



Rt Hon Chloe Smith MP
Secretary of State for Science, Innovation
and Technology

Sent via email

Reply to: Dr A Bramley, Director N8 Research Partnership
Email: annette.bramley@n8research.org.uk

2nd May 2023

Dear Ms Smith,

Re: Support for postgraduate researchers to access government childcare subsidies

On behalf of the N8 Research Partnership, we are writing to raise concerns around the ineligibility of postgraduate researchers (PhDs and Professional Doctorates) for Government-backed childcare subsidies which we believe will have a detrimental impact on diversity in postgraduate research.

The N8 Research Partnership is a collaboration of the major research-intensive universities in the North of England, comprising the Universities of Durham, Lancaster, Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester, Newcastle, Sheffield and York.

We welcome the announcement in the Spring Budget which expands, in England, the 30-free hours scheme, to all eligible children from 9-months starting April 2024.

Unfortunately, postgraduate researchers in England are currently ineligible for current government schemes and the planned extension. Postgraduate researchers are registered as students rather than staff, which means any funding/stipend they receive is not classed as income. This stipend is often their only source of earnings and makes postgraduate researchers ineligible for government support unless they take on additional paid employment. To do so, they would need to earn the equivalent of 16 hours a week at the national living wage.

Many postgraduate students who are in receipt of postgraduate studentship funding have limits placed on the numbers of hours they can work outside their PhDs. For example, the UK Government itself funds scholarships through UK Research and Innovations which in fact prohibit students from holding a full-time job, permanent part-time job, or even temporary role for extended periods.

There are government schemes to support parents in full-time education, but eligibility requirements once again exclude postgraduate researchers. Childcare grants, which can cover 85% of childcare costs up to £188.90 a week for 1 child and up to £323.85 a week for 2 or more children, require students to be in receipt of undergraduate student finance based on their household income.

The typical stipend for a postgraduate student in the UK is currently between £15,000 to £18,000 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. For the majority of funded postgraduate researchers

who have children the cost of childcare is roughly equal to their stipend. It is unsurprising that the NUS found 60 percent of students with parental responsibilities have thought about leaving their course (rising to 65 percent for single parents).

We are concerned that the unforeseen consequence of this combination of policies from different Government departments is to unintentionally exclude postgraduate students from childcare support which is available both to other students and to working families.

The impact of this situation on the diversity and inclusivity of postgraduate research will be to disincentivise parents of young children from pursuing postgraduate qualifications. It will have a negative consequences for the diversity and inclusivity of postgraduate research in the UK.

Can you imagine trying to juggle full-time postgraduate research, part-time employment and raising children, just to meet the eligibility requirements of government childcare support? The burden and stress on postgraduate researchers would be detrimental to the development of future research talent in the UK and reduce the quality of research that they would be able to undertake.

To ensure our postgraduate researchers succeed and thrive we are committed to creating optimal research and educational environments. We are working together as a strategic alliance of universities to improve equality, diversity and inclusion within our institutions. We need to ensure the pipeline of new talent is as open as possible to enable the best researchers to contribute to our research and innovation ecosystem. We would very much appreciate your support in resolving this unfortunate combination of policies which prevent postgraduate students from accessing government childcare support schemes.

By so doing, you will directly address inclusivity and talent development aims embedded not only in the forthcoming Postgraduate New Deal, but also the Department of Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy's Research and Development People and Culture Strategy.

We note that our colleagues from the GW4 universities have also written to express their concerns on this matter. We would be very happy to meet with you to discuss the impacts on postgraduate researchers and accelerate access to government funded childcare schemes.

We look forward to hearing from you,



Dr Annette Bramley
Director of N8 Research Partnership




Professor Charlie Jeffery
Vice-Chancellor and President
University of York
Chair of N8 Board



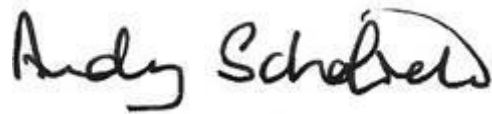
Professor Chris Day
Vice-Chancellor and President
University of Newcastle



Professor Dame Nancy Rothwell
Vice-Chancellor and President
University of Manchester



Professor Tim Jones
Vice-Chancellor
University of Liverpool



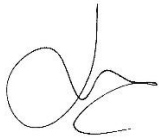
Professor Andy Schofield
Vice-Chancellor and President
Lancaster University



Professor Simone Buitendijk
Vice-Chancellor
University of Leeds



Professor Karen O'Brien
Vice-Chancellor and Warden
Durham university



Professor Koen Lamberts
Vice-Chancellor and President
University of Sheffield