

UK-HyRES National PhD Survey Report: What needs to change?

UK-HyRES ECR NETWORK
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Executive Summary

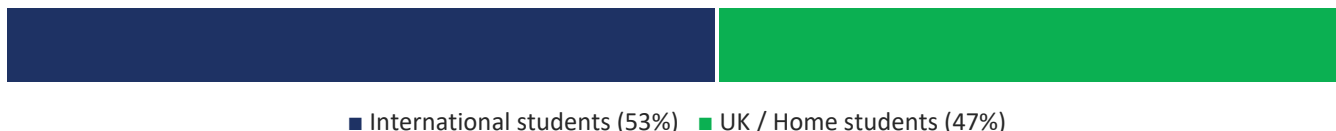
DOMINANT FINDING

Financial insecurity sits at the centre of many other challenges facing UK doctoral researchers.

This report presents a comprehensive analysis of PhD researcher survey responses collected across UK universities. Inadequate stipends, rising housing costs, constraints on conference funding and hidden research expenses contribute directly to stress, well-being concerns and reduced participation in professional development opportunities. Respondents consistently reported that stipends have not kept pace with inflation. Career uncertainty, particularly around transitions beyond academia, was also prominent. Variability in supervisory support, feelings of isolation, limited exposure to non-academic careers, and limited networking opportunities were recurring themes.

Respondent Profile

The dataset includes PhD researchers from universities across the UK and spans a wide range of academic disciplines. Survey respondents represented a diverse range of UK higher education institutions, including Russell Group universities, other pre-1992 universities, and post-1992 universities, providing perspectives from a broad cross-section of the UK academic sector. Respondents were also drawn from all stages of the doctoral journey, ensuring that the dataset captures insights and experiences from both early-stage and late-stage PhD researchers.



Key Findings

Financial pressure is the most significant issue

~4 in 5

cited funding, cost-of-living or stipend concerns as among their most significant challenges

Financial insecurity also emerged as a cross-cutting issue. Students described difficulty paying rent, attending conferences, covering research costs, and coping with inflation and the financial stress caused by project delays. Several respondents felt that compensation for doctoral research does not adequately reflect the responsibilities and workload involved, with many viewing the PhD as full-time professional work that is compensated and recognised primarily as a student activity. This perceived mismatch was a significant source of dissatisfaction among respondents.

Representative concerns:

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PhD pays worse than McDonald's despite requiring far more work.

“

Cost of living is a challenge with the low stipends.

“

Being busy severely restricts flexibility to get part-time work.

“

I cycle 20 km daily to overcome skyrocketed rents.

“

A conference attendance can directly affect the choices I make in the lab due to financial burden.

Career preparation and transition support gap

A majority of respondents reported uncertainty and significant anxiety regarding their future careers. While many expressed interest in pursuing careers both within and beyond academia, they felt that doctoral training does not adequately prepare researchers for the transition into post-PhD employment. Limited opportunities for industry engagement, internships, networking, and exposure to alternative career pathways contributed to uncertainty about future employment and reduced confidence in navigating a competitive job market.

Common concerns included:

- Lack of professional networks
- Limited industry exposure
- Few internship or placement opportunities
- Limited awareness of careers in policy, consultancy, entrepreneurship, and government
- Strong competition for academic positions
- Lack of relevant experience
- Job market competition
- Unclear career pathways

Many respondents expressed interest in careers outside academia, including industry, consultancy, policy, and entrepreneurship. However, they noted that institutional support remains heavily focused on academic career progression, with limited opportunities to explore alternative career paths. Several respondents also highlighted the lack of career guidance specifically tailored to the needs and aspirations of doctoral researchers.

Overall, the findings suggest a gap between doctoral training and career preparation, with many researchers seeking broader exposure to potential career pathways and more structured support to navigate transitions both within and beyond academia.

Lack of recognition of PhD experience

Many doctoral researchers highlighted concerns that time spent undertaking a PhD is often not recognised by employers as either professional work experience or valuable UK-based experience. Respondents described a disconnect between the advanced skills, responsibilities, and independence expected during doctoral research and the way PhD experience is perceived in the wider labour market.

Several respondents viewed the PhD as full-time professional work that involves project management, problem-solving, stakeholder engagement, technical expertise, data analysis, leadership, and independent work. However, they felt that employers frequently prioritise industry experience or previous employment history over doctoral research experience. This can create barriers when applying for jobs, particularly where employers specify prior industry experience or a minimum level of UK work experience.

