

Understanding the effect of UKRI stipend levels on UKRI studentships

SQW, on behalf of UKRI



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Executive Summary

1. UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) is the largest single funder of doctoral research in the UK, which means that UKRI's minimum stipend has an important influence on the wider doctoral funding landscape. As part of wider ongoing work under the New Deal for Postgraduate Research, UKRI has committed to review the assumptions underpinning, and consequences of, the stipend level.
2. In March 2024, SQW, in partnership with London Economics, was commissioned to undertake a study to provide UKRI with evidence to inform decisions about setting the stipend level. The study involved three elements. First, a survey of training grant holders (TGHs) at research organisations (ROs) responsible for an active UKRI-funded training grant with new students starting in the 2023-24 academic year, which was sent to 366 grant holders and received 143 responses. Second, a survey of representatives from ROs who oversee institution-wide doctoral training which was sent to 156 ROs and received 79 responses. Third, in-depth interviews with representatives from 15 ROs and the UK Council for Graduate Education.

What stipend level is being paid?

3. Information collected from 139 TGHs who supplied valid data suggests that all UKRI-funded students on these training grants received a stipend at or above the full-time equivalent (FTE) UKRI minimum level in the 2023-24 academic year (i.e., £18,622 for the UK excluding London and £20,622 in London). In most cases, (79%), UKRI-funded students received the minimum stipend. However, around one in five (21%) received a stipend higher than the UKRI minimum; this was higher for doctoral students at ROs based in London (at 45%) and for those studying on studentships from the Medical Research Council (at 42%) and the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (at 35%).
4. The most frequently cited reasons for paying an enhanced stipend by both TGH and RO respondents were: requirements and commitments of a co-funder or partner organisation; a goal to improve recruitment; and to increase the competitiveness of their offer relative to other opportunities for prospective students.
5. During interviews, only a few ROs said that they have a formal policy regarding stipend payments. However, the interviews indicate that ROs often have their own stated ambition to pay all institution-funded doctoral students the UKRI-minimum stipend level. This was generally motivated by two factors: 1), to provide a consistent stipend to all doctoral students funded by the RO; 2), to ensure that doctoral students have enough money to live on. However, this can mean ROs reduce the number of studentships they offer.
6. This is consistent with the RO survey that indicated ROs do use the minimum stipend level as a guide when setting non-UKRI funded doctoral student's stipends: half of respondents said that at least 90% of their non-UKRI funded doctoral students received a stipend at the UKRI

minimum level. This said, around one in ten of ROs surveyed indicated that all of their non-UKRI funded doctoral students receive a stipend less than UKRI's minimum.

Is the minimum stipend level adequate?

7. Over half of both RO and TGH survey respondents felt that the UKRI minimum stipend does not meet students' living costs. Similarly, many of the ROs interviewed said that the UKRI minimum stipend is too low (e.g., in terms of living costs, rent, etc.) and gave examples of students struggling to get by on the minimum stipend. The ROs interviewed said that this does not generally lead to students dropping out of their courses completely. More commonly, it can mean doctoral study takes longer to complete where students must work alongside their studies. Around half (49%) of TGH survey respondents thought that students in receipt of the minimum UKRI stipend cannot afford living costs without an external source of funding, such as income from taking on additional employment or support from their family.
8. There is no consistent spatial trend across RO and TGH survey respondents in relation to the perception of the adequacy of the stipend level and the need for an alternative source of funding. This said, RO interviews did highlight a recognition that the relative value of the stipend does vary in different places, reflecting living costs in some parts of the country, including London.
9. Survey evidence suggests that UKRI-funded students are eligible for hardship funds at a majority of ROs but, as they receive this funding from UKRI, may not be competitive in their application for such funds compared to students without equivalent financial support. However, there is limited evidence on application, take-up and success rates.

Does the stipend level support Equality, Diversity & Inclusion (EDI)?

10. The stipend is seen as a critical means – in principle – for supporting diversity among the doctoral student population. Nevertheless, evidence from the RO and TGH surveys and the interviews with ROs suggests that there is a perception that some groups are put at a disadvantage by the current minimum stipend level.
11. Groups perceived to be disadvantaged by the current minimum level included people with caring responsibilities, people with children and people from lower socio-economic backgrounds.
12. Opinions varied between participants in the research on the balance between 'universal' and 'targeted' responses to these issues. For some, a consistent and equal minimum was seen as the 'fairest' way to fund doctoral students and support a diverse doctoral landscape. For others, a more targeted approach was preferred. Across this diversity, where more targeted funding was preferred, this was most commonly group/issue, rather than place-based.

What would be the effect of UKRI increasing the stipend level?

13. During interviews, ROs felt strongly that UKRI should set a minimum stipend. Doing so provides an 'industry standard'. While the stipend level is not considered by ROs to be adequate in many cases, ROs nonetheless feel it provides a useful minimum benchmark and helps to ensure a broad parity of experience and fairness across the system.
14. The RO survey suggests that institutions would likely raise their institution-wide stipend level for all funded doctoral students if the UKRI minimum stipend was anchored to price inflation (estimated to be £19,200 in 2024), and potentially the National Living Wage (estimated to be £19,500 in 2024) and Real Living Wage (estimated to be £21,000 in 2024) although this is less certain.
15. Sentiment during interviews broadly aligned with the survey results. However, it was noted that, were the stipend to be raised significantly, there would be implications for student numbers, both UKRI-funded and more widely. When asked more broadly about the effects of an increase to the UKRI universal minimum stipend, most RO respondents felt that study time (72%) and submission and completion rates (59%) would increase.
16. Perhaps paradoxically, ROs said during interviews that while the minimum stipend level is crucially important for students' wellbeing and access (and for diversity of doctoral intake), other factors may be more important *to students* in their decision to apply for doctoral training.

