



## Response to *National Review of State Supports for PhD Researchers, First Report*

### **Introduction and context**

The Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS) launched a public consultation on State Supports for PhD Researchers in March 2023. The Royal Irish Academy's Physical, Chemical and Mathematical Sciences committee submitted a response<sup>i</sup>. DFHERIS published the first report from co-chairs of the consultation on 26 June 2023<sup>ii</sup>. This response statement is in response to that report.

We welcome the publication of the report. Its recommendations in many areas include promising steps forward. We hope that the recommendations will be adopted by government and implemented as soon as possible. We also note some areas which the report did not fully address and make recommendations for government on these additional areas.

### **Stipends**

We welcome the recommendation in the report that the stipend for PhD researchers should be increased to €25,000 pa. We welcome the Minister's public statements in support of this target stipend but we note that the recently announced increase in stipends does not achieve this target<sup>iii</sup>. We call upon the government to implement this recommendation as soon as possible. It is essential that the stipend keeps pace with the cost of living. We note the parallels with the work of the Low Pay Commission<sup>iv</sup>.

It is imperative that the stipends of existing PhD researchers be included in any increase. It is fundamental to equity that people with similar experience doing the same work be paid the same amount.

Government should also ensure that stipend increases continue to conform with the principles of "Catherine's Law"<sup>v,vi</sup> and do not lead to the loss of supports such as disability allowance, travel and medical cards due to exceeding an income threshold.

### **Right to access to leave**

We note the report's conclusion that more work is required around the employment status of PhD researchers. This status impacts PhD researchers' access to rights which are guaranteed to workers, such as sick pay and maternity leave. There is currently no uniform approach to these rights across the sector. For example IRC provides paid maternity, paternity and adoptive leave<sup>vii</sup>. SFI provide for paid maternity and adoptive leave<sup>viii</sup>. We could not identify publicly available policies for sick leave from SFI or IRC. We recommend that a report is commissioned that focuses on the status of PhD researchers (student vs. employee) and explores mechanisms for provision of access to leave. The Government should also ensure PhD researchers have uniform access to paid sick and maternity leave.

## **Housing**

We welcome the acknowledgement in the report that both the availability and affordability of accommodation are major problems for PhD researchers in Ireland. The 2022 Eurostudent Survey report<sup>ix</sup> published by the HEA found that for students not living with their parents, accommodation costs accounted for 42% of their total expenditure. We recommend that the government takes steps to increase the supply of accommodation for postgraduate researchers. The undersupply of accommodation is particularly acute for postgraduates with families. We, therefore, propose that plans for student accommodation include the creation of more on-campus family housing. Furthermore, we recommend that the proposals made in a previous report<sup>x</sup> on the demand and supply of student accommodation be adopted, especially those concerning planning and development, as well as the financing of additional on-campus accommodation.

We welcome the recommendation in the first report from the co-chairs of the public consultation to explore the introduction of an accommodation credit to help PhD researchers in rented accommodation. This credit or allowance could help researchers meet the rising costs associated with rented accommodation.

## **Non-financial supports**

The impacts of completing a PhD on researcher mental<sup>xi</sup> and physical<sup>xii</sup> health are not addressed in the report nor is there a discussion of support for researchers who have issues with supervisors. In line with Principles 2 & 3 of the National Framework for Doctoral Education<sup>xiii</sup>, we would welcome the Government exploring provision of additional supports for researcher health and wellbeing, and the development of appropriate standards for supervision and grievance procedures across the sector.

## **Visa requirements and duration for non-EU PhD researchers**

The report acknowledges that non-EU PhD researchers face additional challenges, but does not make specific recommendations to address them. We suggest (1) non-EU researchers should not be unduly burdened by expenses relative to those from within the EU and (2) non-EU researchers should be granted similar conditions for family support and immigration as workers in other fields and (3) time spent as a PhD researcher should count towards naturalisation.

## Authorship statement

This response statement was written by Oisín Creaner, Spyridon Dendrinis and Ann O’Shea on behalf of the Physical, Chemical and Mathematical Sciences committee of the Royal Irish Academy. The statement is supported by the following multidisciplinary committees of the Royal Irish Academy:

Coiste Léann na Gaeilge agus an Léinn Cheiltigh  
Engineering and Computer Sciences Committee  
Ethics, Politics, Law and Philosophy Committee  
Geography and Geosciences Committee  
Historical Studies Committee  
Languages, Literature, Culture and Communication Committee  
Life and Health Sciences Committee  
Physical, Chemical and Mathematical Sciences Committee  
Standing Committee for Archaeology  
Standing Committee for International Affairs

The views expressed within this statement are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Royal Irish Academy.

