goals for contemporary postgraduate research training?

Section two: Areas of focus

Following earlier engagement with the sector, UKRI set out an approach to the New Deal with four initial areas to focus on. These are:

- Models and access
- Routes in, through and out
- Rights and conditions
- Funding and financial support

We recognise that there are overlaps and interdependencies between these areas.

The following pages will provide details on each of these four areas before asking for your input on what we should consider, and which challenges we should prioritise.

Models and access

In our work on models and access, we aim to consider current models and their respective roles in supporting postgraduate research. This might include models of:

Funding

There are many funding models for postgraduate research. UKRI's Research Councils provide grants to universities which they use to fund cohorts of postgraduate research students. Other funders have different models. Research organisations also fund some postgraduate research students directly (often with support from Quality Related funding or

analogous support), or postgraduate research students can be self-funded, through their own means or loans.

Supervision

Models of individual or team supervision, as well as the support available to – and expectations placed upon – supervisors.

Award

Most postgraduate research students in the UK are working towards a PhD or other doctoral qualification in a specialist subject, often awarded after the completion of a thesis and its defence in an oral exam, commonly known as a viva. While less common, some organisations offer more structured “integrated” programmes. Doctorates may also be awarded by publication or be practice based.

We are interested in bringing together evidence on:

- How different models can support postgraduate research students with diverse backgrounds and experiences, for example, whether some models better support people from different cultural, economic or educational backgrounds. We are also interested in whether the models themselves impact researchers’ experiences and whether this might contribute to mental health outcomes
- Whether some models of postgraduate research better support the needs of organisations in different parts of the private, public or third sectors, or in different disciplines
- What changes are needed so that postgraduate research training is meeting the future needs of the economy, society and culture
- How postgraduate research students, employers, funders and universities and other research organisations are able to engage with one another such that they can be responsive and flexible to changing needs.

Question 2: Are there any additional areas that we should explore under models and access? Please state why.

If you have specific evidence to support your input, please provide a brief summary and – where available – any relevant links.

Question 3: What challenges should we prioritise under models and access?

If you have specific evidence to support your input, please provide a brief summary and – where available – any relevant links.

Routes in, through and out

The New Deal will consider the reasons why people do – and do not – enter into postgraduate research training, and the types of support they receive. It may also consider how part-time modes of working support postgraduate research students.

We will also consider the amount of time required to complete a research qualification and why some people do not complete.

We are interested in bringing together evidence on how:

- Postgraduate research training can actively support researchers with different experiences and career paths – bringing them into, and supporting them throughout,

postgraduate research. This will include, but not be limited to, consideration of the impact of researchers' protected characteristics

- Postgraduate research students are supported so that they can go on to careers in sectors and organisations across the whole economy
- Postgraduate research students find or are given the necessary information to support them in their research and their development.

Question 4: Are there any additional areas that we should explore under routes in, through and out of postgraduate research? Please state why.

If you have specific evidence to support your input, please provide a brief summary and – where available – any relevant links.

Question 5: What challenges should we prioritise under routes in, through and out?

If you have specific evidence to support your input, please provide a brief summary and – where available – any relevant links.

Rights and conditions

Many universities seek to ensure equitable rights and conditions across their postgraduate research population. However, an individual's rights and conditions may be influenced by their source of funding, their particular legal situation (for example, their immigration status or if they are a worker or employee), or other contributing factors.

We are interested in bringing together evidence on how:

- Rights and conditions support postgraduate researchers with different needs
- Rights and conditions compare with other graduate opportunities, the reasons for any differences and their impact on relevant outcomes
- Postgraduate research students are enabled to continue with their research when their personal situation changes
- Postgraduate research students are informed about their rights and conditions; and that there is support in place if things go wrong.

If, when responding to this question, you refer to specific issues or problems, please also try to be clear about any matters that might contribute to their position. For example, specify if an issue relates to people in receipt of funding from a particular source or their immigration status.

