

Sir David Bell KCB DL
Former Permanent Secretary of the Department for Education of United Kingdom
Former Chief Inspectorate of Schools at Ofsted

Sent via email

Reply to	Dr Joanna Jenkinson MBE
E-mail	j.jenkinson@gw4.ac.uk
Date	24 January 2024

Dear Sir David,

Re: Evidence Submission – Bell Review of Early Years

Firstly, congratulations on your appointment as Chair of this review into Early Years provision. We look forward to reading the final report and its recommendations in due course.

We are writing as the universities of Bath, Bristol, Cardiff and Exeter, which together form the GW4 Alliance, with regard to our campaign calling for the government to allow postgraduate students access to UK government-backed childcare subsidies, particularly Childcare Grants.

We are concerned that the current policy disincentivises parents from pursuing postgraduate qualifications and thereby limits the equality and diversity of the higher education workforce and curtails the porosity between academia and business. There are many examples of postgraduate parents struggling in our universities, and the fact that the original letters that we sent to Ministers have been replicated by many other universities across country, and that the issue has been raised with UUK, the Russell Group, HEPI the Academy of Medical Sciences and Onward, should be indicative of the strength of feeling, and level of support around this issue.

There is a gap in provision for postgraduate students. Currently those studying for Masters and PhDs are ineligible for Childcare Grants which are in place for full-time undergraduates to help with childcare costs for children under 15 years old. They are also ineligible for the childcare benefits available for workers unless they are in substantial paid employment in addition to their studies. The expectation of combining postgraduate study, substantial outside work (more than 16 hours a week) and childcare responsibilities is incompatible for most. In fact, those in receipt of tax-free stipends from UK Research and Innovation are expected to work for less than six hours per week and some stipends prohibit undertaking any regular outside work. Currently, a typical stipend for a postgraduate student in the UK is currently between £15,000 to £19,000 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.

The response that we have received from the Government has, to date, been unhelpful. In letters received from the Department of Education by Rt Hon Gillian Keegan MP and Claire Coutinho MP (in response to letter sent to the Rt Hon Michelle Donelan MP) they noted the support available to undergraduates and workers and that postgraduate students have access to interest-bearing loans which can be used as required including to

help pay for childcare costs, and will be eligible for 15 hours of support for 3 and 4 year olds. This is still a considerably reduced offer to that available to undergraduates and workers, which may not incentivise those without independent means to up-skill, undertake postgraduate education and access the jobs that require these qualifications. We would be happy to disclose our full correspondence to the Review upon request, if this would prove useful to you.

Extending the current undergraduate Childcare Grant to postgraduate students would seem a logical step to ensure that those with children, and from the most socioeconomically deprived backgrounds, studying for higher qualifications are not disincentivised. Across the sector, HEIs, funder and policy institutions are wrestling with the challenge of widening participation in postgraduate research. Across multiple indicators including racial and class background, disability, sexual orientation and gender, postgraduate students are underrepresented by those from diverse backgrounds. Opening up access to Childcare Grants would demonstrate sector leadership in removing a barrier to postgraduate study which is an essential precursor for many careers.

For example, our data shows at the University of Bristol, 15% of the 2295 postgraduate researchers (PGRs) and 13% of the 3700 who are being taught (PGTs) are parents and would benefit from gaining access to Childcare Grants. The latest Higher Education Statistics Agency data estimates approximately 66,960 UK PGRs and 380,795 UK PGTs nationally. Meaning this should be a relatively small intervention but one that could directly impact approximately 10,000 PGRs and 48,000 PGTs across the country currently. It would also directly address the government's skills agenda – that 13% of those currently undertaking a taught Masters' degrees have childcare responsibilities is a testament to how individuals use these degrees to reskill and change careers.

We are pleased to note that “Removing Barriers To Opportunity” is one of the Labour Party's five missions ahead of the next election, and that this mission gives a clear recognition that having access to affordable childcare is key to unlocking many working peoples' potential.

Including a commitment to extend the provision of Childcare Grants to those in postgraduate education in Labour's forthcoming Manifesto would show that a Labour Government would redress an issue being felt across the higher education sector and directly impact the future diversity of those able to progress to senior positions across academia and business. It will also demonstrate that life circumstances and daily commitments need not limit an individual's future potential and recognise that unlocking talent from all walks of life can improve the UK's skills profile and economic productivity.

Sincerely,

Prof. Ian White DL
FREng
Vice-Chancellor
University of Bath
Chair of GW4 Council

Prof. Evelyn Welch
MBE
Vice-Chancellor and
President
University of Bristol

Prof. Wendy Larnor
FACSS, PFHEA
President and Vice-
Chancellor
Cardiff University

Prof. Lisa Roberts
FRSB, FRSA
President and Vice-
Chancellor
University of Exeter

Dr Joanna
Jenkinson MBE
GW4 Director
GW4 Alliance