Management of the stipend

17. About three-quarters of RO respondents said that students at their organisation receive stipends payments monthly. At the majority of RO survey respondents' institutions, students receive their first stipend payment fairly soon after commencing study.
18. When asked about the timing of the announcement of the UKRI stipend level, the largest proportion of respondents said the ideal time for this announcement was approximately a year in advance – i.e. September or October – or at the start of the calendar year – i.e., January. Most RO and TGH respondents felt that the timing of the announcement of the minimum stipend level was either very or fairly important.
19. When asked about the flexibility of training grant collaboration agreements, TGH survey respondents provided mixed responses on whether these offered sufficient flexibility to react to changes in the minimum stipend level set by UKRI.

1. Introduction

Study context

- 1.1** In 2002, the Roberts Review recommended the government and Research Councils¹ “raise the average stipend over time to the tax-free equivalent of the average graduate starting salary”.² In response, there was an increase to the stipend. However, beyond increasing the stipend over time broadly in line with inflation (using several different mechanisms for this³), the decision-making process itself has not been revisited. As part of wider ongoing work under the New Deal for Postgraduate Research (PGR) and the transition to Collective Talent Funding, UKRI has committed to review the assumptions underpinning, and consequences (intended and unintended) of, the stipend level.
- 1.2** The stipend is not fixed to any single economic comparator but is sometimes compared to the National Living Wage, estimated graduate earnings and inflation. The real terms value of the minimum stipend has fluctuated since its introduction (graduate salaries have also fluctuated in this time). The stipend was 86% of the value of the average graduate starting salary in 2018-19, when comparable figures were last available. The value of the stipend relative to HEI salary spine points has declined as the National Living Wage has increased. It is worth noting that the UKRI minimum stipend sits towards the lower end of equivalent offers in comparator countries.
- 1.3** In the ‘New Deal for Postgraduate Research: Response to the Call for Input’,⁴ UKRI committed to review how it sets the UKRI minimum stipend. If UKRI determines any changes are required, these are likely to be phased in from academic year 2025-26.

Study objectives

- 1.4** In this context, SQW, in partnership with London Economics, was commissioned to undertake a study which would provide UKRI with evidence to inform decisions about setting the stipend level for UKRI-funded doctoral students. The research has explored how changes to the minimum stipend level might affect student recruitment and retention and the decisions taken by ROs in receipt of UKRI studentship funding.

¹ Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC); Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council (BBSRC); Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC); Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC); Medical Research Council (MRC); Natural Environment Research Council (NERC); and Science and Technology Facilities Council (STFC).

² Sir Gareth Roberts’ Review (2002) [SET for success: The supply of people with science, technology, engineering and mathematics skills](#) (p. 10).

³ GDP deflator, then CPI, then briefly CPI-H.

⁴ UKRI (2023) [A New Deal for Postgraduate Research: Response to the Call for Input](#)

1.5 The specification set out the objectives and requirements for the study. Specifically, the study focused on the following two requirements:

- **The effect on individual UKRI-funded studentships**, including the effect relative to the stipend's objectives. This included examining ROs' perceptions of the effect of stipend levels on factors including (but not limited to): students' hours of study and additional employment, and ability to submit within the funded period; students' financial sustainability and affordability (especially in a wider cost of living crisis); research culture; students' wellbeing, and; the attractiveness of UKRI studentships in relation to both other career pathways and, for international students, other international training opportunities.
- **The effect of UKRI stipend level on ROs**, their studentship recruitment and university stipend. This developed understanding of the 'business as usual' influence of the UKRI stipend level on RO behaviours and practices, and developed understanding of what has been delivered to UKRI-funded students including any enhancements or divergence from the UKRI minimum. The research also examined how and why ROs make decisions about stipends for UKRI-funded students.

1.6 To address these two requirements, and in discussion with UKRI, the study has been structured around five key questions:

1. What stipend level is being paid to students?
2. Is the minimum stipend level adequate?
3. How does the minimum stipend level support EDI?
4. What would be the effect of UKRI increasing the minimum stipend level?
5. How should UKRI manage the stipend level?

1.7 The study findings presented in this report are structured around these questions.

1.8 The study's purpose was *not* to identify a specific level at which the stipend should be set, nor to identify a specific mechanism for setting the stipend. Instead, the research was exploratory and open-minded. It was about understanding RO perspectives and the specific ways in which individual ROs and TGHs interact with the minimum stipend level, acknowledging that this is likely to vary considerably between different types of institution. As such, this research has sought to build on the Call for Input as part of the response to the New Deal by exploring how the stipend influences ROs and interacts with other funding and support.

Report structure

1.9 The report is structured as follows:

- Chapter 2 contains further background and context for the study
- Chapter 3 provides an overview of the methodology
- Chapter 4 presents findings on what stipend level is being paid
- Chapter 5 presents findings on whether the minimum stipend is adequate
- Chapter 6 presents findings on how the minimum stipend supports diversity
- Chapter 7 presents findings on the likely effects of UKRI increasing the minimum stipend level
- Chapter 8 presents findings on how UKRI and ROs manage the stipend level
- Chapter 9 outlines key conclusions from the study.

2. Context and background

- 2.1** This section provides an overview of the context in relation to UKRI studentships and the stipend. It provides some basic analysis of UKRI data on studentships and training grants that existed prior to this study commencing (i.e., it is not the new data collected through the RO and TGH surveys).

UKRI studentships and stipend in context

- 2.2** Around 20% of postgraduate researchers are funded by UKRI's Research Councils,⁵ though the proportions vary depending on the discipline. UKRI is the largest single funder of doctoral research which means that UKRI's minimum stipend has an important influence on the wider PGR landscape. While UKRI is not the only public funder of doctoral education, because of its scale, the UKRI stipend provides an 'unofficial benchmark' for the sector more generally – many funders and ROs set their own stipends in line with the UKRI minimum.
- 2.3** Between 2022 and 2024 the stipend was increased by UKRI in response to inflation (see Table 2-1). Other major funders and institutions have made similar uplifts to UKRI in recent years, including the Royal Society, the Leverhulme Trust, Cancer Research UK, as well as universities.

