

GW4 CONNECT PGR PARENTS REPORT

GW4



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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report is the outcome of a successful application for follow-on funding from the GW4 Connect Programme, which offered group coaching for postgraduate research students (PGR) with parental responsibilities. The nine-month project ran from September 2024 – June 2025 and was led by four PGRs who are parents, on top of their PhD studies.

The project took the form of a needs-analysis and included desk-based research, a survey of PGR students, and two hybrid events that brought together PGRs and university staffs to share experiences, build networks, discuss the challenges facing PGR parents and explore steps forward.

We are hugely grateful to all the PGRs who took the time to share their experiences with us, and to all the staff who made time in their schedules to respond to our requests for information and join us at our events.

FINDINGS

“We don’t all have the same 24 hours in a day.”

The cohort of PGR parents and carers is not a homogenous one, but there are many common challenges. Almost all of the PGRs who responded to our survey or attended the events reported facing additional difficulties in participating in, and completing, their PhD studies due to their role as a parent or carer. Most were mothers who were the primary or sole carers for their children or family members, reflecting the original GW4 Connect coaching programme. Therefore, the views in this report mostly reflect the experiences of mothers and highlight the societal norm that the physical and emotional labour of caregiving disproportionately affects women. Being an international student or having caring responsibilities for children or family members with disabilities added further layers of challenge

The main challenges experienced by PGR parents and carers include:

- Financial insecurity
- Restrictions on time and location
- Social isolation
- Exclusion from participation in development, training and networking opportunities

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

These challenges have an impact on

- Emotional wellbeing and family relationships
- Mental and physical health
- Academic progress and the potential for successful completion
- Future career opportunities

Current provision which explicitly acknowledges or addresses the needs of PGR parents and carers is inconsistent both within and across the GW4 universities. Where there are examples of good practice or services, these are often poorly publicised. Existing support networks are primarily student-led, meaning they are vulnerable to disappearing when the original organisers leave the university. None of the Student Unions currently engage actively with this cohort.

Recommendations

We accept that there is institutional complexity in addressing the needs of PGR parents and carers, with a number of different organisations and departments having a role and responsibility but lacking in resources or specialist knowledge.

The recommendations talk to three main areas;

- Social and emotional support
 - Strengthening supervisors support
 - Peer to peer support
 - Staff to PGR mentoring
- Accessible, relevant information
 - Doctoral champion roles in student services
 - Enhancing online resources
 - Pre-arrival information
- Family-friendly institutional provision
 - Family-friendly scheduling
 - Flexible access to PGR study space across institutions
 - Advocating for policy change on access to childcare

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CONTEXT

In 2024, a GW4 Connect programme implemented a group coaching programme for Postgraduate Research students across the four GW4 institutions with parental responsibilities. Upon conclusion of this programme, a continued interest in supporting this student group and maximising the impact of the group coaching for the wider cohort led to application for a source of GW4 funding to facilitate a short project that served to improve the experience of PGR research for those with parental responsibilities.

PROJECT AIMS

The aims of the project are as follows:

- To gain a greater understanding of support and guidance currently available for PGR parents within GW4 institutions.
- To collect perspectives on the specific challenges faced by those with parental responsibilities whilst undertaking PhD study.
- To raise the profile of this student group amongst policymakers and related university services to inform future planning.

Within this report we will share findings from desk-based research into the current provision for PGR parents and a student survey of current PGR parents across GW4 institutions.

EVALUATION OF EXISTING SUPPORT FOR PGR PARENTS

Between November and December 2024, we contacted key stakeholders at each university via email to gather information on available support and policies for PGR parents. We also reviewed each university's website to verify and supplement this information. Key findings include:

ACCESS TO INFORMATION

1. All universities have parent networks, but they usually mix staff and students.
2. Most universities provide no information about on-campus childcare and nursing; only Exeter University lists these facilities clearly on its website.
3. Only Cardiff University offers one-on-one support for student carers (not specifically for PGRs).
4. Cardiff University is the only one with dedicated webpages for student parents and international students with families, offering support contacts and practical info like housing and schools.

FUNDING

1. Funding to cover caregiving costs for activities like conferences is rare and mostly available only to UKRI-funded students.
2. All universities have affiliated nurseries for staffs and students, but only Bristol University and Bath University offer discounted rates for students.

SUPPORT FOR FAMILY MEMBERS

University of Exeter provides free English classes for spouses of international students.

HOUSING

Finding affordable housing is a major issue for PGR parents, especially international students. Limited family accommodation units are available at Bristol, Bath, and Cardiff.

FACULTY/ DEPARTMENT LEVEL INITIATIVES

Only a few substantial faculty/department-level initiatives exist. Notable examples include:

- a. Cardiff's School of Biosciences holds "Return to Study" meetings after parental leave to discuss needed adjustments.
- b. Bath's Department of Life Sciences has a Research Parental Leave Officer (RPLO) who supports research staff planning parental leave.

Capturing the Experiences of PGR Parents : Survey Overview

During the GW4 PGR Parents' Experiences event at the University of Bath on 6 February 2025, we launched an online survey to capture the experiences of PGR parents and those with caring responsibilities. The survey included 33 questions, featuring both open-ended and closed-ended items focused on caring responsibilities and their impact on the doctoral experience.