- This response statement was amended on 26 October 2023 to correct a factual inaccuracy. It was originally stated that Irish Research Council (IRC) provides paid parent’s leave which was incorrect.

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<sup>i</sup> Physical, Chemical and Mathematical Sciences committee response to consultation [online]

<https://www.ria.ie/news/science-committees-physical-chemical-and-mathematical-sciences-committee/pcms-submission>

<sup>ii</sup> Johnson & Cagney, 2023, National Review of State Supports for PhD Researchers First Report [online] [assets.gov.ie/261655/13774a0b-e8c9-4956-bb62-336250ad6038.pdf](https://assets.gov.ie/261655/13774a0b-e8c9-4956-bb62-336250ad6038.pdf)

<sup>iii</sup> Bowers, S. (2023), PhD stipend increase is ‘step one’, Harris says, [online]

<https://www.irishtimes.com/ireland/education/2023/10/12/phd-stipend-increase-is-step-one-harris-says/>

<sup>iv</sup> Low Pay Commission, 2022, Report of the Low Pay Commission on Progressing to a Living Wage [online],

<https://assets.gov.ie/226962/f72dbeb6-00ef-46cb-8af9-c347cb0851ff.pdf>

<sup>v</sup> Department of Social Protection, 2021, Minister Humphreys announces changes to the Disability Allowance means test for PhD students [online] <https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/0d18a-minister-humphreys-announces-changes-to-the-disability-allowance-means-test-for-phd-students/>

<sup>vi</sup> Department of Social Protection, 2023, Ministers Humphreys and McGrath extend ‘Catherine’s Law’ to further remove barriers facing PhD students with disabilities [online] <https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/a9209-ministers-humphreys-and-mcgrath-extend-catherines-law-to-further-remove-barriers-facing-phd-students-with-disabilities/>

<sup>vii</sup> Irish Research Council, 2021, Irish Research Council Policy on Leave for Parents & Carers, Maternity, Paternity, Adoptive, Parent’s, Parental & Carer’s Leave [online] [https://research.ie/assets/uploads/2023/03/IRC-Policy-on-Leave-for-Parents-and-Carers\\_March-2023.pdf](https://research.ie/assets/uploads/2023/03/IRC-Policy-on-Leave-for-Parents-and-Carers_March-2023.pdf)

<sup>viii</sup> Science Foundation Ireland, 2019, SFI Maternity/Adoptive Policy [online] [https://www.sfi.ie/funding/sfi-policies-and-guidance/gender/SFI-Maternity\\_Adoptive-Policy-V2.3-Sept-2019.pdf](https://www.sfi.ie/funding/sfi-policies-and-guidance/gender/SFI-Maternity_Adoptive-Policy-V2.3-Sept-2019.pdf)

<sup>ix</sup> Eurostudent Survey 2022: Available at <https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2023/04/Eurostudent-8-Final-Report.pdf>

<sup>x</sup> Report on Student Accommodation: Demand and Supply. Published by the HEA, 2017. Available at

<https://hea.ie/resources/publications/report-on-student-accommodation-demand-supply/>

<sup>xi</sup> Forrester, N, (2021), Mental health of graduate students sorely overlooked, Nature 595, 135-137

<https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-021-01751-z>

<sup>xii</sup> Mazurek Melnyk, B., Slevin, C., Militello, L., Hoying, J., Teall, A., & McGovern, C. (2016). Physical health, lifestyle beliefs and behaviors, and mental health of entering graduate health professional students: Evidence to support screening and

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early intervention. *Journal of the American Association of Nurse Practitioners*, 28(4), 204–211.  
<https://doi.org/10.1002/2327-6924.12350>

<sup>xiii</sup> Higher Education Authority, 2023, National Framework for Doctoral Education [online]  
[https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2017/04/national\\_framework\\_for\\_doctoral\\_education\\_0.pdf](https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2017/04/national_framework_for_doctoral_education_0.pdf)