Respondents therefore called for greater recognition of doctoral research as professional work experience and for PhD study undertaken in the UK to be acknowledged as legitimate UK-based experience, reflecting the significant skills and expertise developed throughout the doctoral journey.

Mentorship and supervisory challenges

Experiences with supervision varied considerably, ranging from excellent support to severe supervision failures, and emerged as one of the strongest determinants of overall PhD satisfaction. While some respondents described highly supportive environments and outstanding supervisory support, others reported recurring concerns:

- Supervisors lacking expertise in relevant research areas
- Limited supervisor engagement
- Poor communication
- Lack of postdoctoral mentoring
- Power imbalances preventing students from raising concerns safely
- Being effectively isolated when supervisors were absent
- No alternative mentoring channels
- Fear of retaliation when challenging poor supervision

The quality of the PhD experience is heavily dependent on supervisor quality, creating significant inequality in student outcomes.

Mental health, isolation and belonging

Mental health and wellbeing emerged as a significant concern across the survey responses. Many students reported experiencing burnout, anxiety, imposter syndrome, loneliness, and persistent stress throughout their doctoral studies. These challenges were rarely isolated; instead, they were closely linked to broader pressures, including financial insecurity, demanding workloads, uncertainty about future career prospects, and limited opportunities for social and professional integration. Researchers in small research groups, highly specialised fields, or with limited peer networks appeared particularly vulnerable to isolation and disconnection from the wider research community.

Several respondents described the cumulative impact of working beyond funded periods, the constant pressure to achieve, and a lack of access to adequate community or institutional support. Importantly, the findings suggest that mental well-being challenges are often symptoms of underlying structural issues within the PhD ecosystem, including inadequate funding, inconsistent supervisory support, limited career development opportunities, and weak mechanisms for fostering a sense of belonging and peer engagement. Addressing these underlying factors

is therefore likely to have a more meaningful and sustainable impact on researchers' well-being than standalone mental health interventions.

Networking and sense of community

A recurring theme across the survey was the sense of isolation experienced by many PhD researchers. Several respondents reported being the only doctoral researcher within their research group or working in highly specialised areas with limited opportunities for peer interaction. As a result, students frequently described a lack of peer support networks, limited opportunities for collaboration and networking, and weak integration into their wider departmental or institutional research communities. Many expressed a desire for greater access to fellow researchers, alumni, mentors, and industry professionals who could provide both professional guidance and a stronger sense of belonging.

WHAT WORKS

Many students rely on external networks such as UK-HyRES ECR because institutional structures are insufficient — providing mentoring, peer support and career exposure not consistently available within their home institutions.

International Students Perspective

International students consistently highlighted a range of additional challenges beyond those experienced by domestic students. While visa and immigration costs were a major concern, their experiences also reflected broader financial, practical, and social pressures associated with studying in the UK.

Students reported significant concerns about visa fees, the Immigration Health Surcharge (IHS), family visa costs, and the administrative burden associated with immigration processes. Many indicated that these expenses consumed a substantial proportion of their available resources, increasing financial strain and uncertainty.

Financial vulnerability was further exacerbated by restricted access to hardship funding and scholarship opportunities, leaving some international students with fewer sources of support during periods of financial difficulty.

Housing was another significant challenge. Respondents highlighted high rental costs, guarantor requirements, limited availability of suitable accommodation, and barriers associated with securing short-term tenancies. These factors often compounded existing financial pressures and made it more difficult to access stable housing.

In addition, many international students described challenges related to inclusion and belonging, including homesickness, family separation, adapting to UK culture, social exclusion, and anxiety about post-study employment opportunities.

Career Aspirations

Academia and industry were the most commonly cited career aspirations. A substantial proportion also expressed interest in policy, government, consultancy and entrepreneurship. This reflects the increasingly diverse ambitions of doctoral researchers and highlights the need for broader training and career support structures.

What Works Well?

Despite the challenges identified, respondents highlighted several positive aspects of their doctoral experience. Many expressed strong enthusiasm for their research and remained highly motivated by the opportunity to contribute to scientific and societal challenges.

Supportive and engaged supervisors were frequently identified as one of the most valuable factors influencing a positive PhD experience. Respondents appreciated supervisors who provided constructive feedback, career guidance, networking opportunities, and encouragement.

