



Department for the
Economy
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An Roinn
Geilleagair

A Public Consultation on the future of the Postgraduate Award (PGA) Scheme

A Summary of responses

DECEMBER 2024

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Introduction

This document sets out responses to the Department for the Economy’s (DfE) public consultation on the future of the Postgraduate Award (PGA) Scheme. A Public Consultation was published on 1st August 2024 and closed on 26th September 2024. Respondents could provide feedback via the Citizen Space online platform, email or post.

The consultation set out the background to the PGA Scheme Review and sought views in relation to a number of potential options proposed for the Scheme going forward. Views were also sought on proposed changes to the current terms and conditions intended to enhance the experience of PGA Scheme students, aligning more closely with the Minister’s priority in relation to providing and supporting the delivery of good jobs, reducing bureaucracy for the higher education institutions (HEIs) administering the Scheme, and widening the eligibility and accessibility criteria of the Scheme to attract and secure the best talent.

The consultation received 21 responses via Citizen Space and an additional 3 email responses. Responses were received from employees of HEIs, industry, students including student bodies, government and political representatives.

There was broad support for the continuation of the PGA Scheme and for implementation of the proposed changes to the terms and conditions. In respect of the preferred option for the Scheme, the majority of respondents supported an increase in the number of PhDs directly funded by the Department, if this could be supported via new (additional) investment, as opposed to an increase in the proportion of annual block grant (R&I) funding currently ringfenced for PhD studentships.

This document provides an overview of the feedback received and a summary of responses.

Context

The PGA Scheme has been in operation since 2002 and currently provides funding (tuition fees and a stipend for living costs) for the equivalent of 780 (2024/25) full time PhD students per annum.

The current funding arrangements for the Scheme (while contingent on budget availability each year) is considered as a ringfenced element of the annual block grant that is provided to universities to promote the financial sustainability of research and innovation (R&I). This HEI block grant funding also comprises core Quality-related Research (QR) funding and Higher Education Innovation Fund (HEIF) streams to support R&I capacity and capability.

In 2022/23, the Department commissioned external consultants to conduct a review to determine effectiveness and Value for Money of the PGA Scheme. The recommendations from the external review highlighted the need for further stakeholder engagement to address key information gaps and inform a robust assessment of the impact of the Scheme.

In early 2024, the Department held a number of workshops with key stakeholders including industry body representatives and NI HEIs and conducted a survey with R&I active NI businesses to better understand the demand for PhDs, and their contribution to R&I objectives. Shaped by evidence collated during this additional engagement with key stakeholders, a number of potential future policy options were developed which formed the basis of the Public Consultation exercise.

Data Summary of Responses

Responses

Total number of respondents	Citizen Space Online	Email
24	21	3

Respondent Profiles

Government/ Political Party	Student Body	PhD student	Higher Education Employee*	Industry
2	2	3	6	11

*includes individual responses and those who responded on behalf of a Higher Education Institution.

Organisations	Individuals
18	6

Respondents' Preferred Option (see table below)

Option 1	Option 2	Option 3	Option 4	Option 5	Option 6
3	8	13	0	0	0

Options

Option 1 Business as usual

Option 2 Business as usual optimised to enhance Scheme impact

Option 3 Increase Scheme funding to support 1000 PhDs p.a.

Option 4 Reduce Scheme funding by 50% and seek to reallocate 50% of funding as annual block grant R&I funding.

Option 5 Reduce Scheme funding by 80% (funding university/industry collaborative (CAST) PhD awards only) and seek to reallocate remaining funding as annual block grant R&I funding.

Option 6 Close Scheme and reallocate all funding as annual block grant R&I funding.

Overview

The consultation sought responses to seven questions including one on respondents' preferred option for the delivery of the DfE funded Postgraduate Award Scheme going forward:

Question 1

Do you agree that the Department for the Economy should ringfence research & innovation (R&I) funding provided to NI universities to fund PhD awards?

