

Rt Hon Bridget Phillipson MP
Secretary of State for Education, Department for Education

Sent via email

Reply to Dr Joanna Jenkinson MBE
E-mail j.jenkinson@gw4.ac.uk
Date 18 July 2024

Dear Secretary of State,

OPEN LETTER: Support for postgraduate students to access the Childcare Grant scheme:

Firstly, congratulations on your appointment as Secretary of State for Education. We wish you every continued success in your role.

We are writing as the universities of Bath, Bristol, Cardiff and Exeter, which together form the GW4 Alliance, with regard to our request for the government to allow postgraduate students access to UK government-backed childcare subsidies, particularly Childcare Grants, and in the hope that you may be able, as Secretary of State for Education, to consider this issue.

Since April 2023 we have been in contact with your predecessors on this matter. We expressed our concerns that the Conservative government's policy disincentivised 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, which is why our original letters to Ministers were replicated by many other universities across country, and the issue has been raised with Universities UK, the Russell Group, Higher Education Policy Institute and the Academy of Medical Sciences.

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.

Previous responses from the Department for Education 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 eligibility for the universal 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.

Today (18 July) GW4 is publishing a policy note with HEPI entitled *Who cares? How postgraduate parents fall through the gap for government childcare grants, and how to fix it*. The report shines a light on the unacknowledged gap in childcare support for postgraduate students, in direct contrast to the support and provisions available for undergraduate students and workers.

Using data from partner universities, funding schemes from devolved nations, and interviews with PhD students from across our network, we highlight the impact of the gap in childcare support, both in terms of student participation, and its impact on the future workforce, and make the following recommendations to government:

- **Expand the eligibility of undergraduate Childcare Grants to include home taught and research postgraduates.** This initial step would help to remove barriers for economically disadvantaged parents wishing to undertake postgraduate studies.
- **Bring responsibility for postgraduate students' childcare provision fully within the remit of the Department for Education.**
- **The Higher Education Statistics Agency** should work with universities to **improve data collection** on postgraduate students with childcare responsibilities.

We welcome the fact that “Removing Barriers To Opportunity” is one of the Labour Party’s five missions and that this mission gives a clear recognition to the fact that having access to affordable childcare is key to unlocking many working peoples’ potential. It would also directly address Labour’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.

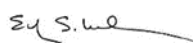
Extending the current undergraduate Childcare Grant to postgraduate students would seem a logical first step for this Labour Government to ensure that those with children, and from the most socioeconomically deprived backgrounds, studying for higher qualifications are not disincentivised. Across the 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 by removing a barrier to postgraduate study which is an essential precursor for many careers. We also hope that this will begin the process whereby postgraduates become eligible for the 30 free hours of childcare support available to workers.

A copy of the HEPI report has been included along with this email. We hope that you will find it to be of interest, and we look forward to discussing our proposals further with you.

Sincerely,



**Prof. Ian White CBE DL
FREng**
Vice-Chancellor and
President
University of Bath



Prof. Evelyn Welch MBE
Vice-Chancellor and
President
University of Bristol
Incoming Chair of GW4
Council



Prof. Wendy Larnier
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