

Response to BIS consultation on support for postgraduate study

1. The British Academy is the UK's national academy for the humanities and social sciences, operating as a Fellowship of more than 1,000 of the world's most eminent scholars in the humanities and social sciences, elected for their outstanding research. The Academy funds research across the UK and in other parts of the world, in disciplines ranging from archaeology to economics, from psychology to history, and from literature to law – producing knowledge, insights and ideas that help us to address the great challenges of our time. The Academy seeks to increase public understanding of how all these subjects contribute to our economic, social, cultural and individual well-being.
2. The Academy sees investment in higher level, postgraduate skills across disciplines and sectors of the economy as an essential component in the broader research and innovation infrastructure that powers the UK's economy, prosperity and wellbeing. In February 2015, the British Academy, together with its sister National Academies – the Royal Society, Royal Academy of Engineering and Academy of Medical Sciences – published *Building a Stronger Future*, which makes clear that, 'to ensure that the UK can exploit all that its excellent research and innovation base has to offer and remain an economic powerhouse, it must keep investing in and building an environment in which research will prosper and ideas will flourish.'¹

SUMMARY POINTS

3. The Academy welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this important review, particularly following its previous work in this area. The following summarises the contents of our draft response.
 - i. The Academy welcomes the commitment to providing loans for taught postgraduate study, and the focus on the need to widen participation and ensure that all the most able students are able to continue to postgraduate study and gain higher level skills.
 - ii. The Academy believes that the most efficient and effective method for funding the very best PhD students is through the Research Council studentships, and if further funding is available, the Government would achieve best return on investment by funding through these channels. Moreover, the Government should, with this new funding, aim to enhance provision rather than simply increase volume.
 - iii. Any loan system or new funding stream for postgraduate training should not be limited by discipline. Any such limit risks damaging the breadth and depth of our research base, and cutting off the supply of highly skilled individuals into some of the most successful and productive sectors of the UK economy.
 - iv. The Government should avoid establishing a sharp divide between PGT and PGR courses in its funding schemes. Routes into the labour market, and into academia, are varied, and often involve a combination of both PGT and PGR. Separate and distinct treatment of these

¹ National Academies 2015, *Building a Stronger Future*, p.4.

courses of study could create a transition problem from masters to PhD level; this is particularly the case in the humanities, where taught masters programmes, both MA and MRes, are a standard route into research degrees. The STEM model of four-year undergraduate master's degrees has not developed in humanities and social science disciplines.

- v. According to UUK, 16% of doctoral students are funded through Research Council studentships, with an additional 20% funded by their institution. This means that the majority of doctoral students, 64% (and this percentage would be higher in non-STEM subjects) is either self-funded or funded from some other sources. Demand from highly qualified individuals outstrips the availability of funded places. Unquestionably, there are high quality students who would benefit from the introduction of a loan system, who currently are not able to self-fund. Nevertheless, we have seen significant changes in behaviour within parts of the HE system as a result of larger income-contingent loans for undergraduate provision, and the incentive structures that would be created by the introduction of a loan system for postgraduate are little understood. The Government must be confident that the introduction of an income-contingent loan system into the postgraduate research environment would not undermine the strengths of the existing system, or give rise to unintended consequences such as reduced quality or oversupply of PhD graduates wishing to continue into postdoctoral research. The Government could commission a detailed independent review into this ecosystem to better understand these drivers and strengths; assess the demand for postdoctoral researchers in UK academia; and establish the supply and demand for PhD skills in the wider economy. This would provide the basis to assess the impact a loan scheme might have.
- vi. The Government should be mindful of the impact of limiting any loan offer to students under the age of 30 on certain groups, for example women and those wishing to retrain.

POSTGRADUATE TAUGHT

4. **The Academy welcomes the move to introduce government-backed loans for taught postgraduate study, and agrees that access to finance remains the single most important barrier to continued postgraduate study.** In July 2012, the Academy published a position statement entitled 'Postgraduate funding: the neglected dimension'.² It recommended that a government backed postgraduate loan system must be considered alongside the new funding system for undergraduate study, and that these loans should be available for all disciplines.
5. Regarding those postgraduate taught masters courses which last one year, and following which students move directly into the labour market, a Government-backed income-contingent loan with market-beating terms and conditions offers a sensible and pragmatic solution. Following the Autumn Statement, the Academy welcomed the announcement that the loans for taught postgraduate study were to be available to all disciplines. There is significant demand for humanities and social sciences masters-level skills across the UK labour market, and a loan for employment-focused, taught postgraduate programmes in all disciplines will provide a strong boost to the nation's economy.