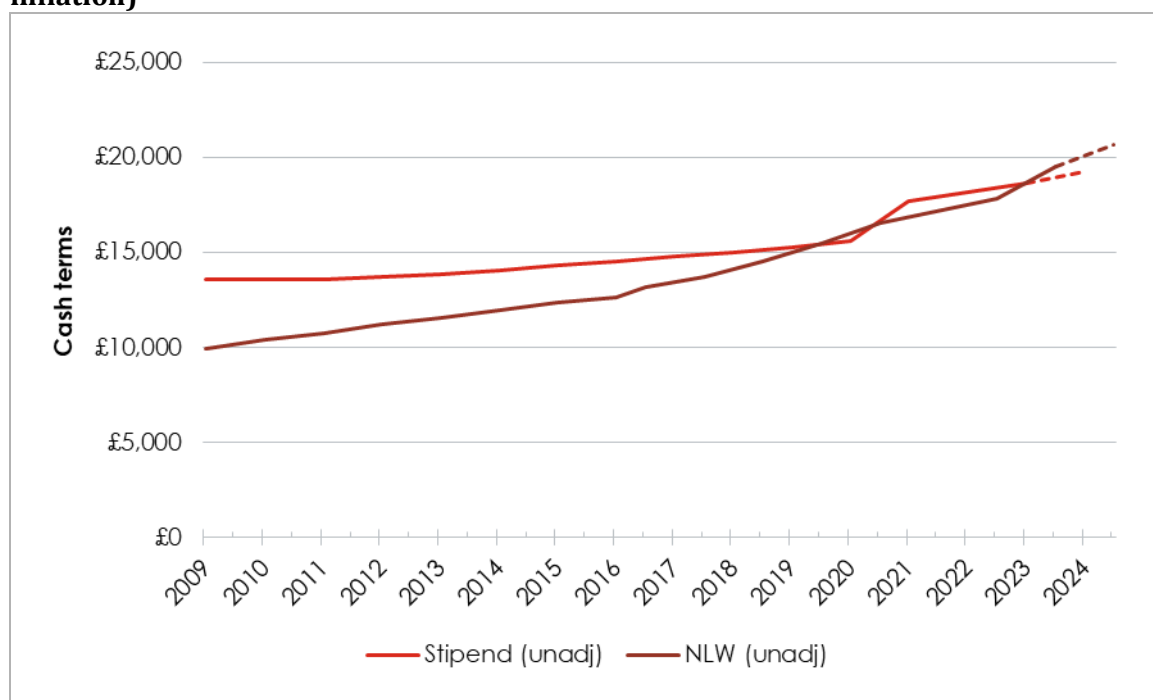
Table 2-1: UKRI minimum stipend level in the last five years

Academic year	Minimum stipend rate (excl London allowance*)	% increase on previous year
2019-20	£15,009	1.57%
2020-21	£15,285	1.84%
2021-22	£15,609	2.12%
2022-23	£17,668	13.2%
2023-24	£18,622	5.4%
2024-25	£19,237	3.3%

Source: UKRI Quotation Request *UKRI also provides an additional London allowance of £2,000 (not subject to inflation increases)

⁵ UKRI (2023) [A New Deal for Postgraduate Research: Response to the Call for Input](#)

Figure 2-1: Historic stipend level compared to the minimum wage (unadjusted for inflation)



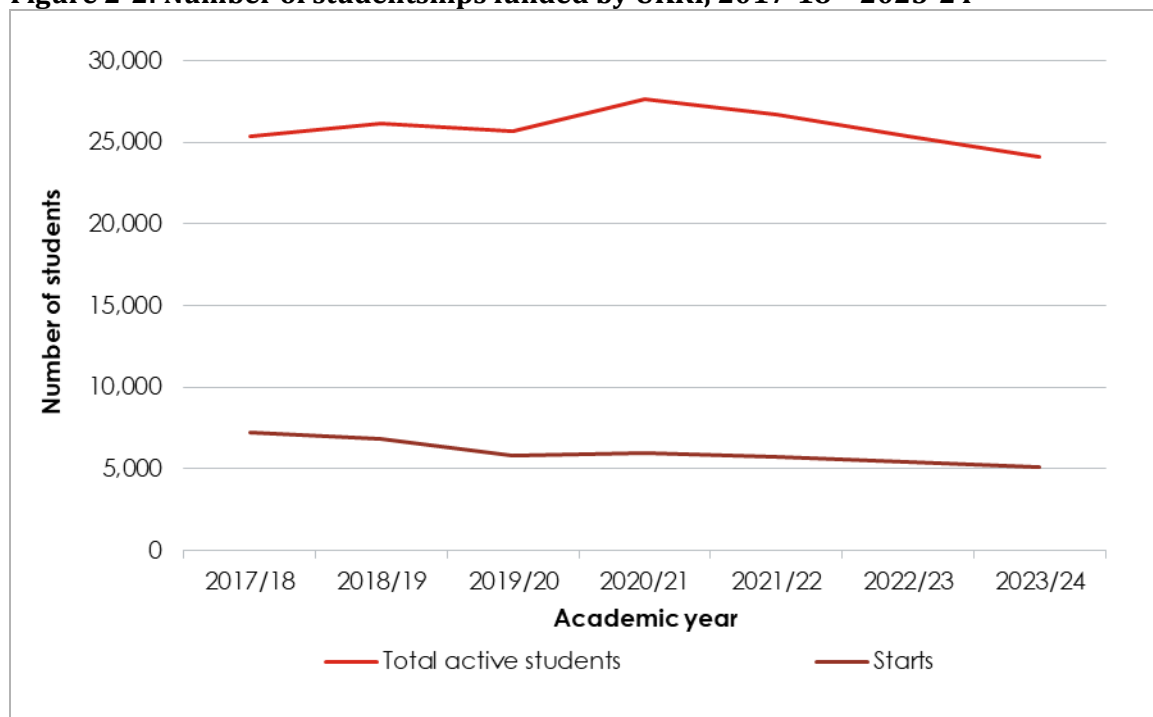
Source: SQW analysis of UKRI data

- 2.4** It is worth noting that stipend funding is one part of a much wider set of RO costs associated with PGR. Therefore, whilst this report focuses on implications of the stipend level, this is only part of the full picture of the total cost of PGR funding.