Question 2

If funding for the PGA Scheme was increased, either by securing an increase in allocated R&I funding or by increasing the proportion of the annual R&I block grant ringfenced for PhDs, what impact do you think this would have?

Question 3

If ringfenced support for the PGA Scheme was reduced, what impact do you think this would have?

Question 4

If funding (currently ringfenced for the PGA Scheme) was redirected and allocated as QR/HEIF what impact do you think this would have?

Question 5

Which is your preferred option for the future of the PGA Scheme?

Question 6

Do you have any views on the potential to provide different stipend levels for PhD studentships across different disciplines or subject areas?

Question 7

Do you agree with the proposed changes to the existing PGA Scheme Terms and Conditions?

There was broad agreement that the Department should continue to ringfence R&I funding provided to the NI HEIs to fund the Scheme (Question 1), however, only a small number of respondents commented specifically on the advantages of ringfencing the R&I funding for this purpose. Other responses tended to focus on the value of PhDs.

In response to Question 2, the majority of respondents thought that increasing the funding either via ringfencing or via QR/HEIF would result in more PhDs with an associated positive impact on the economy. A number of respondents preferred that any additional funding would be used to enhance the student stipends rather than increase the numbers of PhDs.

There was a general consensus that reducing ringfenced support for the PGA Scheme (Question 3) would have an overall detrimental effect on NI's economy and the ability to respond to challenges and opportunities of the future across academia and industry.

The response rate to Question 4 (67%) was the lowest of all the questions. While some did not provide any response, others stated that they were unsure or did not feel they had sufficient knowledge to respond. The majority of those who did respond were not in favour of reallocating the funding as QR funding and/or HEIF, due to risk that the HEIs would opt to support fewer PhD studentships.

Question 5 asked respondents to identify their preferred option for the future of the PGA Scheme. All respondents were in favour of the PGA Scheme continuing with the majority (54%) favouring an increase to the provision to support 1000 PhDs per year. Some 13% of respondents preferred the Scheme to continue as usual with 33% preferring to continue as usual but with changes implemented to optimise the impact of the Scheme.

On the whole, respondents expressed support for different stipend levels being offered for PhD studentships across different disciplines or subject areas (Question 6). Respondents not in favour of different stipend levels were mainly from the student/student body sector. Those in favour of different stipend levels suggested that varying levels of support should be provided dependent on the expected contribution of the research to the economy. Those not in favour stated that such an approach would give the perception that subject disciplines are only valued in economic terms.

The majority of respondents to Question 7, welcomed the proposed changes to the PGA Scheme terms and conditions (T&Cs), highlighting the benefits of aligning more closely with UKRI's terms and conditions, ensuring consistency and fostering an environment that supports PhDs. A number of respondents commented on the shorter duration of DfE studentships (3 years) compared to UKRI's 4-year studentship.

Respondents were invited to submit additional comments. These are included at Annex A.

It is recognised that additional engagement with stakeholders will be required on any proposed changes to the Scheme.

Summary of Responses

Question 1

Do you agree that the Department for the Economy should ringfence research & innovation (R&I) funding provided to NI universities to fund PhD awards?

Response	Total
Yes	22
Not necessarily	1
No	0
Not Answered	1

There was broad agreement (92%) from respondents that the Department should continue to ringfence research and innovation funding provided to NI HEIs to fund PhD awards.

The majority who responded 'yes' to this question commented on the importance of PhDs to research and innovation but did not comment specifically on why the funding allocated to the HEIs needed to be ringfenced rather than allocated via QR or HEIF.

One respondent who did 'not necessarily' agree did not provide a rationale in support of their response.

Two respondents commented specifically on the ringfencing element: one respondent believed that fewer PhD studentships would be made available if the funding was not ringfenced; and another stated that the Scheme mitigates the risk of HEIs allocating non-ringfenced funding to other R&I activity, resulting in fewer postgraduate research opportunities in NI. While the respondent acknowledged that local HEIs have made internal strategic decisions to support postgraduate research provision, they highlighted that without a ringfenced allocation, there is no requirement on HEIs to allocate funding to supporting postgraduate research studentships. There was therefore a risk that R&I income could be allocated to other activity, such as employment of postdoctoral researchers to advance research strategic research outcomes.

