



POSTGRADUATES, THE PANDEMIC, AND THE UNIVERSITY OF NOTTINGHAM (UoN)

Postgraduate Researchers (PGRs – often referred to as PhD students) have been facing various struggles since the pandemic began and many even before that. The short term and inflexible nature of their studies means that, for many, the interruptions and delays brought on by the pandemic has been disastrous for their research. Most PGRs receive some form of funding for the period during which they conduct their research. This funding will likely contain a stipend, which is essentially the PGRs wage for the fixed period (typically three years) in which they conduct their doctoral research. Thus, many depend on this type of funding for their livelihoods.

The UKRI, a public body that directs research and innovation funding on behalf of the government, has recently released [new guidance](#) for the PGRs they fund. It states that students should adjust and adapt their research projects in consultation with their supervisors to complete a doctoral-level qualification within their funded period, instead of receiving funded extensions. This is despite the fact many projects have been severely disrupted, or put entirely on hold, as a result of the pandemic, meaning many will not be able to adjust their research to finish on time. There has been an [outcry](#) as a result of UKRI's guidance. While Pandemic PGRs have been leading the [push back](#) against this cruel treatment at a national level, within UoN the PGR Support Committee, a grassroots student led body, organised an open letter to the university calling for increased support. After stalling for months, university management finally arranged a meeting with the group recently. This pressure has resulted in the Deputy Vice-Chancellor making some conciliatory remarks in a recent email to PGRs regarding funding extensions, but the extensions mentioned are still limited and conditional, with potentially very high barriers to successful application. There is still a long way to go.

UoN seems to have broadly adopted the UKRI's current stance towards PGRs in the earlier stages of their research, a deliberately divisive approach which allows limited funded extensions for final year PGRs, but not those at the start or in the middle of their research projects, who have equally faced the impacts of the pandemic. These include severe adjustments, limited opportunities for data collection, limited access to research facilities (labs and libraries), and unsuitable working conditions, alongside the overall increased anxiety of balancing these impacts during a global pandemic. The UKRI has also ignored its own research [commissioned by NatCen](#), including the recommendation to provide targeted support for students in specific groups (e.g. students with disabilities, students with caring responsibilities) based on their needs.

This situation also highlights a broader issue. PGRs appear to have a dual status. While independently producing research for the university, not to mention teaching, PGRs occupy a role similar to many other members of staff, yet their "student" status denies them this recognition and the associated rights. Budget cuts have seen UoN replacing paid teaching positions with "opportunities" for PGRs to "volunteer" to "gain experience" through extra unpaid teaching work. In addition, the UKRI's decision, from which UoN have taken their lead, means that many PGRs are facing the prospect of continuing to work after their funding (and therefore pay) ends. Like other workers, PGRs produce value which the university exploits, but by mobilising the language of studentship the university seeks to deny the essence of this relation. Research is work and as such should be paid. PGRs must demand that the value they produce is recognised!



WHAT NEXT?

Join the Union!

The UCU has condemned the UKRI treatment of PhD candidates and has also nationally adopted a policy to campaign for Postgraduate Researchers (PGRs) to be recognised as members of staff. But these positions will only progress towards making concrete changes if PGRs are pushing them within the union and organised within their workplaces. UCU membership is currently free for all PGRs.

Organise!

The current situation has affected the vast majority of PGRs, speak to your colleagues, discuss these issues. What can be done within your school, faculty and across the university to put pressure on management to extend PhD funding, challenge the UKRI decision, and start to acknowledge the value PGRs produce for the university as workers.

Take Action!

If you work or study at the University of Nottingham, sign and share the PGR Support Committee's [open letter](#) calling on the university to provide more support for PGRs. There is currently a [parliamentary petition](#) running which calls for a six month funded extension to be available to all PhD students. Pandemic PGRs have also put together a useful [resource](#) which includes information as well as practical steps we can all take. But we must also be prepared to take further action alongside others, linking up with the struggles of all workers across campuses.

Get Involved!

Contact us: NottsUniWorker@gmail.com

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/NottsUniWorkers> Twitter: [@NottsUniWorkers](https://twitter.com/NottsUniWorkers)

Follow Pandemic PGRs: <https://twitter.com/PandemicPGRs>

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