Training grant value, variation and student numbers

- 2.5** According to data sent to SQW by UKRI, the total number of active UKRI-funded doctoral students, including both continuing students and new starters, was approximately 24,000 in the 2023-24 academic year.
- 2.6** As shown in Figure 2-2, the number of active students in receipt of a UKRI-funded stipend has remained relatively consistent from the 2017-18 to the 2023-24 academic year. During the Covid-19 pandemic, UKRI and ROs extended many studentships, leading to a rise in active student numbers from 2019-20 to 2020-21. The number of active students subsequently decreased, due to lower numbers of new starts.

Figure 2-2: Number of studentships funded by UKRI, 2017-18 – 2023-24⁶



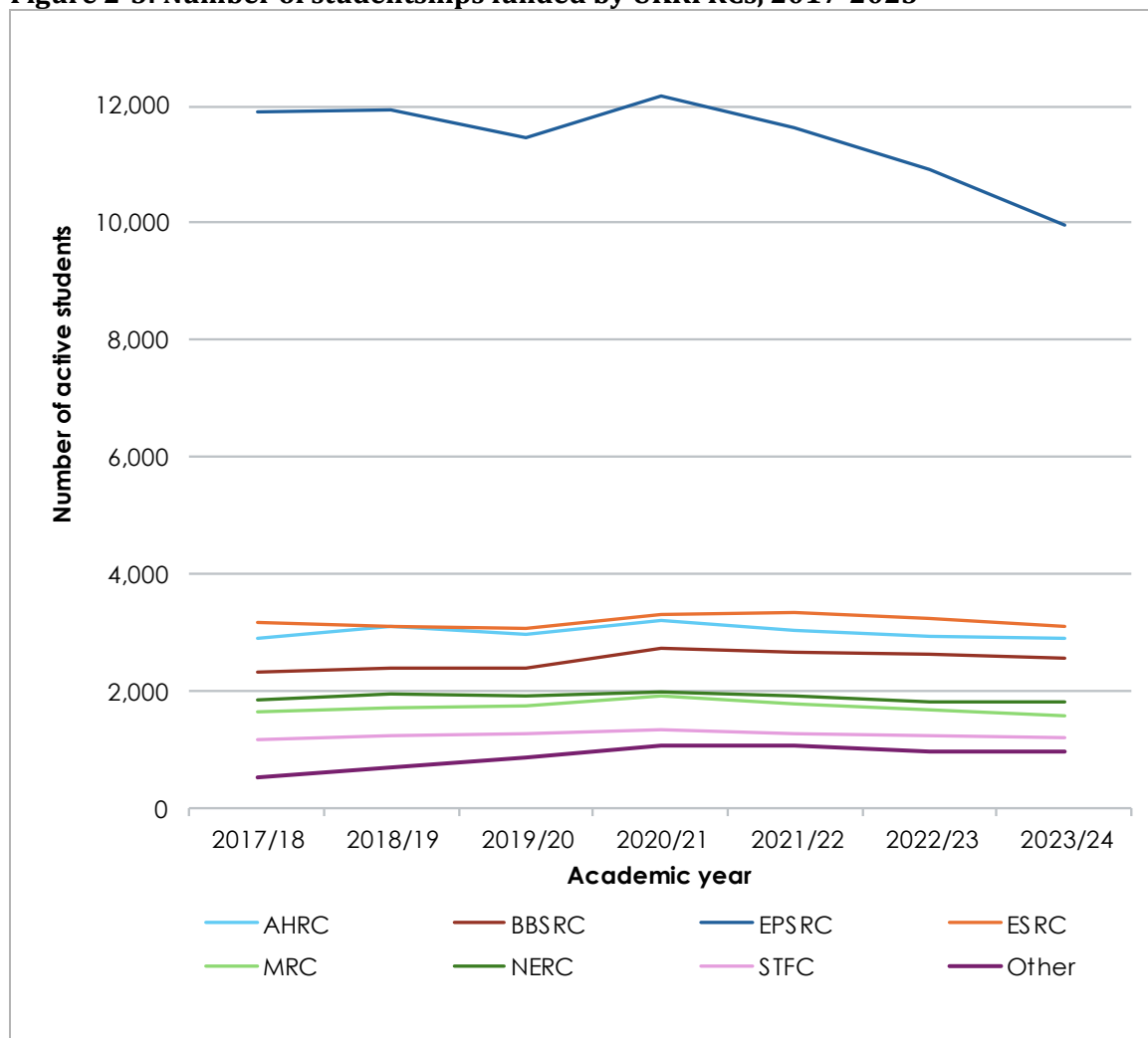
Source: SQW analysis of UKRI studentships data

- 2.7** Figure 2-3 shows this breakdown by UKRI Research Council. EPSRC stands out in this figure, as it has the single largest budget of all UKRI's Research Councils.⁷ Furthermore, EPSRC has taken a strategic decision to support a high number of students. It is the single largest funder of doctoral students in engineering and physical sciences (EPS), supporting around one third of all EPS doctoral students in the UK (spending approximately £200m a year on doctoral education).⁸

⁶ Please note that numbers for 2023-24 will rise due to late submissions of data on new recruits and late recording of funding extensions.