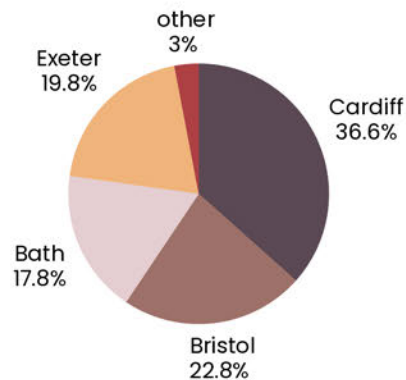
PGR parents and carers from Cardiff University, University of Bristol, Exeter University, and the University of Bath were invited to participate. The survey was promoted through various channels, including newsletters, emails, mailing lists, word of mouth, and relevant PGR networks such as Doctoral Colleges, Student Unions, and EDI leads. The survey closed on 21 March 2025.

A total of 111 PGRs completed the survey. The results provide insights into the profiles of PGRs and carers, their experiences, and how caring responsibilities affect their doctoral research.



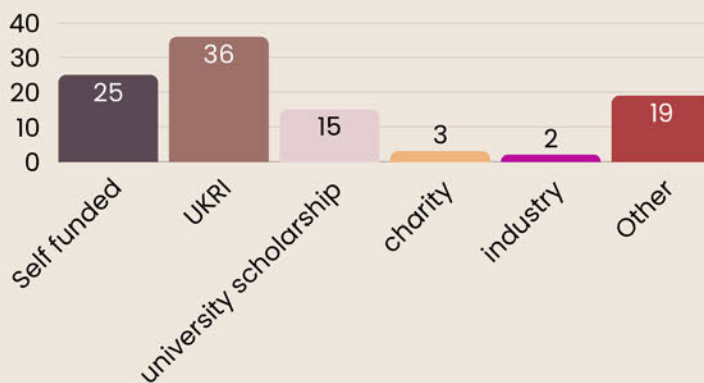
PARTICIPANTS

DEMOGRAPHICS



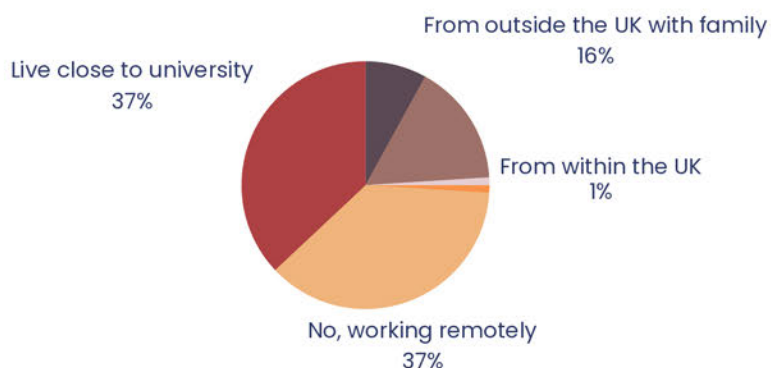
UNIVERSITY OF ORIGIN

We received responses from PGRs attending Cardiff University (37%), University of Bristol (23%), Exeter University (20%), and the University of Bath (18%), while 3% of respondents were from other universities.



FUNDING SOURCE

Most respondents reported being funded by UKRI (36%), 25% of respondents are self-funded, 15% receive a university scholarship, and 19% have other sources of funding.



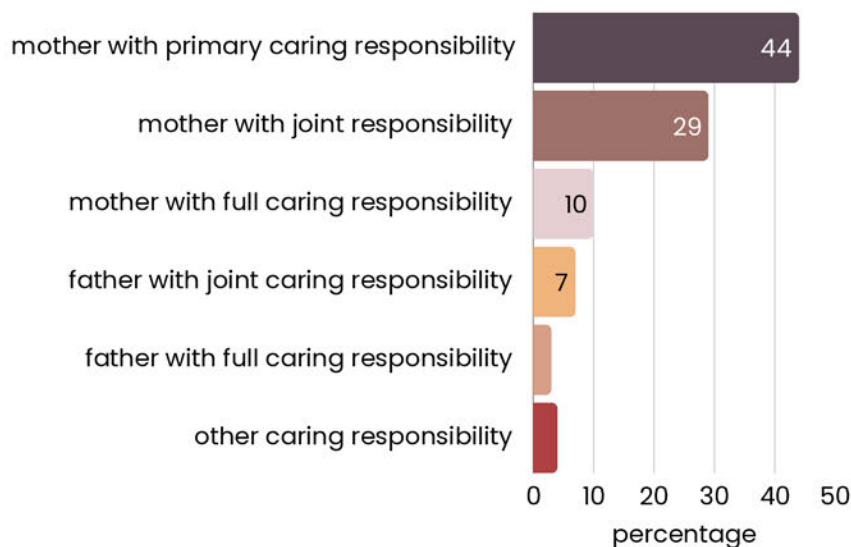
RELOCATION TO STUDY

Regarding study-related relocation, 37% of respondents live near the university, and another 37% chose to work remotely instead of relocating. 16% relocated to the UK with their family, 8% moved from abroad on their own, and 1% relocated from within the UK."

