

New Deal for Postgraduate Research (May 2022)



For more information about the enquiry please visit: <https://engagementhub.ukri.org/skills/new-deal-for-postgraduate-research-call-for-input/>

Background:

The Physiological Society (The Society) is Europe's largest network of physiologists, at the forefront of science for 145 years. Physiology is the science of life, and research in physiology helps us to understand how the body works in health, what goes wrong in disease, and how it responds and adapts to the challenges of everyday life. The Society's membership is made up of researchers in all of these areas, from neuroscience through to endocrinology, nutrition and sport and exercise science with the science ranging from the mechanistic to the applied, from molecular to whole body.

The New Deal for Postgraduate Research ("the New Deal") by UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) is a long-term piece of work that aims to improve the experience and quality of postgraduate research training in the UK. It aims to ensure that postgraduate research in the UK remains sustainable, open and attractive to a wide range of candidates (both from the UK and internationally) and delivers the highly qualified and skilled researchers and innovators the UK and global societies need. The current consultation focuses on four areas: routes in, through and out, funding and financial support, rights and conditions, and models and access.

The Society's response to this consultation is based on our Chatham House-rule workshop with a combination of current PhD students and Early Career Researchers (ECRs) in April 2022. As a result of this, the 'participants' referred to in the document are those early-career physiologists that agreed to participate in the workshop and provide additional feedback in writing.

Consultation response:

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

Students face a number of challenges for routes into postgraduate research and subsequently lack knowledge about future job prospects and career trajectories once they have completed their academic study.

Participants expressed the need for better understanding of what a PhD entails and the different types of PhDs. For example, 'a PhD' could be three or four years of exclusively academic study, have an integrated Master's, involve a year in industry, or be a PhD by publication or profession.

Understanding future career paths could help students make better informed decisions about whether to undertake further study and the variety of opportunities available to them. During a PhD, careers support can be limited and there is a limited amount of time for PhD students to understand their options while completing their PhD research and papers in a timely manner.

Students are often unaware of the job opportunities available outside academia within industry, unless they have industry exposure and networks built into their academic course (for example, a year in industry). Participants noted that this can be perpetuated by some PhD students only engaging with academics and departmental

contacts who themselves have a limited knowledge of job opportunities outside the academia, and hence are often unable to advise students.

Additionally, the job market is perceived to be saturated, with undergraduates and postgraduates applying for the same entry level roles outside of academia. In the *R&D People and Culture Strategy*, the UK Government outlines its desire to address 'gaps in the UK's talent offer so that we can develop appropriate programmes...to attract and retain talented people within the sector'.¹ As the UK job market continues to evolve, the UK Government must ensure that there are sufficient PhD level roles to support the increasing number of workers entering the workforce with postgraduate qualifications.

In response The Physiological Society is working on updating the careers information provided through the website, and showcasing trajectories post PhD. The Society is also considering more face-to-face networking events to allow students to directly interact with people from the industry.

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

Participants noted that the financial support provided is often insufficient for those undertaking PhDs, particularly those that have already joined the workforce following the completion of their undergraduate or Master's qualification. The minimum stipend for PhD students awarded by UKRI is approximately £16,000 a year but many self-funded PhD students receive no financial support and rely on postgraduate loans or part-time work.² Furthermore, for students already enrolled in a PhD programme, the minimum stipend has not increased in line with the changes to the UKRI guidelines, the inflation rate, or the cost of living.

The risk associated with deferred income (particularly with no guarantee of increased future earnings compared to colleagues without PhDs) can often discourage people from undertaking a PhD.

A number of participants noted that the financial support provided is often insufficient for the type of PhD carried out (particularly with delays to agreeing contracts etc); that extensions for PhDs that took longer than initially anticipated were difficult to secure and that the average duration to complete PhD is not in line with the average duration of funding provided.³ This was particularly acute during the COVID-19 pandemic but participants also noted that this was relevant for PhD students that experienced significant life events. Participants noted that students would benefit from knowing additional funding opportunities available should the PhD take longer than anticipated. This was also considered to be a particularly severe problem for those students in receipt of international funding.

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

Some participants raised concerns about a lack of parity between funded and self-funded PhD programmes. Participants noted that capacity is an issue, with laboratory priority given to those working on funded projects and a reliance on using external resources to accommodate PhD students. This could be due to increased financial pressure on universities, and the need for universities to attract as many students as possible. This is a concern as tuition fee caps are likely to exacerbate this issue.

¹ Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. *R&D People and Culture Strategy*. Available from: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/research-and-development-rd-people-and-culture-strategy>

² UK Research and Innovation. *Find Studentships and Doctoral Training*. Available from: <https://www.ukri.org/what-we-offer/developing-people-and-skills/find-studentships-and-doctoral-training/get-a-studentship-to-fund-your-doctorate/>

³ Horta H, et al. The impact of Ph.D. funding on time to Ph.D. completion. *Research Evaluation*. 2019; 28(2):182–195. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1093/reseval/rvz002>

Participants expressed concerns about the power dynamic between students and their supervisors. This could relate to the direction of a project (and external funding related to it), who holds the funding for the research, responsibility for administering the obligations of grants or the potential for a conflict of interest between a supervisor and line manager working very closely (or in some cases, being the same person).

Additionally, the career progression of established researchers can be prioritised over a PhD student's supervision. This can undermine the value of the student's position and relationship with their supervisory team. This consequently feeds in to the detrimental power dynamic between students and supervisors.

The Society has also heard concerns about a lack of management skills among supervisors, who, as mentioned above, often act as both supervisor and line manager, supporting the need for comprehensive mandatory training. The student-supervisor relationship can make or break a student's experience. It can be a source of significant stress for students and supervisors, and may lead to poor mental health.

Universities must demonstrate that they can enable postgraduates to produce quality research in a supportive and collegiate environment. We recommend a commitment from universities, similar to obligations outlined in the [Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers](#), to provide guarantees for PhD students that they will have sufficient access to infrastructure and support to complete their PhD in a timely manner.

What challenges should we prioritise under models and access?

Participants noted that student feedback on their PhD experience is predominantly in the form of an annual quantitative survey. It was suggested that more engaging forms of assessment such as focus groups could be a better mechanism to address specific issues or barriers. Students would also benefit from knowing exactly how the issues addressed will be improved, based on the discussion points raised. While improvements in student satisfaction should be one ambition of student feedback surveys, the Society would support a more holistic approach to bettering the structures in place to support PhD students. The group also noted that there was significant work to be done to tackle the lack of diversity amongst students applying for PhDs, and more targeted funding schemes were required.

Our recommendations:

- We recommend potential candidates be provided with information about what a PhD entails and the career trajectories and job prospects upon successful completion of a PhD. Career events held for PhD students could include more networking opportunities outside academia, allowing students to interact with people from industry.
- We recommend creating a more supportive environment for PhD students, with greater opportunities for line management training offered to supervisors.
- We recommend creating more opportunities for PhD students to secure additional funding should their research take longer than anticipated or initially agreed. This is particularly important as the sector recovers from COVID-19.
- We recommend greater attention is paid to funding to increase diversity and inclusivity within PhD programmes.
- We recommend a commitment from universities, similar to obligations outlined in the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers, to provide guarantees for PhD students that they will have sufficient access to infrastructure and support to complete their PhD in a timely manner.
- We recommend that more consideration is taken in the processes of recruiting PhD students to ensure that they are paired correctly with supervisors and projects to prevent confusion or disappointment through the PhD process.