⁷ UKRI (2022) [UKRI budget allocations 2022-23 – 2024-25](#)

⁸ EPSRC (2021) [Review of EPSRC-funded Doctoral Education](#)

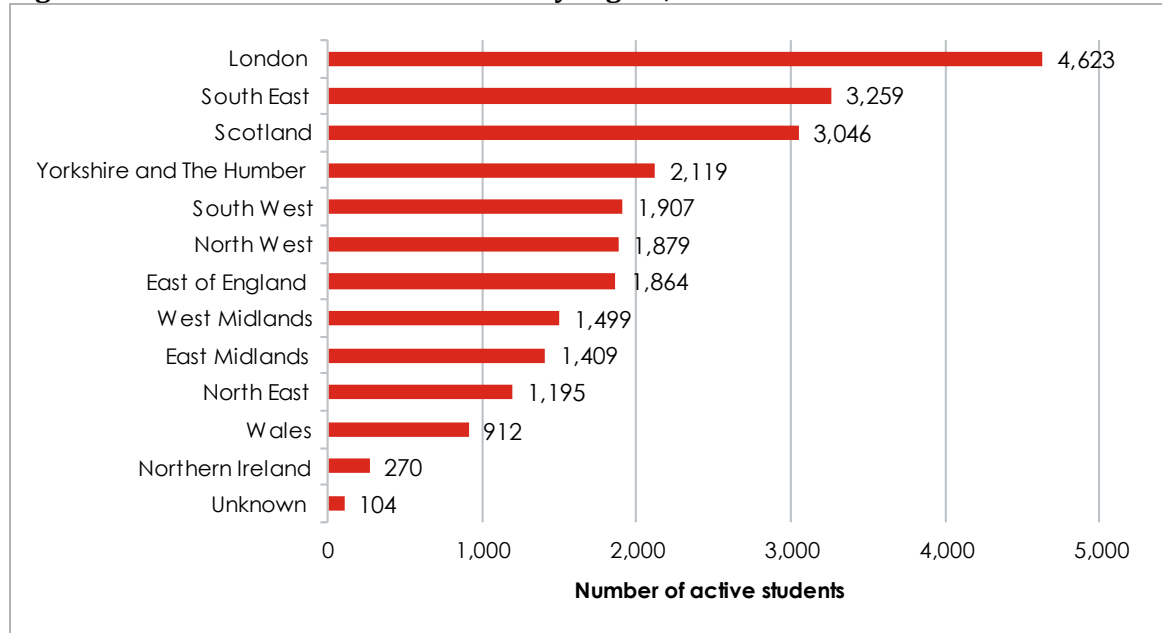
Figure 2-3: Number of studentships funded by UKRI RCs, 2017-2023

Source: SQW analysis of UKRI studentships data

2.8 Figure 2-4 shows the breakdown of active UKRI-funded students in the 2023-24 academic year, by region. Almost a fifth of students (19%) were associated with a training grant that has its lead organisation in London, followed by the South East (14%) and Scotland (13%). However, it must be noted that this is the raw number of students and does not take into account the number of institutions or academics in each region. It is also worth noting that EPSRC research shows that the proportion of EPSRC students correlates strongly with EPSRC research funding and EPS academics.⁹

⁹ EPSRC (2021) [Review of EPSRC-funded Doctoral Education](#)

Figure 2-4: Number of funded students by region, Academic Year 2023-24



Source: SQW analysis of UKRI studentships data

2.9 In the 2023-24 academic year, overall, 115 ROs had at least one UKRI-funded doctoral student. The 10 ROs with the largest number of active UKRI-funded doctoral students accounted for just under half of all doctoral students in receipt of a UKRI stipend (46%). A further 35 ROs had at least 100 students and there is then a 'long tail' of ROs with lower numbers of students.

3. Methodology

3.1 This section provides an overview of the methodology used for the research.

Overview of the methodology

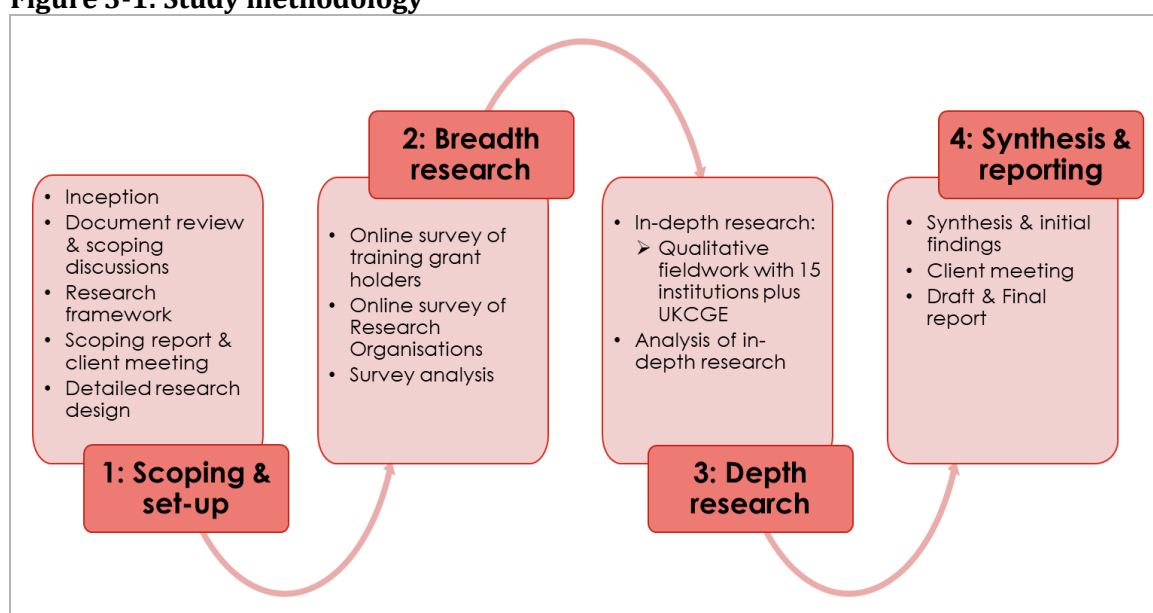
3.2 The study had four main phases. The scoping and set-up phase involved an inception meeting with UKRI, a review of key documentation and scoping discussions with key UKRI staff. The key findings from this stage were summarised in a scoping report which also provided plans for the 'breadth' and 'depth' research. Following this, the survey tools and topic guides were developed. The breadth and depth research phases ran in parallel.