Question 6: Are there any additional areas that we should consider in our work on rights and conditions? Please state why.

If you have specific evidence to support your input, please provide a brief summary and – where available – any relevant links.

Question 7: What challenges should we prioritise in our work on rights and conditions?

If you have specific evidence to support your input, please provide a brief summary and – where available – any relevant links.

Funding and financial support

Universities invest their own resources in postgraduate research training. They also receive funding from charitable or public sector funders. Other organisations from the private, public and charitable sectors sometimes also support postgraduate research students.

UKRI is the largest single funder of postgraduate research training in the UK, financially supporting around a quarter of the UK's doctoral student population through the Research Councils and (in England) through Research England's Quality-Related (QR) funding. Funding councils in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland provide funding to universities in their nations.

Funding can be complex, with several sources supporting one postgraduate research student. The mixture of funding might be influenced by rules or incentives from a funder, but it may also be influenced by the university's appetite to fund more postgraduate research students, or the availability of partners.

Financial support includes the support provided directly to postgraduate researchers, for instance some postgraduate researchers receive a stipend or salary via their university.

Many postgraduate researchers are self-funded. This means the university does not pay them a stipend or salary. They may rely on loans or income from other sources, such as the salary from a job.

Postgraduate research students are commonly required to pay a fee to their university. Some funders pay this on the student's behalf.

We are interested in bringing together evidence on:

- Whether the balance of funding between postgraduate research and other research and innovation investments is appropriate
- If funding and financial support for postgraduate research is sustainable and sufficiently resilient, and what financial challenges universities, grant holders and others face. The impact of these challenges on postgraduate research students
- If there is sufficient transparency about decision making in relation to postgraduate research funding and financial support.

Question 8: Are there any additional areas that we should explore in our work on funding and financial support?

If you have specific evidence to support your input, please provide a brief summary and – where available – any relevant links.

Question 9: What challenges should we prioritise in our work on funding and financial support?

If you have specific evidence to support your input, please provide a brief summary and – where available – any relevant links.

Overall approach

The four areas of focus outline an approach to the New Deal. As a reminder, these were:

- Models and access
- Routes in, through and out
- Rights and conditions
- Funding and financial support

Question 10: Are there any areas that we could usefully focus on, or other questions that we should explore, not covered within our four focus areas?

Please state why and provide links to evidence where possible.

Question 11: Do you have any further comments on the New Deal?

Section three: Future engagement

There are currently around 110,000 postgraduate research students in the UK. Around a quarter of PhD students receive some funding from UKRI. Our Research Councils already have some well-established ways of engaging with postgraduate research students, grant holders and others who they fund.

We want to understand what more we can do to build on this work for the New Deal, to ensure that our activities are as transparent as possible and support the widest possible number of people.

We would like to know what engagement works well, where the community feel there are gaps, and how we can ensure everyone is able to fully engage and contribute in an equitable and accessible way.

In particular, we want to ensure that people who are marginalised or under-represented are given a voice.

How do we best listen and engage with a diverse range of postgraduate research students? Are there engagement approaches or existing structures that UKRI is not using or could make better use of that could be practical ways to hear the views of large numbers of postgraduate research students?

For UKRI's work on the New Deal, we will:

- Articulate our purpose, decisions, or recommendations clearly
- Show how we have used evidence and taken it into account
- Support our communities to input where desired
- Make best use of resources
- Be open to challenge and change.

Question 12: What factors should we consider as we develop our engagement plans for future New Deal work?

A report prepared by:

Pye Tait Consulting

Registered in England, Company No: 04001365, VAT No: 755 8312 14

Postal address: Royal House, 110 Station Parade, Harrogate, North Yorkshire, HG1 1EP

Tel: 01423 509 433

Registered office address: 5 Merus Court, Meridian Business Park, Leicester, LE19 1RJ

email (enquiries related to this report): n.charleton@pyetait.com

email (general enquiries): info@pyetait.com

website: www.pyetait.com



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