PROFILE OF PGRS WITH CARING RESPONSIBILITIES

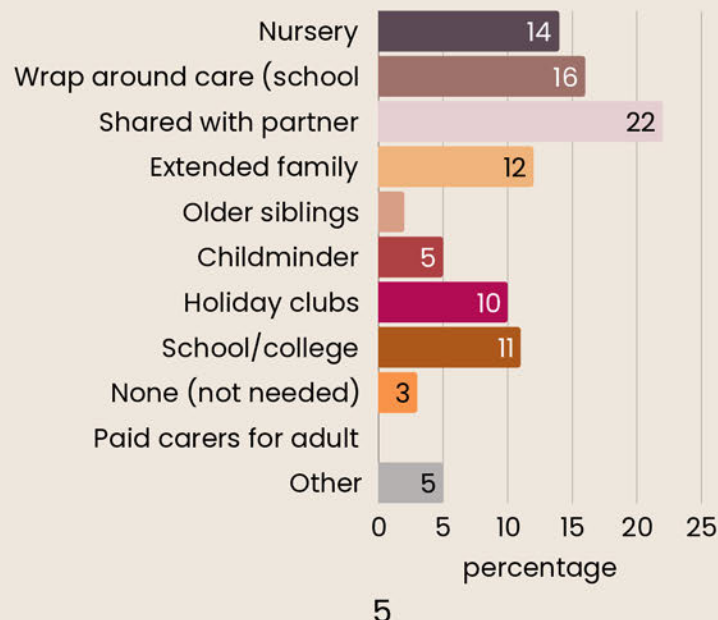
CARING RESPONSIBILITIES

- Most caregivers are mothers with primary responsibility (44%), followed by one-third (29%) of mothers who share caregiving duties.
- Most PGR parents care for one or two children (77% total).
- Children's ages vary, with many in primary school (21%), under 2 years old (19%), upper primary (16%), and secondary school (15%).



CARE OPTIONS & COVERAGE OF FORMAL CARE

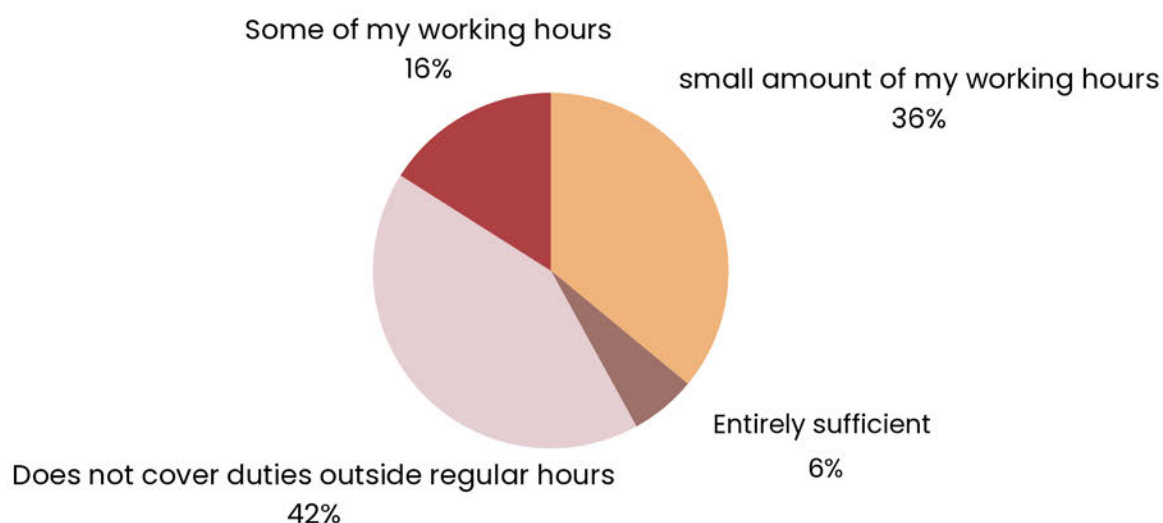
PGR parents use a variety of care options, primarily influenced by the age of their children. The graph below highlights the reliance on family members, wrap-around care and clubs to cover their daily working hours.



PROFILE OF PGRS WITH CARING RESPONSIBILITIES

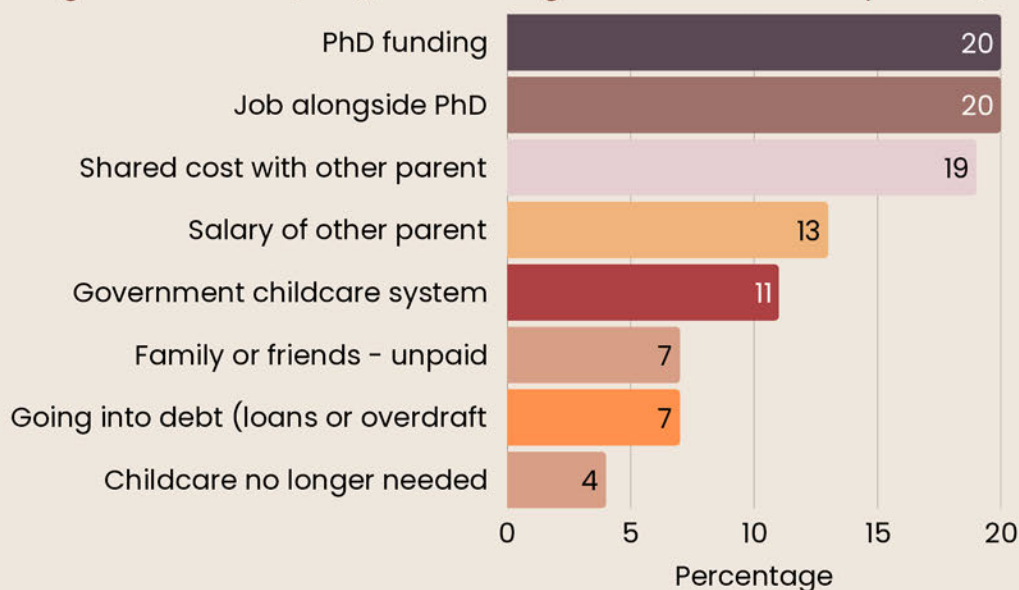
CARE OPTIONS & COVERAGE OF WORKING HOURS

The survey asked about how their caring arrangements covered their working hours; most respondents reported their existing childcare arrangements did not meet the needs of their studies. Only 6% felt the arrangements were sufficient.