3.3 The breadth research involved, (i), a survey of individuals at ROs who are responsible for an active UKRI-funded training grant with new students starting in the 2023-24 academic year and, (ii), a survey of representatives from ROs who oversee institution-wide doctoral training, such as Vice Chancellors, Principals and other senior leaders responsible for talent. The breadth surveys were tested with training grant and RO stakeholders prior to their dissemination by UKRI to 366 grant holders that had students starting in the 2023-24 academic year (some of whom are responsible for multiple training grants), and 156 ROs in the UK. We say more about the sample selection for this research, below.

3.4 The depth research involved interviews with representatives from 15 ROs and the UK Council for Graduate Education (UKCGE). Again, more detail on sample selection is provided, below.

3.5 SQW then reviewed, cleaned and analysed data before summarising it for the purposes of this report (see below).

Figure 3-1: Study methodology



Source: SQW

Breadth research

- 3.6** The surveys were open for approximately four and half weeks, disseminated on 6th September 2024 by UKRI. It was hoped that this window would give respondents enough time to collate the required information.
- 3.7** In dialogue with UKRI, it was decided that where surveys requested specific numeric or financial information about training grants (and their associated studentships and stipends), that questions would focus on “the grant you (the respondent) know best and which funds students who started in the 2023-24 academic year.” In other words, respondents were not asked to supply information for every training grant in which they are involved, to make the survey more practical for respondents to complete.
- 3.8** Some questions in both the TGH and RO surveys were more general to encourage reflection, asking about studentships, stipend and students more broadly. We have made clear in our analysis the scope of each individual question.

Research Organisation survey

- 3.9** The RO survey was sent to representatives from 156 ROs, most of whom had UKRI-funded students in the 2023-24 academic year. Respondents were selected because they have an institutional perspective – for example, Vice Chancellors, Principals and other senior leaders responsible for talent. Upon closing, the survey received a total of 79 responses, each from a different organisation. This section compares how respondents’ characteristics compare to the wider base of ROs (RO Population) in terms of region, TRAC group and total number of PGR students.
- 3.10** The regional profile of the RO survey respondents is comparable to that of the wider RO base, as illustrated in Table 3-1. The largest difference can be seen in the North West, which is slightly overrepresented, as well as London, Wales and Scotland, which are all slightly underrepresented.

Table 3-1: RO respondents versus RO population regional profile

Region	Respondents		RO Population		Percentage point difference
	Count	%	Count	%	
East Midlands	5	6%	9	6%	1%
East of England	5	6%	8	5%	1%
London	15	19%	34	22%	-3%
North East	4	5%	5	3%	2%
North West	11	14%	14	9%	5%
Northern Ireland	1	1%	2	1%	0%
Scotland	7	9%	18	12%	-3%

Region	Respondents		RO Population		Percentage point difference
	Count	%	Count	%	
South East	10	13%	20	13%	0%
South West	8	10%	14	9%	1%
Wales	2	3%	8	5%	-3%
West Midlands	6	8%	12	8%	0%
Yorkshire and The Humber	5	6%	12	8%	-1%
Total	79	100%	156	100%	N/A

Source: SQW analysis of UKRI data

3.11 Looking at the TRAC group classification of ROs, the respondent sample has a higher proportion of ROs in the TRAC group A and D categories, and it has a lower proportion of organisations in the TRAC group F category and without a categorisation (such as research institutions that are independent of a university).

Table 3-2: RO respondents versus RO population TRAC group profile

TRAC group	Respondents		RO Population		Percentage point difference
	Count	%	Count	%	
A	21	27%	32	21%	6%
B	10	13%	22	14%	-1%
C	13	16%	23	15%	2%
D	11	14%	15	10%	4%
E	19	24%	39	25%	-1%
F	5	6%	17	11%	-5%
No TRAC group	0	0%	8	5%	-5%
Total	79	100%	156	100%	N/A

Source: SQW analysis of UKRI data

3.12 Based on data from HESA, the ROs which responded to the survey host, on average, more postgraduate research students than the wider RO population. Specifically, the average for respondents is 1,008 students per institution, while the average for the wider sample is 860 students per institution.

Training Grant holder survey

3.13 The TGH survey was sent to 366 contacts for UKRI training grants that had students starting in the 2023-24 academic year. Where a TGH administers more than one training grant, they were asked to respond based on the training grant with which they were most familiar. Upon closing, the survey received a total of 143 responses from respondents based at 55 institutions. This section compares how respondents' characteristics compare to the wider

base of training grants with students starting in 2023-24 (the TG population) in terms of region, TRAC group and UKRI Research Council.¹⁰

3.14 As is shown in Table 3-3, the regional profile of the survey respondents' training grants broadly reflects that of the wider population of training grants that had students starting in the 2023-24 academic year. The biggest differences can be seen in the South West and London, which are slightly overrepresented in the respondent profile, and Scotland, which is slightly underrepresented. Additionally, Northern Ireland is not represented in the respondent sample.

Table 3-3: TGH respondents versus TG population regional profile

Region	Respondents		TG Population		Percentage point difference
	Count	%	Count	%	
East Midlands	6	4%	89	5%	-1%
East	11	8%	169	9%	-2%
London	30	21%	323	18%	3%
North East	6	4%	103	6%	-1%
North West	9	6%	159	9%	-2%
Northern Ireland	0	0%	14	1%	-1%
Scotland	13	9%	227	13%	-3%
South East	19	13%	264	15%	-1%
South West	18	13%	136	8%	5%
Wales	7	5%	63	3%	1%
West Midlands	10	7%	105	6%	1%
Yorkshire and The Humber	14	10%	157	9%	1%
Total	143	100%	1,809	100%	N/A

Source: SQW analysis of UKRI data

3.15 In the respondent profile, a higher proportion of training grants are hosted at institutions from TRAC group A than is the case in the wider population profile. TRAC group B, D, E and F and institutions who do not have a TRAC group classification are comparatively underrepresented.