² British Academy 2012, *Postgraduate funding: the neglected dimension*

6. **However, the Government should avoid establishing a sharp divide between PGT and PGR courses.** The routes into employment in academia as a postdoctoral researcher and beyond, or into the wider labour market, are not linear and uniform across disciplines and are subject to complex individual and institutional circumstances. The taught MA course, particularly in the humanities, remains an important stepping stone to PhD study. Universities UK point to the fact that, in 2012-13, nearly seven in ten doctoral students in arts, humanities and social science subjects had a masters degree, while the corresponding proportion for those in STEM subjects was only four in ten.³ The Academy would strongly support a mechanism within the loan system for postgraduate taught programmes that would accommodate students moving into both the wider labour market and academia. This would mean supporting routes where students take up a taught masters programme followed by a doctorate. We would highlight, therefore, the importance of allowing PhD students who had previously undertaken a taught MA funded through the loan scheme to be able to defer loan repayments until after their PhD study.
7. The British Academy commissioned research by the National Union of Students into student attitudes to debt, sparked by fears that increased indebtedness of graduates following the introduction of £9,000 course fees would have a detrimental impact on the supply of postgraduates (including both PGT and PGR students).⁴ The research found that students and graduates consider the debt incurred through the Student Loans Company to be a particular kind of debt, and so they did not consider themselves 'in debt' as they would if they had a mortgage or bank loan. However, we do not yet know how the first cohort of students paying up to £9,000 per year of university fees will behave, and it may be useful for the Government to monitor views and behaviours of graduates in relation to this increased student debt over the coming years.
8. **The NUS research pointed to a significant lack of adequate advice and guidance for current undergraduates considering postgraduate study.** Students very much over-estimated the amount of financial support available for postgraduate research and taught study and presumed that funding was available. The Academy would impress upon the Government the need to accompany any new scheme with a detailed strategy for advice and guidance, in partnership with the research councils, universities mission groups, and the National Academies.

POSTGRADUATE RESEARCH

9. **The British Academy welcomes moves to bring more investment into the research base in the form of supporting talented researchers.** The Academy sees investment in PhD skills across all disciplines as an essential tool to drive growth and productivity in the UK economy, as well as a core part of the development of the next generation of the very best academic researchers. An increase in the funding options available to potential students and universities must also be welcomed. A one-size-fits-all solution to funding postgraduate

³ Universities UK, 2014, *Research and postgraduate research training*, p.26

⁴ British Academy / National Union of Students 2014, *Student attitudes to debt and its impact on postgraduate participation*

training across research and taught programmes will not serve a diverse cohort of students on diverse pathways, with diverse motivations for retraining or up-skilling.

10. **There is significant unmet demand for the skills gained during the period of PhD study, and the Government is correct to seek policy mechanisms to address this.** The fastest growth area in demand for research postgraduate courses is in the arts, humanities and social sciences, with increases of 30% from 2007–08 to 2012–13.⁵ A diverse set of skills are developed by postgraduate research in the humanities and social sciences: from the ability to creatively and imaginatively tackle problems to detailed data collection and analysis and the ability to bring a large project to a close. These skills are vital to the whole range of UK industry and enterprise. A much greater proportion of students in these disciplines self-fund. For instance, in 2012–13 Research Council studentships supported about 21% of all engineering, science and technology and 24% of all physical sciences doctoral students, compared to 11% of history and philosophy and 6% of creative arts and design students funded by the AHRC in the same year.⁶ In humanities and social sciences, the best students are competing for a smaller number of studentships only available to domestic students, and increasingly are competing with the best students globally for university scholarships.
11. **The Academy believes that Research Council studentships are the most effective method for ensuring that the very best PhD candidates are funded.** The Academy would welcome an increase in the levels of funding granted to Research Councils to fulfil this need, and if funding is to be made available, the Academy would recommend that the Government direct available funds here, rather than in the management of a loan system for PhD students. Although the consultation terms of reference assert that the loan will provide *additional* funding, the Academy would be concerned that, over time, loans would begin to replace direct funding across the research system.
12. The Government could look to encourage others to build on the example of the AHRC collaborative doctoral awards <http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/Funding-Opportunities/Pages/Collaborative-Doctoral-Awards.aspx>. These have proven an effective means of facilitating partnerships with industry and charities. Research training in the humanities and social sciences offers natural opportunities to collaborate with many industries, for example through heritage and culture organisations, public health organisations via medical humanities, and commercial and rescue archaeology via construction business and commercial archaeology units.
13. **The Government should consider the effect of a loan system on the quality of PhD students.** As recent REF scores indicate, pockets of excellence in research exist throughout the UK. The PGR loan system might therefore facilitate access to excellent training wherever that excellence exists. A loan may, for example, enable students who wish to undertake a PhD on a particularly specialist topic, that may not be covered by the existing DTC network, to undertake research. At the same time, comparability of PhD qualifications needs to be maintained. It would be necessary to ensure that high quality candidates are accepted onto both student loans and studentship schemes. The sector must guard against creating a two-