From many of the comments made in response to this question, it appeared that some respondents interpreted this question as meaning that it would be the Department's intention to withdraw funding for PhDs, rather than providing the same level of funding via QR to the HEIs, who would be able to continue funding PhDs should they wish to do so.

The majority of respondents thought it was important to continue ringfencing R&I funding as this would promote and protect much needed PhD funding in the region. It was suggested by one respondent that without this funding, the opportunity to undertake a PhD is at risk of becoming only attainable for the elite, as they would be expensive to self-fund over the 3 year period, and so would exacerbate class barriers.

Question 2

If funding for the PGA Scheme was increased (either by securing an increase in allocated R&I funding, or by increasing the proportion of the annual R&I block grant ringfenced for PhDs), what impact do you think this would have?

The majority (92%) of respondents provided comments to this question.

Most commented that the additional funding would inevitably increase the number of PhDs and that this would have a positive impact on NI's research ecosystem, as it would enable greater capacity for PhD researchers, who are essential to driving innovation and growth.

A number of respondents thought that the additional funding should be used to increase the stipend payments to the PhD student rather than using the funding to increase the number of PhDs. By increasing the funding awarded to PhD students, one respondent commented that it would provide opportunities for students to consider studying a PhD as a potential early career opportunity and that this is essential for students from lower socio-economic backgrounds. It was also mentioned by another respondent that an increase in funding could facilitate the introduction of differential stipends.

One respondent suggested that if funding was increased there should be more of a focus on aligning PhDs with local and global needs, with another suggesting that an increase in STEM PhD funding would be preferable.

A number of respondents expressed their view that existing QR and HEIF funding should not be reallocated to increase funding for the PGA Scheme.

Impacts of increasing the funding for PhDs, as stated by the respondents, included:

- enabling HEIs to expand their cohort of postgraduate researchers and build on successes achieved through the Scheme to date, including leveraging the draw-down of external funding, enhancing collaboration with industry to drive innovation and productivity, addressing critical skills shortages and ensuring NI can meet the future demands in priority and emerging sectors;
- guaranteeing a talent pipeline of early-stage researchers to support the Department's research and innovation priorities, the Minister's economic mission statement and the draft Programme for Government priority to "Grow a Globally Competitive and Sustainable Economy";
- building long-term capacity in the workforce at doctorate degree level;
- reducing the 'brain drain' from NI;
- building on the social and economic benefits of PhDs;
- maintaining a route to publicly funded postgraduate research study for students, particularly for those without financial means to self-fund;
- guaranteeing a minimum number of funded postgraduate research opportunities for students, particularly in the absence of a tuition and finance support framework for postgraduate research study in NI; and
- increasing the diversity of available projects and increasing the possibility to create cohorts of studentships in particular areas.

Question 3

If ringfenced support for the PGA Scheme was reduced, what impact do you think this would have?

The majority (92%) of respondents provided responses to this question.

The general consensus was that reducing ringfenced support for the PGA Scheme would be to the overall detriment of the NI economy and the ability to respond to challenges and opportunities of the future, across academia and industry. From the responses provided, it is clear that the majority of respondents equated the reduction in ringfenced support for the PGA Scheme with a necessary decrease in the number of PhDs overall. Most responses did not comment on the continued ability of HEIs to use the corresponding uplift in QR/HEIF funding to continue to fund PhDs, should they wish to do so. One respondent commented that NI already has low levels of public investment in Research and Development and that a reduction in funding for the PGA Scheme would lead to a further deterioration in these metrics.

A small number of respondents interpreted this question as reducing the funding provided to the student and one respondent commented that this would decrease the quality of work the candidates produce, if they had to focus on earning a second income in order to support the cost of living.