¹⁰ Figures for both the respondent and population profile are at the training grant-level. An institution with multiple training grants will, therefore, be 'counted' multiple times. For example, if there were three respondents from the same institution in the East Midlands, who answered for three different training grants, they will contribute three to the count of all respondents from the East Midlands.

Table 3-4: TGH respondents versus TG population TRAC group profile

TRAC group	Respondents		TG Population		Percentage point difference
	Count	%	Count	%	
A	119	83%	1302	72%	11%
B	13	9%	301	17%	-8%
C	8	6%	82	5%	1%
D	1	1%	26	1%	-1%
E	0	0%	24	1%	-1%
F	0	0%	11	1%	-1%
No TRAC group	2	1%	63	3%	-2%
Total	143	100%	1,809	100%	N/A

Source: SQW analysis of UKRI data

3.16 The breakdown of training grants by UKRI Research Council, depicted in Table 3-5, shows the relative overrepresentation of EPSRC in the respondent pool as compared to the wider population of training grants with students starting in 2023-24. BBSRC, AHRC and STFC are slightly underrepresented. To note, these proportions do not take into account the number of students funded per grant and instead may reflect the grant funding cycles of different Research Councils..

Table 3-5: TGH respondents versus TG population UKRI Research Council profile

UKRI Research Council	Respondents		TG Population		Percentage point difference
	Count	%	Count	%	
AHRC	5	3%	222	12%	-9%
BBSRC	11	8%	366	20%	-13%
EPSRC	82	57%	607	34%	24%
ESRC	11	8%	44	2%	5%
MRC	9	6%	96	5%	1%
NERC	13	9%	103	6%	3%
STFC	12	8%	371	21%	-12%
Total	143	100%	1,809	100%	N/A

Source: SQW analysis of UKRI data

Depth research

3.17 A range of institutions were selected, in dialogue with UKRI, for involvement in the interviews, seeking to balance a range of factors including:

- Doctoral student numbers, number of training grants and disciplines

- The ‘type’ of RO (i.e., research intensive, small specialists, business-focused, institutes etc.)
- The location of ROs
- Other institutional affiliations and characteristics, such as Russell Group.

3.18 As some of the data summarised in Chapter 2 indicates, single ROs are often involved in multiple training grants. Their grant ‘mix’ can be complex, covering a wide variety of timescales, disciplines and partners (among other factors). Consequently, we sought during interviews to speak with stakeholders who have a broad perspective across an institution’s training grants and doctoral programmes, rather than, say, supervisors from a specific discipline whose focus is narrower and more specific.

3.19 Fifteen institutions were consulted as part of the depth research, representing all regions except East Midlands and Northern Ireland.¹¹ Most of the ROs were in TRAC group A, with the remaining ROs in either TRAC groups B or D. Consultees at these institutions included Directors of Doctoral Schools and Deans of Postgraduate Research among other roles. UKCGE were also consulted as part of the research.

3.20 Fieldwork for this study was conducted in September and October 2024 (alongside the surveys). Some institutions invited to participate were unable to do so within this timeframe.

Table 3-6: Organisations consulted

Name of institution/representative body	
Aston University	University of Bristol
Cambridge University	University of Edinburgh
Cardiff University	University of Essex
Imperial College London	University of Leeds
Lancaster University	University of Oxford
Northumbria University	University of Strathclyde
Sheffield Hallam University	University of Sussex
University College London	UKCGE

Source: SQW

3.21 As Table 3-6 indicates, a spread across different considerations and characteristics was achieved. It is not claimed that this sample is statistically representative of the wider Higher Education sector – indeed, it is not. However, every effort was made to secure a wide range of perspectives from institutions that interact in different ways with UKRI training grants.

¹¹ Institutions in both were approached but it was not possible to arrange interviews within the time available.

4. What stipend level is being paid?

Key findings

- Information collected from 139 TGHs who supplied valid data shows that all doctoral students studying on their training grant in the 2023-24 academic year received a stipend that was at least the FTE UKRI minimum level (i.e., £18,622 for the UK excluding London and £20,622 in London). Around a fifth received a stipend higher than the UKRI minimum level.
- The most frequently cited reasons for paying an enhanced stipend by both TGH and RO respondents were: requirements and commitments of a co-funder or partner organisation; a goal to improve recruitment; and to increase the competitiveness of their offer relative to other opportunities for prospective students.
- During interviews, few ROs said they have a formal, institution-wide policy regarding stipend payments but many have a stated ambition to pay all institution-funded doctoral students the UKRI-minimum stipend, whether or not students are funded by UKRI. However, this can mean ROs reduce the number of studentships they offer.
- This is consistent with the RO survey that indicated ROs do use the minimum stipend level as a guide when setting non-UKRI funded doctoral student's stipends: half of respondents said that at least 90% of their non-UKRI funded doctoral students received a stipend at the minimum level. This said, around one in ten of ROs surveyed indicated that all of their non-UKRI funded doctoral students receive a stipend less than the minimum.

- 4.1** This section presents information about the value of the stipend under different training grants and the level of stipend that is actually paid to doctoral students. Where institutions deviate from the UKRI minimum (either upwards or downwards), we present survey and interview findings explaining why, and the extent to which deviations result from RO-wide policies or one-off decisions for specific grants or students.

Value of the stipend

- 4.2** It is worth noting up front that several institutions included in our depth research emphasised that they find it extremely difficult to track student funding in general, and stipend levels specifically. This can be for a range of factors, such as (for example), the sheer range of funders (including government departments, hospitals, charities, industry partners, museums, other cultural institutions, etc.) and data on stipend levels may be held by individual academic divisions or schools rather than centrally. In certain cases, international students receive grants (including stipends) from their domestic governments or other institutions meaning that the stipend funds will at no point 'pass through' the UK ROs' books, instead being paid directly to the students concerned.

