

Rt Hon Michelle Donelan MP
Secretary of State for Science, Innovation
and Technology

Sent via email

Reply to	Dr Joanna Jenkinson MBE
E-mail	j.jenkinson@gw4.ac.uk
Date	04 April 2023

Dear Michelle,

Re: Support for postgraduate researchers to access government childcare subsidies

We are writing on behalf of the universities of Bath, Bristol, Cardiff and Exeter, which together form the GW4 Alliance, to raise concerns around the ineligibility of postgraduate researchers (PhDs and Professional Doctorates) for Government-backed childcare subsidies.

Like many, we very much welcome the recent announcement in the Spring Budget to expand in England the 30-free hours scheme, which is currently available for three- and four-year olds, to all eligible children from 9-months starting April 2024, and we await news of how this might be adopted in Wales. This will no doubt be revolutionary for many working families across the UK. However, postgraduate researchers in England are currently ineligible for current government schemes and the planned extension. To access the government's tax-free childcare scheme or the 30 hours of free childcare, both parents (or single parent) need to earn at least £152 a week to qualify, which is equivalent to 16 hours a week at the national living wage. Postgraduate researchers are registered as students, like undergraduates, rather than staff, which means any funding/stipend they receive is not classed as income. This stipend is often their only source of earnings and makes postgraduate researchers ineligible for government support. We are concerned as to the impact of this policy on the diversity and inclusivity of postgraduate research. It will disincentivise parents of young children from pursuing postgraduate qualifications.

Many who are in receipt of UKRI, Wellcome or other sources of studentships, also have limits placed on the numbers of hours they can work outside their PhDs. Many UKRI-funded scholarships in fact prohibit students from holding a full-time job, permanent part-time job, or even temporary role for extended periods. Even if that were not the case, the additional burdens of trying to juggle full-time postgraduate research, part-time employment and raising children, just to meet the eligibility requirements of government childcare support, would put an indescribable burden on postgraduate researchers that would be detrimental to the development of future research talent in the UK.

There are schemes to support parents in full-time education, but eligibility requirements once again exclude postgraduate researchers. Childcare grants, which can cover 85% of childcare costs up to £188.90 a week for 1 child and up to £323.85 a week for 2 or more children, require students to be in receipt of undergraduate student finance based on their household income. In Wales, the situation for postgraduate researchers is slightly better. In September 2022, the Welsh government opened up the 30 hours of early education and childcare for parents of 3- to 4-year-olds to students enrolled on an undergraduate, postgraduate or further education course. This is in addition to plans for a phased expansion of the Flying Start Scheme for all 2-year-olds starting April 2023. Like in England, however, postgraduate researchers are not eligible for Tax-Free Childcare or Childcare Grants.

The typical stipend for a postgraduate student in the UK is currently between £15,000 to £18,000 per annum. The charity Coram surveyed local authorities across England, Scotland and Wales and found that the average cost of a full-time childcare place for a parent of an under-2-year-old is £14,030 per annum. For the majority of funded postgraduate researchers who have children the cost of childcare is roughly equal to their stipend. It is unsurprising that the NUS found 60 percent of students with parental responsibilities have thought about leaving their course (rising to 65 percent for single parents).

A core strength of the GW4 portfolio is our success in the doctoral training space. Over the past decade our universities have received 24 awards by 15 cross-institutional doctoral training entities amounting to almost £189M in funding to support the development of UK research and innovation talent. Our universities are home to over 7000 postgraduate researchers of which 10


to 20 percent have declared parental/caring responsibilities at registration. To ensure our postgraduate researchers succeed and thrive we are committed to creating optimal research and educational environments that enable our postgraduate researchers to push forward the boundaries of knowledge and innovation.

We encourage the Westminster government and the devolved nations to consider how they can better support our postgraduate researchers with childcare costs and address the current barriers that exist. Doing so would directly address inclusivity and talent development aims embedded not only in the forthcoming Postgraduate New Deal, but also the Department of Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy's Research and Development People and Culture Strategy.

Sincerely,



Professor Ian White DL FREng
Vice-Chancellor, University of Bath
Chair of GW4 Council



Professor Evelyn Welch MBE
Vice-Chancellor and President
University of Bristol



Professor Colin Riordan CBE
Vice-Chancellor
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Professor Lisa Roberts FRSB, FRSA
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