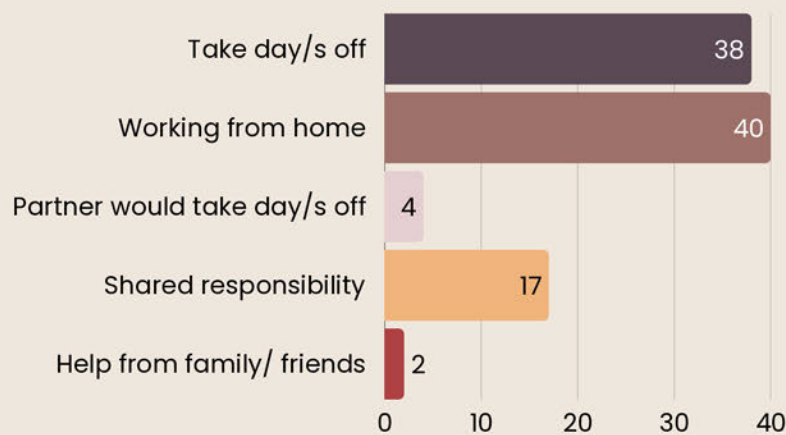
PAYING CARE COSTS

PGR parents used multiple sources to cover childcare costs. The most common are PhD funding (20%), though this was never sufficient to cover the costs, employment alongside their PhD (20%), and sharing costs with the other parent (19%).



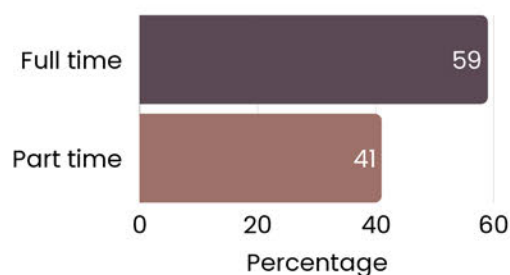
IMPACT OF CARING RESPONSIBILITIES ON STUDY MODE

IMPACT ON WORKING HOURS



Respondents described how breakdowns in care arrangements affect their working hours. Most PGR parents reported working from home and taking a day off. Less common responses included sharing responsibility, a partner taking time off, and seeking help from family or friends.

IMPACT ON STUDY MODE



The distribution is relatively balanced, with 59% of PGRs with caring responsibilities studying full-time and 41% part-time.

Many PGRs choose to study part-time to better manage caring duties, especially with young children and children with additional needs (e.g., autism, disability). Others noted that they needed to be able to work alongside their studies to meet the financial commitments of their family. Some switch between part-time and full-time as children grow older or demands and circumstances change.

IMPACT ON TIME AND FLEXIBILITY

STRATEGIC PLANNING

PGR parents must be highly organised, working around children's schedules (early mornings, evenings, weekends) and often relying on partners or family for support, and sacrificing their needs.

"My research, writing and paid work is planned around the schedule of my husband and my availability to cater for my children. As a result, I am only able to get substantial parts of my work done when the children are either asleep, in school or my husband is off work. This deeply impacts the amount of free time I have to myself to do any other thing."

NOT ENOUGH TIME

PGRs often report feeling as though they are constantly 'catching up' or falling 'behind'. It is unclear whether this reflects actual delays caused by balancing childcare and study, or if it is primarily a matter of perception. Regardless, these feelings contribute significantly to stress and guilt.

"If I had a superpower it would be to stop time for everyone else so I could make dinner / have a sleep / write up field notes / watch the thing I've been aching to watch on telly / have a hair cut / actually book a GP appointment... in order to be able to spend actual quality time with my kids and husband - rather than squeeze it in whilst trying to write a work email..."
"I just think it needs to be acknowledged that we don't all have the same 24 hours in a day, and that some of us have to work even harder to get things done."

REMOTE AND HYBRID OPTIONS

Remote working and online meetings are highly valued by PGRs with caring responsibilities for the flexibility they offer. These arrangements help balance academic and family commitments, maximize productive time, and reduce commuting and childcare costs. Several PGRs described them as 'essential' to their ability to continue their studies. But remote and hybrid working does have some difficulties

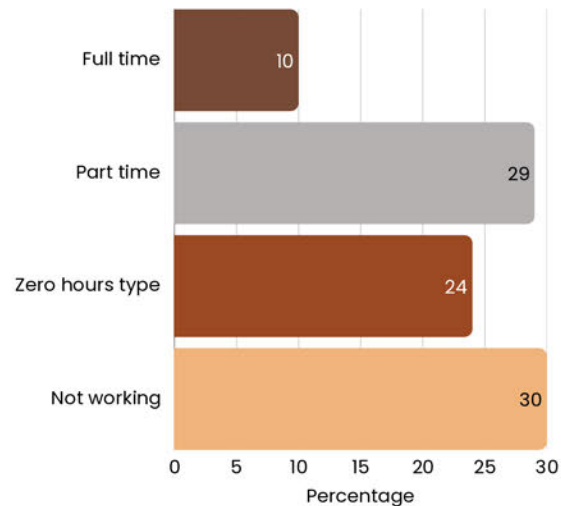
"It can impact productivity; working alongside active parenting means disruptions are frequent and concentrating is difficult."
"Being remote also means being isolated from "discussing work and gaining emotional support for the rigours of PhD life, and the balancing act of caring and study."

