

Parental Leave for PGRs- considering the policy landscape

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Wider Context



In 2010 all UK research councils introduced mat leave and pay entitlements for funded PhD (ECU, 2010)



Women are more likely to study for a PhD later in life than men (Brown and Watson, 2010)



Being a parent has an ongoing impact on women's academic career progression – the 'motherhood penalty' (Correll, Benard & Paik, 2007)



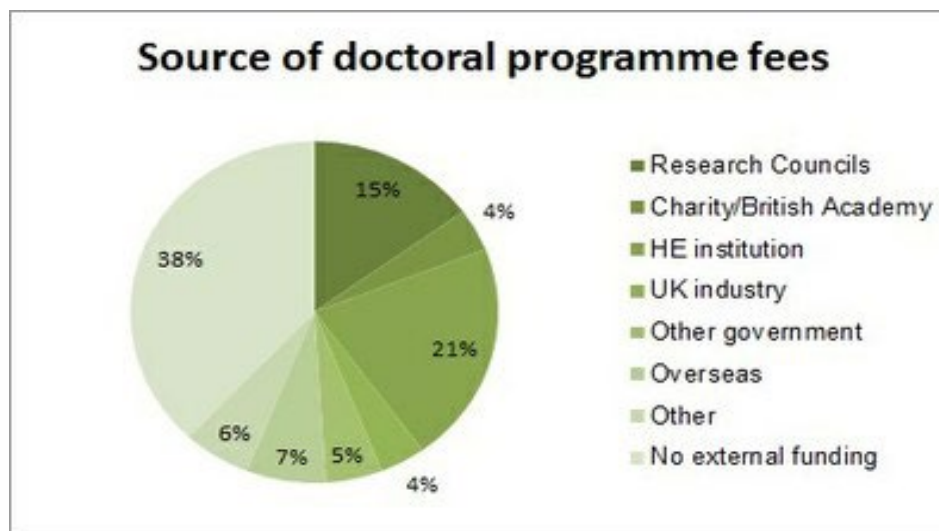
Period in which women likely to become mothers often coincides with the timeframe for academic career progression (Ward and Wolf-Wendel, 2016)



Evidence that in considering their future identities, women PGRs find imagining themselves as both academics and mothers challenging (Handforth, 2022)

Who funds PGRs?

- Patchwork of different funders for PGRs in the UK and internationally
- Results in a wide diversity of funding terms and conditions for PhD studentships
- Most comprehensive analysis of the main sources of funding for PGRs in the UK done in 2012/13 by Vitae:



[Source: Who provides funding for UK doctorates — Vitae Website](#)

Status of PGRs

- Despite often being members of teaching staff, PGRs do not automatically get access to paid parental leave – maternity, paternity, shared parental or adoption leave – as they are not employees
- In 2020 UCU passed policy advocating formal recognition of all PGRs as academic staff-paid parental leave featured in their [2023 Manifesto](#)
- Student status of PGRs affects access to parental leave and may negatively impact on PGRs' mental health:



“The entitlement of PGRs to maternity and paternity leave, and continued funding, is not always clear. As PGRs (generally) do not have employee status they may not be able to access, or know they can access, HR support to get advice about leave of any kind (maternity, paternity, sickness, compassionate, emergency).

Several PGRs noted that they were not aware that they were entitled to any maternity leave during their doctoral studies. There were also isolated accounts of supervisors reacting negatively (covertly or overtly) to PGRs who became pregnant.”

(Vitae, 2018, p. 25)





Parental Leave Policies

- Appears that HEIs and most well-known external funders of PhD studentships in the UK do provide paid parental leave, usually following UKRI entitlement. However, differences in the language used within T&Cs:

“If you receive a Wellcome studentship stipend, we expect your organisation to provide you with the same leave and pay entitlements as an employee. We will supplement your grant by the actual costs your employing organisation incurs paying your salary or stipend while you’re on leave, less any recoverable statutory pay...We will pay 50% of your research costs, pro-rata, for the period you are on leave.” ([Wellcome](#), 2024)

“Doctoral students are governed by the policies and rules of the institution where they are registered, but subject to these [Leverhulme] allows students to take maternity, paternity, shared parental and adoption leave. Where appropriate, [Leverhulme] will consider requests, on a case by case basis, to pay for the provision of additional stipend.” ([Leverhulme](#), 2024)

“Pay associated with leave is the responsibility of your host organisation (e.g. maternity pay). They can draw on indirect costs and other costs available to them to cover the cost of your leave pay. Whilst pay itself is the responsibility of your host university, if the total salary/stipend costs increase compared to the costs originally budgeted for (as a result of the end date changing and any additional increments and pay awards being incurred), NIHR SPHR will cover the difference” ([NIHR](#), 2024)

Related issues for PGRs

- No provision for paid parental leave for non-birthing partners beyond statutory 10 days across sector
- Mental health and wellbeing – fear of discrimination and concerns about finances/progression
- Return to work post parental leave- subjective to relationship with supervisors and potentially locked out of access to email etc ([THE](#), 2019)- lack of support from HR and the protections that this offers
- Access to childcare grants ([THE](#), 2024)
- Underlying EDI issue relating to transparency of terms, conditions and policies relating access to parental leave within PhD studentships
- Reflects broader trend across employment sectors where there is also a lack of transparency of parental leave policies- just 23% of FTSE 100 companies make this information available – ([Financial Times](#), 2019)



What developments have there been?



General trend since 2010 that those funding PhD research will provide some form of paid parental leave- focus on mat leave arrangements primarily



Improved transparency from universities and funders on their parental leave policies – many are now publicly available



Many universities using policies around authorized absence/intermission due to exceptional circumstances to enable international PGRs longer periods of mat leave



Some universities are actively lobbying on behalf of PGRs to allow access to childcare support and grants

Remaining Challenges

- International PGRs face ongoing difficulties depending on their funder and access to advice/support- perhaps useful to consider how best practice could be shared across the sector to offer maximum flexibility within Tier 4
- Funders and institutions' offers vary and there is a lack of national data about what is available to PGRs and their experiences of accessing leave
- Explore access to paid parental leave and the effect on PhD completions – wider context of lack of access to childcare will also have an impact, though
- Need to support those considering PhD study to explore all terms and conditions of their funding before they apply
- Access to parental leave is relatively small concern but within broader shift towards more equitable research culture it is important to address- ultimately has longer-term implications on who is able to succeed