Potential impacts identified by respondents, if the ringfenced support for the PGA Scheme was reduced, included:

- Reduced attraction of NI as a place to develop capability;
- Decline in the standards of academic research in certain departments, diminishing NI's research output;
- Reduction in quantity of PhD studentships available in NI HEIs and reduction in competitiveness of these institutions as research partners relative to national and international competitors;
- Fewer high calibre students applying, meaning businesses would have to increase contributions and may not see the value for money in supporting a 3-year project if not fully supported by the PGA Scheme;
- Impact on ability to support spin-out technology companies and start-ups, with difficulties in recruiting high quality staff into NI from the rest of the UK or internationally;
- Negative impact on young people in NI, facing multiple barriers to graduate education;
- Reduced ability to leverage additional research funding for PhDs;
- Risks regarding submission for Research Excellence Framework (REF) for 2029; and
- Impact on HEI rankings, league tables and research and teaching excellence.

Question 4

If funding (currently ringfenced for the PGA Scheme) was redirected and allocated as Quality-related Research (QR) funding and Higher Education Innovation Fund (HEIF) what impact do you think this would have?

The response rate to this question was 67%, as some did not provide any response, or stated that they were unsure or did not have sufficient knowledge to respond.

The majority of those who did respond were not in favour of reallocating the funding as QR funding and/or HEIF, due to risk that the HEIs would ultimately support fewer PhD studentships.

A number of respondents commented on the current level of QR and HEIF in NI as being the lowest per capita of all UK regions, and that this too should be increased to maximise impact and return on investment.

One respondent stated that the impact of reallocating to QR/HEIF would focus on high quality R&I which would add value given the critical impact which high quality research has in terms of the health and growth of all sectors in NI.

Concerns were raised that reallocating funding to QR, would create institutional divergence on the number of PhD studentships awarded, based on institutional R&I priorities, and that in assigning all funding as part of the annual block grant the Department would lose a useful lever to ensure that the university sector is playing a full role in fulfilling Ministerial and overarching economic objectives for NI.

Further potential risks identified by respondents included:

- Risk of reduced attractiveness of NI to graduates from elsewhere the UK;
- Risk of negative messaging regarding equity of access to higher education; and
- Risk to long-term workforce planning for the commercial sector due to uncertainty in talent pipeline.

Question 5

Which is your preferred option for the future of the PGA Scheme?

The Consultation asked the respondents to state their preferred option for the future of the PGA Scheme as listed below. All respondents answered this question.

Option	Total	Gov/ Political	Student body/PhD	HE Employee	Industry
Option 1 Business as usual	3	0	0	2	1
Option 2 Business as usual optimised to enhance Scheme impact	8	0	3	2	3
Option 3 Increase Scheme funding to support 1000 PhDs p.a.	13	2	2	2	7
Option 4 Reduce Scheme funding by 50% and seek to reallocate 50% of funding as annual block grant R&I funding.	0	0	0	0	0
Option 5 Reduce Scheme funding by 80% (funding university/industry collaborative (CAST) PhD awards only) and seek to reallocate remaining funding as annual block grant R&I funding.	0	0	0	0	0
Option 6 Close Scheme and reallocate all funding as annual block grant R&I funding.	0	0	0	0	0

Option 3 (to increase Scheme funding to support 1000 PhDs per annum) was the preferred option overall, followed by Option 2, (business as usual optimised to enhance Scheme impact), and then Option 1 (Business as usual). Options 4 to 6 were not considered preferable by any of the respondents.

Based on the classification of respondents, both industry and government/political representatives preferred Option 3, HE Employees preferred Options 1, 2 and 3 equally and student bodies/PhD students preferred Option 2.

Consultees were invited to comment on their preferred option. This had a lower response rate i.e. 71%.

Comments provided by respondents who preferred **Option 1**, cited that the Scheme had worked well to date, and that further work would be required before making any changes.