Researchers also valued opportunities to engage with external networks, conferences, industry partners, and interdisciplinary collaborations. These activities helped expand professional networks, improve career awareness, and reduce feelings of isolation.

Many respondents particularly highlighted the benefits of networks such as the UK-HyRES ECR Network in providing mentoring, peer support, professional connections, and exposure to careers beyond academia.

Policy Priority Rankings

When respondents ranked policy interventions, five areas consistently ranked highest.

1	Funding and stipends
2	Skills development
3	Internships and placements
4	Mentoring and networking support
5	Mental health provision

Implications for UKRI, Universities and Research Hubs

For UKRI and other funders, the strongest message is the need to review stipend adequacy and establish mechanisms for funding extensions when delays arise beyond student control. Universities should strengthen supervisor training, independent mentoring arrangements and structured career development. Research hubs or groups need to address and facilitate networking deficits through professional networks, alumni engagement and industry partnerships.

Universities, employers, funders, and policymakers should recognise doctoral research as professional work experience and acknowledge PhD study undertaken in the UK as legitimate UK-based experience. PhD researchers develop and demonstrate a wide range of transferable skills, including project management, problem-solving, stakeholder engagement, technical expertise, leadership, data analysis, and independent working. Formal recognition of these skills and experiences would help improve employment outcomes and support smoother transitions from doctoral study into research and non-research careers.

Strategic Recommendations

For Funders and Government

- Increase PhD stipends and ensure they keep pace with inflation and regional living costs, reducing financial pressures that can negatively affect wellbeing, research productivity, and participation in professional development opportunities.
- Provide guaranteed funding extensions where research delays arise from factors beyond the student's control, such as equipment failures, procurement delays, laboratory set-up requirements, or other institutional constraints.
- Recognise doctoral study as professional work experience and acknowledge PhD training undertaken in the UK as valuable UK-based experience, reflecting the advanced skills, expertise, and responsibilities developed during doctoral research.
- Review visa and immigration costs for international doctoral researchers, including visa fees and Immigration Health Surcharge payments, to improve accessibility and strengthen the UK's attractiveness as a destination for global research talent.

For Universities

- Establish independent mentoring programmes alongside supervisory arrangements to provide doctoral researchers with additional sources of career guidance, support, and impartial advice.
- Strengthen supervisor training, accountability, and quality assurance processes to promote consistent supervisory standards and ensure all doctoral researchers receive appropriate support throughout their studies.
- Expand career-development support tailored specifically to doctoral researchers, including careers guidance, professional development planning, and exposure to career pathways within and beyond academia.
- Promote a broader definition of doctoral success by recognising and celebrating diverse career outcomes across academia, industry, government, policy, consultancy, and entrepreneurship.
- Embed employability and professional skills development within doctoral programmes, including training in project management, leadership, communication, entrepreneurship, coding, AI, and knowledge exchange.

For Doctoral Training Programmes and Research Hubs

- Create structured networking opportunities that enable doctoral researchers to build professional connections with peers, alumni, researchers, employers, and other stakeholders across institutions and sectors.
- Facilitate meaningful engagement with industry, policy, government, and other non-academic sectors to improve career awareness and strengthen links between doctoral research and real-world applications.
- Support internships, placements, and secondment opportunities that allow doctoral researchers to gain practical experience, develop transferable skills, and explore diverse career pathways.
- Strengthen doctoral peer communities through cohort-based activities, mentoring schemes, networking events, and collaborative initiatives that reduce isolation and foster a stronger sense of belonging.
- Develop and sustain national doctoral researcher networks to facilitate knowledge exchange, professional development, mentoring, and collaboration across institutions and disciplines.
- Facilitate regular engagement with employers, alumni, and professionals from diverse sectors to broaden career awareness and support informed career planning.

Conclusion

The survey suggests that UK doctoral researchers remain highly motivated and committed to research excellence, but face increasing financial, professional and wellbeing pressures. Many respondents felt that the PhD system places growing demands on researchers without providing equivalent levels of financial security, career preparation, mentorship and pastoral support. The evidence indicates that the most impactful reforms would focus on funding adequacy, career development, supervision quality and inclusion, alongside a broader shift towards a researcher development model rather than one centred primarily on research outputs. Addressing these challenges would improve researchers' well-being, strengthen retention, and enhance the long-term contribution of doctoral talent across academia, industry, and public policy.