IMPACT ON FINANCIAL STABILITY

INSUFFICIENT FUNDING AND THE NEED FOR PAID WORK

Financial necessity often requires PGRs to work alongside their PhD, sometimes at the expense of study time. Flexible, remote, or part-time jobs are preferred to accommodate childcare schedules.

This need for paid work is often the result of PhD stipends and universal credit not being enough to cover living expenses, or high childcare costs, forcing students to work additional jobs, which can impact progress.



"I have to work because I have bills to pay - I cannot afford to not work."

"I have had to take on more paid work in part to pay for childcare to do my PhD work, which my stipend doesn't cover."

CHILDCARE COST

High childcare expenses are a significant barrier, sometimes leading to suspensions, reduced study time, or even the decision to quit the PhD.

"I have had to reduce my working hours due to costs of nursery and a gap in support."

"I am unable to afford childcare without working alongside my PhD which has negatively impacted my studies."

LIMITED ACCESS TO SUPPORT

PGRs are ineligible for government-funded childcare hours, and scholarship restrictions may prevent access to paid teaching or research assistant roles.

"I considered early termination of my studies when it became clear that PhD students wouldn't be eligible for free childcare from the government. Instead, I got a part time job to gain eligibility."

IMPACT ON EMOTIONAL WELLBEING

STRESS AND GUILT

Juggling a PhD, paid work, and caring responsibilities leads to stress, reduced confidence, and feelings of guilt—especially when unable to spend enough time with children or support family members in difficult circumstances.

“I tend to feel stuck in this eternal space of guilt for leaving work ‘early’ paired with guilt for often being late to my parental responsibilities.”

“Constant mental pressure of how to balance commitments to providing care and my research. There’s a guilt that comes up sometimes when I dedicate time to my research and leave home to focus on it, and then there’s the feeling of falling behind whenever I have the children.”

EXHAUSTION

Many PGR parents report chronic tiredness and overwhelming stress, which negatively impact their concentration and ability to focus on their studies.

“I’m chronically tired! It affects my ability to concentrate.”

“I often feel like I’m spread too thin and juggling too much”

“When things get really bad with family members I can barely string a sentence together, let alone write a PhD.”

RELATIONSHIPS WITH PARTNERS

Many PGR parents experience increased stress and strain on their relationships as they juggle study and family responsibilities, often working evenings to compensate for lost time

“We both often end up working evenings to make up hours so is detrimental to our relationship and levels of tiredness and stress.”

“I feel that already my husband takes a lot more responsibility than is fair, and he still has his career, working full-time and let’s be honest he is a bread winner as the PhD scholarship does not contribute too much for the family.”

IMPACT ON EMOTIONAL WELLBEING

FEELING LUCKY

Having a positive experience is often regarded as being lucky. But this depends on the level of support received by their supervisor. PGRs are conscious that such experiences are the exception rather than the norm.

"My supervisors have been the main source of support. I am lucky in that they both have young children and can relate to me well. I felt comfortable asking for time off or explaining why I hadn't achieved much that week."

ROLE MODEL AND INVESTMENT

For some, pursuing a PhD is seen as an investment in their family's future and a way to be a positive role model for their children.

"I want to give my kids a better life and myself, beside being model to them and showing them that they can do anything they want."

IMPACT ON SOCIAL OPPORTUNITY

SOCIAL ISOLATION

Many PGRs with caring responsibilities struggle to find a sense of belonging within the PhD community, as they juggle different roles and often work remotely to accommodate caring responsibilities.

I do not come onto campus as much as my peers because being at home makes it easier to collect my daughter from childcare. As such, I do not bond with my peers or take part in other activities. Social activities are usually held in the evenings too which I now can't attend.

I'm definitely more isolated from my cohort and the department than I would otherwise be, and I have had to pass up on lots of amazing opportunities.

LIMITED PARTICIPATION

PGRs frequently sacrifice career opportunities, networking events, and training to prioritise caring responsibilities. Caring responsibilities restrict attendance at in-person events, such as conferences, seminars, training, and networking opportunities, especially those events scheduled outside working hours, within school holidays or clashing with caring responsibilities.

"There are opportunities available to the wider PGR community that are not an option for me. Training courses/workshops run by the doctoral college are often in the afternoons ... Conferences and school holidays have also become tricky. Ultimately, I find myself having to make choices between my child's wellbeing and my additional academic opportunities. It concerns me however that this means I will graduate with a PhD but without the additional experience and training to ensure I am prepared for a life in academia."

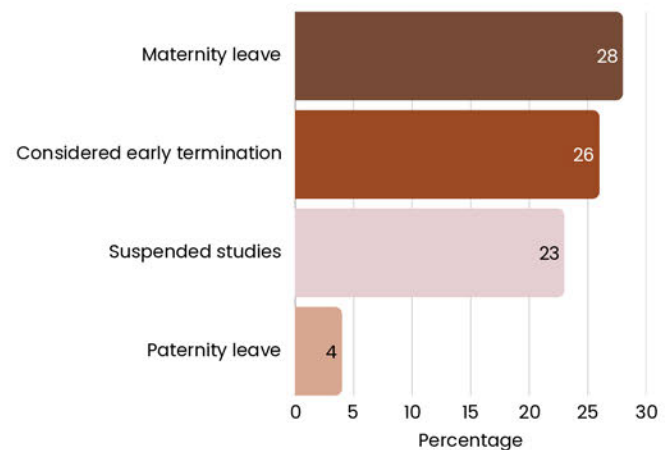
ACCOMMODATION AND HOUSING

Finding suitable, affordable accommodation is challenging, especially for international students with children in their care.