Those who preferred **Option 2** stated that they would prefer to see prioritising of STEM PhD studentships and that PhDs with industrial partners should take priority. One respondent commented that attracting PhDs in the right disciplines was more important than increasing the number of PhDs. Suggestions also included optimising the scheme, by increasing the length of studentship to 3.5 years and increasing the stipend paid to students.

Those who preferred **Option 3** favoured increasing the number of PhDs, without necessarily providing a rationale. One correspondent who preferred Option 3, caveated their response by stating that they supported additional PhDs, but not necessarily increasing to 1000, and others expressed support for an increase only on the basis of an increased uplift in overall annual R&I funding and not within existing budget allocation. One respondent who preferred Option 3, commented that there may be a case for Option 4, (Reduce Scheme funding by 50% and seek to reallocate 50% of funding as annual block grant R&I funding), however, the potential negative impact on local HEIs would need to be considered.

It was also stated that scheme enhancement should not come at the detriment of subject disciplines that are not perceived to be economic priority areas (e.g. non-STEM); broadly PGA Scheme awards should provide opportunities to students of all disciplines to pursue doctoral qualifications across all academic disciplines.

It was also suggested that future investment must ensure that studentships are aligned with government priorities, with clear KPIs and improved destination tracking of PGA participants to demonstrate value for money for future appraisal exercises.

Question 6

Do you have any views on the potential to provide different stipend levels for PhD studentships across different disciplines or subject areas?

The response rate to this question was 79%.

On the whole, respondents were in favour of different stipend levels for PhD studentships across different disciplines or subject areas. Respondents who were strongly not in favour of different stipend levels were mainly from the student/student body sector.

Those in favour of different stipend levels stated that varying levels of support should be provided depending on the expected contribution that the research will benefit the economy; in order to attract the best candidates it is considered necessary to provide an attractive stipend.

A number of industry respondents added that it was difficult to attract PhDs as the starting graduate salary was greater than the PhD stipend and offering a higher stipend may ensure that graduates consider a PhD as a viable option.

A number of respondents recommended that stipend levels should align with stipends offered by other funders to ensure consistency and competitiveness across the UK, while one respondent suggested that different stipend levels should be offered to encourage local students to enter the research sector.

Respondents who did not agree with different stipend levels were concerned about equity for students, a negative impact on the future of humanities research and a perception that subject disciplines are only valued in economic terms. Concerns were also raised on how the different levels of stipend would be assessed and how the policy would be communicated to PhD students, who may perceive it as a two-tier system.

One respondent suggested the introduction of different durations for PhDs, with longer durations for those with high degree of field work or experimental work.

Question 7

Do you agree with the proposed changes to the existing PGA Scheme Terms and Conditions?

The response rate to this question was 71%.

The suggested changes in the consultation document included:

- Classification of Irish Nationals as ‘home students’ to enable access to full award (fees and stipend)
- To raise cap on international students to 30%
- To offer both part-time and full-time studentships
- To permit part-time students to undertake part-time employment
- To introduce leave entitlement (bereavement)
- To introduce keeping in touch days for students on maternity leave

The majority of respondents who responded to this question welcomed the proposed changes to the PGA scheme terms and conditions (T&Cs) and commented on the benefits of aligning them more closely with UKRI’s terms and conditions, ensuring consistency and fostering an environment that supports PhDs.

Benefits of the changes mentioned by respondents included: a more diverse and inclusive workforce; increased competitiveness and quality of PhDs; greater all-island R&I collaboration; and increased student mobility.

There were some additional suggestions from respondents including:

- Overseas students should require an industrial partner to ensure value for NI;
- Broader definition of CAST studentships in the T&Cs to consider partnership with Government departments to address major policy challenges; and
- Aligning the duration of a DfE studentship with UKRI’s (4 years rather than 3 years)

Concern was expressed that the raised cap on international students would negatively affect home-based students.

