

# The New Deal for Postgraduate Research – GW4 Consultation Response

Since 2013, GW4 Alliance has brought together the research-intensive universities of Bath, Bristol, Cardiff, and Exeter to drive and inspire collaborative research, development, and innovation. GW4 is unique among regional alliances for its cross-institutional dedicated programme of support for postgraduate researchers, early career researchers and technical staff. Through institutional investment, we deliver sector-leading professional development programmes that cross career stages, job families, and disciplinary silos to support our talented people.

Our extensive experience in supporting postgraduate researchers provides a wealth of information and expertise that speaks directly to The New Deal for Postgraduate Researchers (“The New Deal”), which is currently out for consultation. We absolutely welcome the attention placed on postgraduate researchers; however, we are very conscious that only 20-30% are directly funded by UKRI studentships and are concerned about equity of support for the remaining community. We encourage UKRI to consider how the approaches emerging from the New Deal can become standard practice for all postgraduate researchers.

## **Championing best practice in Doctoral Training recruitment for all postgraduate researchers**

The publication of the *BEIS R&D People and Culture Strategy* in July 2021 highlighted the critical role postgraduate researchers played in delivering on the government’s aims for the UK to be a global science superpower. If the research and innovation sector is to recruit an additional 150,000 researchers by 2030 to sustain the UK’s target of 2.4% research and development intensity, then postgraduate researchers must be at the forefront of that drive.

Recruitment at this scale creates an opportunity to address poor practice within the system and the New Deal has the potential to provide much needed leadership in area. We need to ensure we are recruiting a diverse population with a variety of experiences, backgrounds and abilities that will enrich the research and innovation system. This further addresses the aims set out in UKRI’s *EDI strategy* by articulating and championing successful approaches to inclusive recruitment. To shape methods and evidence activities, we encourage UKRI to draw on the wealth of expertise that exists among our GW4 Doctoral Training Programmes.

The history of GW4 is embedded in the strength of our doctoral training with our institutions hosting over 30 doctoral training partnerships and centres. Our geographical proximity means our PhD researchers can be supervised across our institutions more easily, and any student registered as a PhD student in a GW4 university, has freedom of movement between our institutions, opening up access to expertise and training like no other consortia.

Our success has been enabled by GW4 forums and networks that align activities across our institutions and address challenges of cross-institutional partnership working. For instance, the GW4 PGR Policy Forum is a forum to discuss PGR strategy, share best practice and work in collaboration to coordinate PGR activities across GW4. Similarly, the GW4 DTE Network brings together managers and administrators for knowledge exchange of operational considerations that impact the successful delivery of doctoral training partnerships and centres.

Recently, discussion across both groups has concerned developing effective EDI strategies for inclusive recruitment, which speaks to desired outcomes in the *R&D People and Culture Strategy*, is a central tenet of UKRI’s *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy* and is a deliverable for the New Deal. We welcome the opportunity to engage these mechanisms to work collaboratively with UKRI to enhance understandings of inclusive recruitment approaches and diversify the postgraduate research population. The key learning can

then be disseminated beyond UKRI doctoral training programmes through mechanisms like the GW4 PGR Policy Forum to ensure that we are levelling up provision for all postgraduate researchers.

### **Professionalising the postgraduate researcher experience**

Ensuring equity of support for all postgraduate researchers was a mandate of our Doctoral Colleges and Academies before the publication of the *R&D People and Culture Strategy*. Each of our GW4 universities have a dedicated team that provides support to all prospective and current postgraduate researchers to enable them to join and thrive in their research community. They deliver comprehensive personal and professional development programmes which offer workshops, seminars, discussion groups and on-demand resources to train and up-skill postgraduate researchers. They deliver community networking opportunities such as postgraduate research festivals or inauguration events that ensures postgraduate researchers feel part of a research community.

Workshops, training events and community networking serve a vital purpose in professionalising postgraduate research. They provide wrap-around structures of support, clear expectations for progression, and place an emphasis on continuing professional development that is standard in most industries. In the process, our Doctoral Colleges help mitigate against isolation and anxieties around progress which are among the leading causes in suspension of studies by postgraduate researchers.

Pivotaly, our Doctoral Colleges offer similar support to all postgraduate researchers as that provided through UKRI doctoral training programmes, which requires significant institutional investment. We encourage UKRI to consider how similar strategies and structures can be enabled through its funding mechanisms to enrich the research experience for all postgraduate researchers.

### **Conclusion**

Collaboration is at the heart of GW4. We recognise that delivering on the New Deal will involve hard decisions from both UKRI and our institutions. We know that we have the greatest chance to ensure that New Deal results in new approaches to postgraduate research if we work in partnership with UKRI, government and other sector leaders. We encourage UKRI to reflect on the challenges made above, and particularly, consider how it can ensure that universities can support 100% of postgraduate researchers within the research and innovation system. We recommend that UKRI works with our institutions, networks, centers and groups to further improve postgraduate research. We are eager to drive forward this New Deal together with UKRI.