"No one believes that you are financially capable for paying the rent while being a 'student', having kids and a wife."

IMPACT ON COMPLETION OF STUDY

When PGR parents were asked about the impact of caring responsibilities on their studies, 26% had considered terminating before submission point, and 23% have suspended their studies or are in the process of doing so. 28% of the cohort respondents took maternity leave during their studies while 4% of participants took paternity leave.



60%

- PGRs who had suspended their studies did so because of their caring responsibilities.
- **All of these PGRs were women.**

57%

- PGRs who considered ending their PhD studies early did so because of their caring responsibilities
- **All of these PGRs were women.**

"My living costs are higher, I'm less able to secure employment... I have frequent episodes of near burnout, it causes arguments with my partner because if he takes time off he doesn't get paid, if I take time off, I risk not completing in time. "

"Caring and parental responsibilities(in the context of a struggling NHS and inadequate social care), very expensive childcare and the way PhD funding and support is structured has resulted in financial insecurity and debt. It has certainly negatively impacted my mental health which also then slows down the PhD progress. At one point I had to suspend for a significant period of time because my mental health challenges became so serious. "

THE EXPERIENCE OF FATHERS

We received 14 responses from fathers (out of a total 111 respondents), which likely represents a small proportion of male PhD candidates with children. This raises the possibility that those who responded may be experiencing the most significant impacts.

We were interested in whether there were differences between the experiences of mothers and fathers. Some notable figures:

- 28% were primary carers for their children (compared to 44% of mothers)
- 64% of fathers were pursuing their PhD full time. This is a higher proportion than it is for mothers.

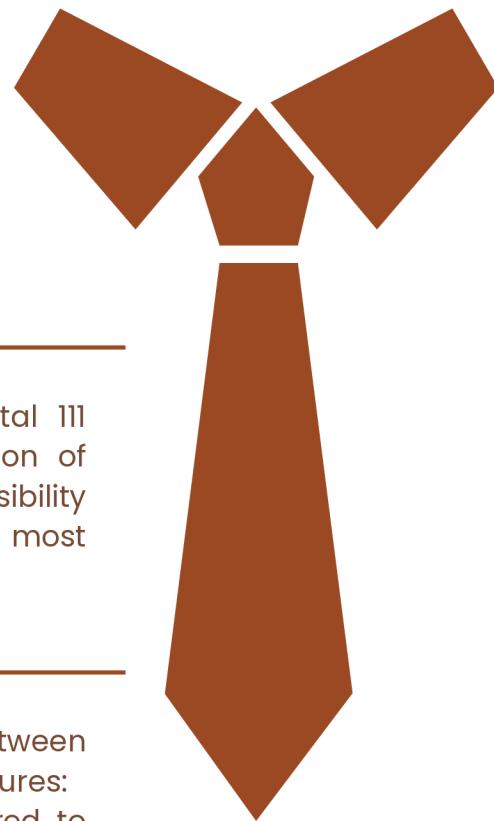
When discussing the impact of being a postgraduate researcher and a parent, fathers' responses largely echoed those of mothers, though with a somewhat stronger emphasis on **financial pressures**.

"I need to work full time on the PhD so that means I need to put my children into nursery so that means I need to take on as much paid extra work as possible."

"The cost of raising a family means that I need to continue full time work during my studies. A PhD stipend or part time work would not cover our family's costs, even with my partner's income. It also lowers the risk of taking a PhD - the personal cost of failing in the PhD is minimal as it would mean just continuing in my current career."

One clear difference emerged:

- None of the fathers had suspended studies or asked for extensions.
- Only one father had considered early termination of studies which was related to finances.



INSTITUTIONAL AND POLICY BARRIERS

STRUCTURAL EXCLUSION

Respondents described how institutional planning and timetabling impacted on their participation in the wider PhD experience and on their ability to meet deadlines. For example, some thesis 'bootcamps' which are invaluable in the final stages of writing up require full attendance but run from 9a.m until 7p.m, which acts as a barrier for parental inclusion.

"I would say the biggest challenge is that many deadlines are often right after school holidays (in January, April and September) ...Another challenge is when opportunities for training or personal development are organised during school holidays, which de-facto excludes parents from attending."

FUNDING RESTRICTIONS

Fully funded scholarships may require full-time study, adding pressure to students with caring responsibilities. International students face visa restrictions that prevent part-time study or limit access to maternity leave. As mentioned elsewhere, funding for childcare hours is restricted to those who earn £195/week, and the UKRI stipends and university scholarships do not count as earnings.

Financially, it's a disaster but one we have accepted and planned around. Through not being eligible for government childcare support we have paid £1000's more on childcare than my peers who are 'salaried'. I wasn't aware I wouldn't be eligible for government childcare initiatives when I accepted the PhD as it's not made clear on the government website, and I'm not sure I would have been able to apply had I known.

EQUITY CONCERNS

Access to PhD study is not equitable, with many potential students excluded due to financial or caring constraints.

"Personally, if I did not benefit from the second income of my partner and some ad hoc work, I would simply not be able to afford to pursue my studies. I feel that it is not just and equitable that doctoral research is only available to parents who are able to afford it and it excludes many folks who would otherwise bring a wealth of lived experience and insight into their research."

