

National Review of State Supports for PhD Researchers

Consultation on state supports for PhD researchers

Consultation response

March 2023

Please provide the name of your representative group.

Physical, Chemical and Mathematical Sciences multidisciplinary committee of the Royal Irish Academy

Please describe the membership of your representative group.

The Physical, Chemical and Mathematical Sciences (PCMS) Committee is an all-island multidisciplinary committee of the Royal Irish Academy. The committee representation includes academia, research centres, industry and interest groups. The PCMS committee exists to provide scientific and scholarly expertise and to promote the value of the physical, chemical and mathematical sciences. The committee's functions include promoting co-operation across and within relevant scholarly disciplines, addressing topical issues with a national or international focus and advising Academy engagement in these issues. The committee does this through its programme of work combining public engagement events, expert statements, responding to Government consultations and working with relevant international unions. The committee also acts as the national adhering body for the International Union of Pure and Applied Chemistry (IUPAC).

The opinions expressed in this consultation response represent the opinions of the PCMS committee and are not necessarily the opinions of the Royal Irish Academy.

Please state the approx. number of members of your representative group.

20

Please state when your representative group was established.

September 2014

Consultation Questions

Q1: What, in your view, are the primary challenges facing PhD researchers in Ireland at present and how are these affecting their educational experience and graduate outcomes?

- **Consider your organisation, do you have data or metrics to support your views?**
- **Do you have any examples of best practice?**

Cost of Living: The cost of living crisis has highlighted the inadequacy of PhD stipends. At present the IRC and SFI PhD stipend is €18,500pa. Some institutions have scholarship schemes that pay even less than this amount. By contrast, the Government plan to increase the minimum wage to a living wage of €13.10 for 2023, equating to €25,545pa, indexed to 60% of the median wage. (See <https://tinyurl.com/LWI2023>). Many PhD researchers take on extra work to survive.

Accommodation: The housing crisis is felt particularly by postgraduate researchers. They struggle to find and afford housing near their institution. Many PhD researchers commute long distances, lengthening their workday considerably. This is a very stressful experience for early-career researchers. It is particularly difficult for people from disadvantaged backgrounds, with dependent family members or those whose family home is a long way from their institution. It makes an Irish PhD programme unattractive to international students.

Working Conditions: PhD Researchers are not considered workers in the legal sense. Amongst other things, they have no mechanism for sick leave, pensions or essential worker protections. There is no national provision for extensions to accommodate illness, pregnancy and so on. Where local arrangements exist, they rarely enable access to sickness/maternity benefits.

Basic Research: There are limited funding options for PhDs in areas without immediate applications. Thus, many talented students leave the country to continue their education abroad.

International Researchers: PhD Researchers from outside Ireland, especially from outside the EU, face additional challenges. There are often out-of-pocket expenses such as registration fees, visa application fees and so on, as well as the cost of relocating to Ireland, which are not covered by research grants. There are additional challenges for those with dependent families, who are not entitled to work in Ireland.

Q2: How can these challenges be best resolved such that educational experience and graduate outcomes are enhanced?

- **Consider your organisation, what part do/should you play in the solution going forward?**
- **Do you have any plans/actions in the next 12 months that focus on this area?**

- **Is there a role for other stakeholders in addressing these challenges? If so, who and what are they/should they be doing?**

One way to alleviate the economic problems of PhD researchers is to increase their stipends. The Government recently announced a plan to increase the minimum wage to a living wage of 60% of the median hourly rate, set at 13.10 euro for 2023, equating to €25,545pa for a 37.5 hour work week. This should be considered the minimum stipend. The stipend should also rise in line with inflation.

In order to help with the lack of supply of affordable housing, universities should be incentivised to build postgraduate housing including housing for students with young families and to reserve a proportion of this for students from disadvantaged backgrounds and for international students. A shorter-term measure could be that universities reallocate some of their existing housing which is normally taken by undergraduate students to PhD students.

PhD researchers on funded projects should be considered workers to reflect their contribution more accurately to their institutions. While this would expose them to a tax & PRSI liability of €2,977 in 2023, the employee protections this would confer, together with access to PRSI-based benefits, would more than offset this cost.

An expansion in the number of grants that support basic research will also attract and retain talented individuals who would otherwise be forced to look overseas.

Suitable provision in research grants to pay the costs of PhD visa applications, relocation and so on would make Ireland a more viable option for international researchers. The provision of visas that permit the families of researchers to work while they are here would allow researchers and their families to be mutually supporting.

Other changes that would help include making PhD researchers eligible for medical cards, GP visit cards and fuel allowances.

Q3: Are there wider ramifications of these proposed solutions? If so discuss.

The proposed solutions will provide a marked increase in quality of life for PhD researchers. This improvement will make Ireland attractive as a venue for PhD research both domestic and international, making it easier to attract top talent.

In addition, by removing, or even mitigating the stresses and strains imposed by the cost of living crisis, it will help ease burnout, leading to greater retention of talented individuals, not just to completion of the PhD, but also beyond that.

By removing barriers such as periodic visa renewal, Ireland can become an attractive destination for some of the world's most sought-after researchers.

By alleviating the effects of the cost of living crisis for PhD researchers, we will open up PhD research options to candidates from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds, and enable access to higher education for a wider segment of society. This is very important from an Equality Diversity and Inclusion perspective.

While it is true that some of these proposals will have an increased up-front cost on a per-project basis, there may be room for a more equitable structure of research compensation and grant allocations across the board. More importantly, the return on investment to the country in terms of increased attraction and retention of talent cannot be overstated.

Q4: Are there any other issues facing PhD researchers in Ireland at present that are relevant in addition to the six review elements in the Consultation Document and the over-arching Impact 2030 strategy?

Improved recruitment potential: barriers to access PhD researcher positions have blocked many exemplary candidates. Economic factors have limited PhD research to those who have the existing resources to get by without adequate pay, and often act to prevent those with dependants from participation. Visa restrictions and complications have prevented institutes from bringing in the best candidates from overseas. Removing these barriers will allow the best candidates to be recruited for a project and improve participation in research performing organisations by members of disadvantaged groups.

Career prospects beyond the PhD: While it is essential that the department addresses the difficulties that PhD researchers face while completing their research project, it is also important to consider their future prospects. The provision of adequate, secure and non-precarious career paths within academia and beyond for the talented researchers who complete PhD research projects in Ireland is an indispensable element of a healthy research ecosystem.

Return on investment to the nation: the education of talented young researchers is a substantial investment in the future, especially for those who have been in the Irish education system from their earliest years. Should this talent be lost to emigration or be unable to complete their studies due to economic hardship or other barriers to entry, then the state will be all the poorer for it.

Improved research outcomes: It is well established that workers who are not subject to external stresses work better. State efforts to mitigate cost of living, healthcare and other struggles for PhD researchers will allow them to concentrate more on their projects and deliver improved research outcomes.

Q5: Is there anything else that you would like the Co-Chairs to consider?

Many studies highlight higher rates of anxiety and depression in PhD candidates. Resolving the primary challenges in Q1 could have a positive impact on mental health.

Access to higher education should not be dependent on pre-existing wealth and social status. This is the cornerstone of the National Access Plan. However, for PhD researchers, this cornerstone is not present. Familial support is essential for PhD researchers to complete their studies, as it is extremely difficult for an individual to get by on the current PhD stipend, much less for a family. Making the changes that we have suggested above should help recruit more PhD researchers from minority groups and disadvantaged communities.

It is thus not only incumbent upon the Government to provide sufficient support for these essential pillars of our research community, it is also a matter of already stated policy to do so.