One respondent highlighted the current review being undertaken by UKRI, as part of the New Deal for Postgraduate Research, and noted that it is essential that the NI Scheme remains consistent with national standards.

Next Steps

- The Higher Education Research and Knowledge Exchange Branch in DfE are grateful for the responses received to the Consultation.
- We note the broad agreement to continue the Scheme and the preferred option to increase the number of PhD studentships supported.
- We will consider all the comments and suggestions as we develop the policy for the Scheme going forward.
- We recognise that further consideration is needed in some areas, and we will continue our engagement with stakeholders.

Annex A

Additional comments on the policy options

Consultees were invited to provide additional comments on any of the policy options considered in the consultation. The response rate to this section was 46%.

The additional comments from Industry respondents included:

- Industry engagement is crucial to optimise public investment. Flexibility for industry co-supervision without direct cash input is needed. Clear Intellectual Property (IP) terms for co-funded PhDs are essential. Alignment with City Deals could positively impact the region.
- DfE funding for Masters in Research (MRes) and PhD training is critical - impact cannot be underestimated for the local NI economy moving into the next decades.
- PhD graduates are critical to the operation and overall growth of our business so any changes made should be to enhance this area.

Additional comments from HE employees/organisations included:

- It is refreshing to see such a consultation supporting the increase in critical doctoral training funding that directly supports the economic growth of NI and the UK as a whole.
- Reduction or closure of the PGA scheme would be a disaster for our economy and only result in the increase of students taking their skillsets and knowledge outside of NI upon graduation of undergraduate studies.
- We recommend a review into financial support mechanisms to evaluate adequacy of stipend support, measured against cost-of-living costs.

Additional comments from Student Bodies/current or former PhD students included:

- Extension to allow for 4-year PhD courses would help in terms of the level of training of the graduates.
- We require a commitment to grow the stream of talented PhDs in STEM generally, but Physics and Computer Science in particular. It is people from this group who become our key technology leaders and subject matter experts and whose influence stretches all the way from concept development to the smooth running of our production lines. Our PhD graduates are the intellectual and energy-centres of our success.
- The current Departmental administration/reporting requirements of HE institutions should be maintained, as they enable independent VFM and equality of opportunity reporting to take place.
- Provision for funding on an annual basis should move to a commitment for the entire funded life cycle of a PhD (i.e. three years). It is reasonable for the DfE to reduce this risk to HEIs who are essentially committing to underwrite a DfE programme.
- There should be greater flexibility in the timeline set by DfE for commencement and completion of study to enable institutions to align PhD programme commencement with their local academic calendars. This would enhance the overall student experience and enable consistent and coherent programme induction and support to be provided to all postgraduate research students, regardless of their personal funding situation.

- The level of stipend should be reviewed against a new baseline. The current levels have increased with inflation, but it is prudent to review given the substantial increases in living costs for students in recent years which may not be captured by general inflation measures (e.g. HEPI Minimum Income Standard for Students). Any potential increase in stipend could potentially be funded from the current PGA Scheme funding allocation. It is recognised that, while this may result in a reduction in the overall number of stipends available, it ensures that those on stipends are sufficiently resourced to undertake PGR study, meet their academic attainment potential and are therefore more likely to complete PGR study within the three-year stipend period.
- We appreciate the Department's detailed work in examining this important scheme and the clear desire to optimise public R&I funding in NI. The policy options outlined in this consultation provide a useful framework and we would welcome a further discussion on potential outcomes in the context of the wider HE and R&I funding ecosystem in NI. We have a preference for any outcome that results in continued and enhanced support for the PGA Scheme, while also ensuring the sustainability of QR/HEIF funding.

Additional comments from Government/Political Representatives included:

- We note concerns re Option 5 & 6. It is recognised that DfE's requirements to demonstrate economic value are important to consider wider social impact and not apply a 'narrow' definition of industry and STEM. 80% reduction over 3 years would lead to fewer PhD awards and consistent underperformance over time.