⁵ UUK, p.27

⁶ UUK, p.27-8

tier system whereby there is a differential in quality between those candidates who are accepted onto a loan scheme and those who are accepted onto a studentship. However, excellence in PhD supervision must be maintained across the system. Some system of assurance should be considered so that a criterion of excellence is met by all potential supervisors of loan scheme students.

14. We would argue further that equal opportunities issues would be best served by routing additional PGR funding through the research councils. The proposed level of PGR loan will only cover a proportion of PGR costs, and so these loans may not be taken up by the most qualified students but rather by those who can fund the difference from their own, or their families' resources.
15. The UK is a highly attractive place to undertake postgraduate study. Attracting and retaining top research talent in the UK will be possible through the sustained and appropriate funding of all levels of the higher education system. Students from the rest of the EU and non-EU countries constitute a significant and growing portion of doctoral students – a recent UUK report shows that the growth in numbers of doctoral students is accounted for by a strong proportional rise in international students, who now constitute approximately 40 percent of the doctoral population⁷.
16. The British Academy has a prestigious and longstanding postdoctoral scheme for early career researchers in the humanities and social sciences. The scheme is highly competitive, with a success rate in 2014/15 of less than 5%. The scheme is open to UK or EEA nationals, or those who have undertaken their doctorate at a UK university. While the fastest growth area in demand for research postgraduate courses is in the arts, humanities and social sciences, with increases of 30% from 2007–08 to 2012–13⁸, postdoctoral opportunities in these areas remain limited relative to those in other discipline areas.
17. This consultation comes before the recommendations of the Nurse Review have been published. The Academy submitted evidence to this review, which can be viewed on our website. It is important that the recommendations of the Nurse Review should inform any loan scheme.

PHD SKILLS IN THE WIDER ECONOMY

18. PhD-level skills are increasingly valued by employers other than universities, across many sectors of the economy, fulfilling a wide range of job roles other than that of researcher. Data gathered by Vitae on the 2010 cohort shows that after six months of completing their PhD around 40% of arts and humanities doctoral graduates work in sectors other than higher education. The figure is roughly 30% for social science doctoral graduates.⁹ An RCUK study published in January 2015 found that *'employers value doctoral graduates' deep and specialist subject knowledge, particularly where there is a clear link between this and their business needs. Employers across sectors value graduates' excellent research and analytical skills, particularly their*

⁷ UUK, p.25

⁸ UUK, p.27

⁹ Vitae 2010, *What do researchers do*

*capacity for critical thinking and ability to solve problems by bringing fresh perspectives and a systematic approach.'*¹⁰

19. **The RCUK study also found that doctoral graduates in the humanities and social sciences earn on average £40,000 and £46,000 p/a respectively seven to nine years after graduation.** 80% of all survey respondents earned between £30,000 and £65,000 at the same stage. They are greatly valued by employers and are often employed in the high-growth, highly-productive service sectors of the UK economy. For example, social science PhDs are more commonly found in the financial, business, IT and legal sectors than doctoral graduates from other disciplines.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

20. The Academy recommends that the Government should consider how limiting access to funding schemes by age may have a disproportionately negative impact on women and those wishing to retrain. Women are known to delay career changes until after having children, and anecdotal evidence from our fellowship suggests that women would be negatively impacted upon if unable to access new forms of funding after the age of 30.
21. The Academy has just launched a project to investigate interdisciplinarity in research and higher education, and will make recommendations around the structures and mechanisms for the funding of postdoctoral study as it impacts on, and is affected by, increases in interdisciplinary activity. Should the review team wish to learn more about this project, please do not hesitate to contact the British Academy policy team.

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¹⁰ RCUK 2014, *The impact of doctoral careers: Overview*