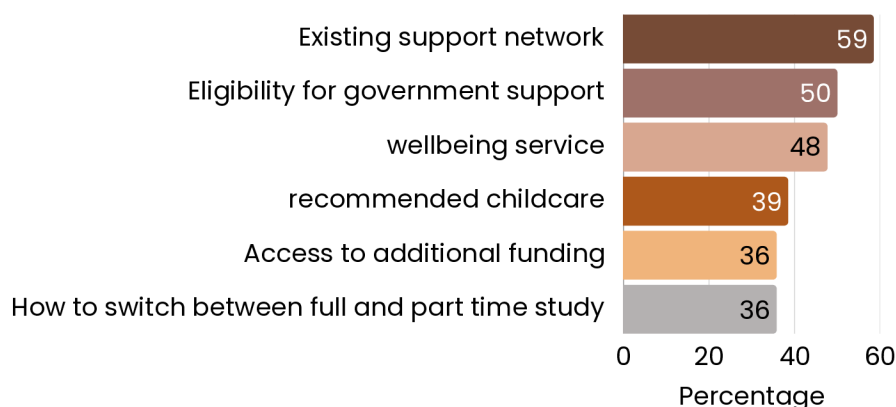
PERCEPTIONS OF AVAILABLE SUPPORT

Survey responses indicate that many PGR parents and carers find current support systems lacking in key areas.

- **39.9%** participants rated the written information available to them as insufficient or non-existent.
- **43.2%** participants rated the access to someone who could answer parent / carer related questions as insufficient or non-existent.
- **30.3%** felt that opportunities to meet other PGR parents or carers are insufficient or non-existent.
- **47.7%** consider hybrid arrangements to access learning opportunities remotely was good or sufficient, which was rated more positively compare to others. However, given that many students relied on hybrid arrangements to access learning, this leaves half for whom hybrid arrangements are inadequate.

"The availability of information is patchy and it is often hard to identify if it is applicable for PGRs or if the advice and guidance applies only to taught students. What I would really appreciate is a person who I could contact (or even a mailbox) as opposed to navigating a minefield of website pages"
"Most information was not available or of little use. University advice for money is not geared for PhD parents"

Survey respondents also identified several key topics they most frequently searched for, both before they apply or during their time as PGR. The answers are listed in this chart in order of frequency



PERCEPTION OF AVAILABLE SUPPORT NETWORKS

Respondents indicated that they felt supported as a PGR parent by a range of different networks. The most commonly cited sources of support were:



- Supervisors were identified as a primary source of support for PGR parents and, encouragingly, 55% of respondents described the support they received from their supervisors as '5 star'.
- Of the 9 respondents who rated support from their supervisors as low (1 or 2 stars), 2 indicated that their supervisors were unaware of their caring responsibilities, while 4 reported that their supervisors were aware but that these responsibilities were not discussed.
- 12 of the 111 respondents stated that they felt they did not need to discuss their caring responsibilities with their supervisors as these did not impact their studies, exemplifying the diversity of the PGR parent experience.

COMMON THEMES OF GOOD PRACTICE

- **Demonstrating trust in student managing their workload**

"My supervisors [...] (hopefully) trust me to manage my workload and work when it suits me"

- **Encouraging students to develop supportive networks**

"One of my supervisors put me in touch with a fellow academic who is a parent at the start of my PhD, so I could have a realistic idea of what was involved"

- **Offering a feeling of understanding**

"My supervisor has always been supportive whenever I mentioned my caring responsibilities, arranging meetings outside those hours"

"My supervisor has been an excellent source of support. If I had a different supervisor I may not have made it this far. His supervision goes above and beyond the basic requirements but this has allowed me to make good progress despite the challenges of juggling. He ensures that I feel recognised and valued as a PGR at times when I feel inadequate"

A JOURNEY WORTH RECOMMENDING? REFLECTIONS FROM PGR PARENTS AND CARERS

We asked respondents whether they would recommend PhD study to other parents:

14% SAID "NO"

The financial stress and emotional toll were too great, particularly as the additional difficulties in networking and publishing would negatively impact future job seeking.

12% SAID "YES"

These parents emphasised the importance of space and time to use their intellect in ways other than parenting, acting as a good role model and having developed the life skills to be productive and efficient.

74% SAID "THINK CAREFULLY" OR "ONLY IF"

-
- You have family or a network who can support with caring and / or finances
 - You really want to!
 - You are clear about what your rights and commitments before beginning and can plan accordingly.
 - You are candid with your supervisors about your need for flexibility, and your supervisors support this.
 - You are prepared to accept that you will not have the 'full' PGR experience.
 - You can be kind to yourself and let go of perfection.

LIMITATIONS OF THE PROJECT

We hope that the findings of this project and the associated report will contribute to informing institutional changes that better meet the needs of the student group studied. At the same time, we acknowledge the limitations in our findings and have identified areas that may require further exploration beyond the scope and funding of this project:

- We have used the term PGR parents in this report. However, as a result of the survey, we identified PGRs caring for family members and/or partners. Although these experiences might share some commonalities with PGR parents, further work is recommended to explore the specific needs of this group.
- By surveying current PGR students we are selecting only for those that are continuing with their studies. We identified a common theme of respondents citing their caring responsibilities as a pressure that caused them to consider suspending and/or terminating their studies but do not have the data available to understand how often this does result in suspension or termination or how this compares with the rates in non-parent PGRs.
- The PGR experience is not uniform across faculties/departments due to different demands and expectations e.g. laboratory based work or field work. We therefore hypothesise that the challenges facing PGR parents may differ between departments within an institution.
- Although parental leave is mentioned by multiple respondents, our survey questions did not explore the specific challenge of navigating return to work. We expect that this experience raises unique challenges that would be worthy of further consideration.
- In this survey we did not fully capture the experience of PGR parents who care for children with disabilities and special needs. Further work is required to better understand the unique needs of this PGR group.



RECOMMENDATIONS

In this section of the report, based on our findings from the exploration of existing support and policies in place with the PGR survey responses and, using feedback from attendees of our in-person discussion event, we propose recommendations for improving the PGR experience for PGRs with caring responsibilities so that practice is inclusive and equitable:

1. STRENGTHENING SUPERVISORS SUPPORT

Supervisors play a crucial role in the support network of PGR parents. We recommend that guidance on supporting PGR parents be integrated into existing mandatory supervisor training. While students will have varying needs and preferences, supervisors should aim to provide proactive, not just reactive, support. This could include helping students identify key contacts for arranging maternity or paternity leave, checking whether flexible working patterns are needed during school holidays, or encouraging participation in mentoring or coaching opportunities.

We also recommend the use of an Expectation Agreement at the beginning of the supervisor–PhD student relationship, including a prompt inviting students to share any caring responsibilities. This can help initiate an open conversation about support needs throughout the PhD journey.

2. PEER TO PEER SUPPORT

PGR parents are looking for a sense of community. While student-led initiatives are likely the most effective way to meet their needs, individuals working to build this support require backing from their institutions to promote, sustain, and expand their impact. This support could include help with applying for research culture funding, buying in or developing in-house group coaching programmes, using existing communication channels to raise awareness of activities, or meeting with members to brainstorm ways to grow the community's reach and legacy. Relevant departments for providing such support might include doctoral colleges, doctoral training centres / partnerships, Student Union PGR representatives, EDI teams, or a combination of these.

An excellent example is the Postgraduate Researchers and Families (PAFs) network at Exeter University (<https://sites.exeter.ac.uk/pafs/>). Interestingly, none of the 22 respondents from Exeter university mentioned this network; and although eight actively sought support groups, the PAFs network was not referenced. This may suggest limited engagement, but we believe that with active institutional support, networks like PAFs could better serve their communities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

3. STAFF TO PGR MENTORING

PGR parents often feel like they are 'less of a PhD student' or that they are 'missing out' because of their caregiving responsibilities. Mentoring from senior academics who are also parents could help them feel more supported and shift this perspective. These mentoring opportunities could be built into existing institutional programmes or introduced at the department, faculty, or school level.

4. DOCTORAL CHAMPION ROLES IN STUDENT SERVICES

Student Services are currently not sufficiently aware of the specific challenges faced by PGR parents to effectively meet their needs. We propose the creation of dedicated 'Doctoral Champion' roles within the wellbeing and financial support branches of Student Services. These champions should be equipped with a deeper understanding of the unique challenges experienced by doctoral students, including the impact of caring responsibilities. When a doctoral student contacts Student Services, they can then be referred to this individual for tailored advice and appropriate support.

5. ENHANCING ONLINE RESOURCES

Survey respondents from the same institutions reported different experiences accessing written information relevant to PGR parents, indicating that existing online resources are not well organised. We recommend that each institution reviews and improves the online availability of key information to reduce the effort required to find it. This centralised resource could include:

- Policies for PGR parents, especially regarding suspending studies for parental leave or caregiving responsibilities
- Details on eligibility for additional funding, such as government childcare support and grants, or access to university funding to fund childcare to support attendance at conferences or development events.
- Links to internal and external support services
- Information about existing support networks and guidance on building new ones
- Advice on parent-specific mentoring and coaching opportunities, or related schemes
- Contact information for individuals or services who can provide further assistance where possible

RECOMMENDATIONS

6. PRE-ARRIVAL INFORMATION FOR INTERNATIONAL PGR PARENTS

International PGR parents often face extra challenges, especially with finding suitable housing and understanding the UK nursery and school systems. Providing clear, informative resources to these students before they arrive in the UK would be very helpful. Additionally, offering an induction meeting at the start of their studies can help ease their transition and ensure they are better prepared for life and study in the UK

7. PROMOTING FLEXIBILITY AND FAMILY-FRIENDLY SCHEDULING

A common need identified by PGR parents is greater flexibility in working patterns and deadlines. Institutions should encourage departments to adopt 'family-friendly scheduling' to improve access to networking opportunities for parent researchers. Additionally, institutions and funders should review deadlines to avoid scheduling them during or immediately after major holidays.

8. FLEXIBLE ACCESS TO PGR STUDY SPACE ACROSS INSTITUTIONS

Many PGR parents are distance learners and cannot regularly access study spaces at their home institution. Partnering with other institutions to offer study space access could help meet their needs, allowing them to use facilities closer to home on a case-by-case basis.

5. ADVOCATING FOR POLICY CHANGE ON ACCESS TO FREE CHILD CARE

Many students faced difficulties due to government policies that restrict access to free childcare, with international students experiencing additional challenges related to visa restrictions—especially when taking parental leave. While we recognise that institutions and funding bodies have limited influence over these policies, we encourage them to continue supporting and engaging with ongoing campaigns for policy change.

CONCLUSIONS

PGR parents are a highly diverse group; however, this project has identified several common challenges they face. While we acknowledge that implementing many of these recommendations may present difficulties, we hope readers of this report will recognise opportunities for positive change and take action to improve the inclusivity of the PGR research culture and provide institutional support which will benefit the experiences and achievements of PGR parents.

We strongly believe that the experiences and challenges we have presented here are not unique to those who have participated in our project, but would be reflected in the wider population of PGR parents and carers across GW4 and nationally.

We encourage GW4 institutions to take the lead in addressing this important area of equity, diversity and inclusivity.