Information on the value of stipends under training grants

4.3 The TGH survey asked respondents to complete a table which indicates, for all students studying on their training grant in the 2023-24 academic year, who were at least part-funded by UKRI:

- the total financial value of the full-time equivalent stipend (FTE value)
- the percentage full-time equivalence studied during the academic year (FTE)
- period of study, i.e., the number of months the student spent studying within the academic year (period)
- actual spend on the stipend, i.e., the amount of UKRI and non-UKRI funding paid within the academic year (actual spend)
- and the proportion of a stipend, in percentage terms, derived from matched funding from a non-UKRI source (% matched funding).

4.4 Respondents were asked to provide this information for students funded through one training grant. Where a TGH administers more than one training grant, they were asked to respond based on the training grant with which they were most familiar.

4.5 Prior to analysis, responses to this question were screened for inclusion and cleansed. Respondents who did not provide any information were necessarily excluded from the analysis (three respondents). All other respondents' submissions were tested for validity (140), i.e., consistency between the values for FTE value, FTE, period and actual spend. Of these, 134 were deemed to contain valid, usable data, five included some invalid data but were included in the analysis as the invalid data represented less than a quarter of their students¹² and one was excluded completely due to providing invalid data for more than a quarter of their students. This led to a final analytical set of data from 139 respondents, covering 8,641 UKRI-funded doctoral students.

4.6 Summary statistics for the FTE value that TGH respondents reported is being paid to students studying in the 2023-24 academic year are summarised in Table 4-1. For the UK, excluding London, the range of FTE value is £18,622 to £29,122, with a mean of £19,072; in London, the range is £20,622 to £30,622, with a mean of £21,456. In both cases, the mean value is higher than the UKRI minimum stipend level.

¹² To note, for these five respondents, only the valid data they provided was included in the analysis.

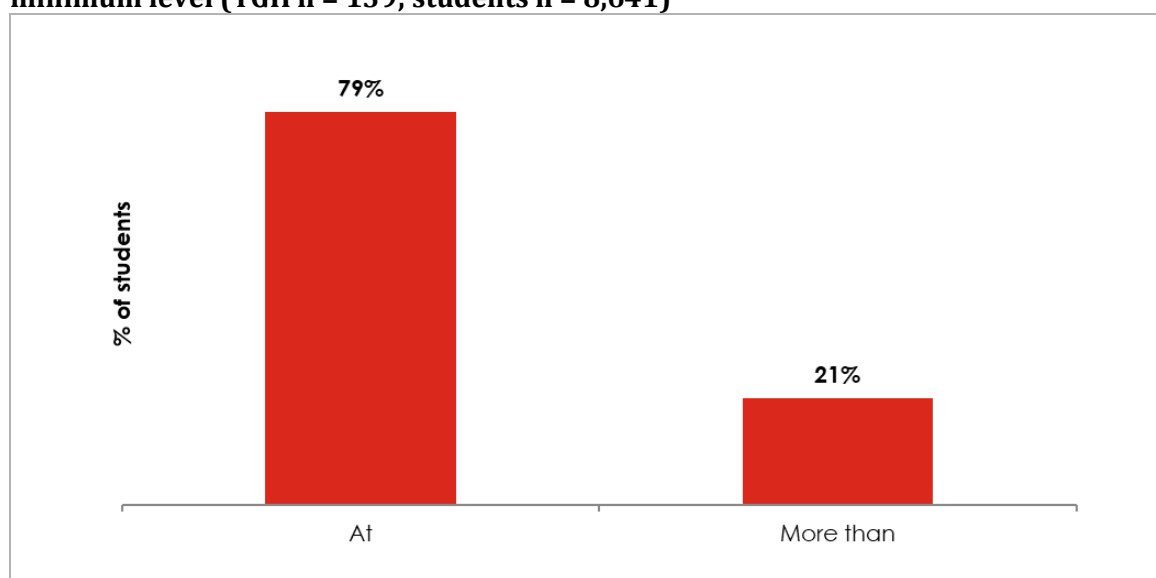
Table 4-1: Summary statistics for FTE value of stipends received by UKRI-funded students (TGH n = 139; students n = 8,641)

Geography	Min	Mean	Mode	Max
UK, excl. London	£18,622	£19,072	£18,622	£29,122
London	£20,622	£21,456	£20,622	£30,622

Source: SQW analysis of TGH survey data

- 4.7** As summarised in Figure 4-1, almost four in five UKRI-funded students on these training grants were paid a stipend amount at the FTE UKRI minimum level (79%), i.e. £18,622 for the UK excluding London and £20,622 in London, and just over one in five are paid above the FTE UKRI minimum level (21%).

Figure 4-1: UKRI-funded students receiving a stipend at / more than the FTE UKRI minimum level (TGH n = 139; students n = 8,641)



Source: SQW analysis of TGH survey data

- 4.8** A breakdown of students receiving a stipend at / more than the minimum stipend by location, UKRI Council, TRAC group classification, full-time or part-time study, and period of study is shown in Table 4-2. From this, there are a few important points to highlight. First, when the £2,000 London allowance is taken into account, a higher proportion of students studying in London receive an enhanced stipend (45%) as compared to students studying in the rest of the UK (17%).¹³ Second, two RCs have a higher proportion of students receiving an enhanced stipend – EPSRC (35%) and MRC¹⁴ (42%). Third, a higher proportion of students studying at TRAC group A ROs receive an enhanced stipend (23%) than those studying at non-TRAC A institutions.

¹³ For clarity, for London, we have interpreted an enhanced stipend as being a stipend above £20,622.

¹⁴ We suspect this is largely due to MRC Units which historically have tended to award slightly higher stipends. This data does not include Clinical Fellows.

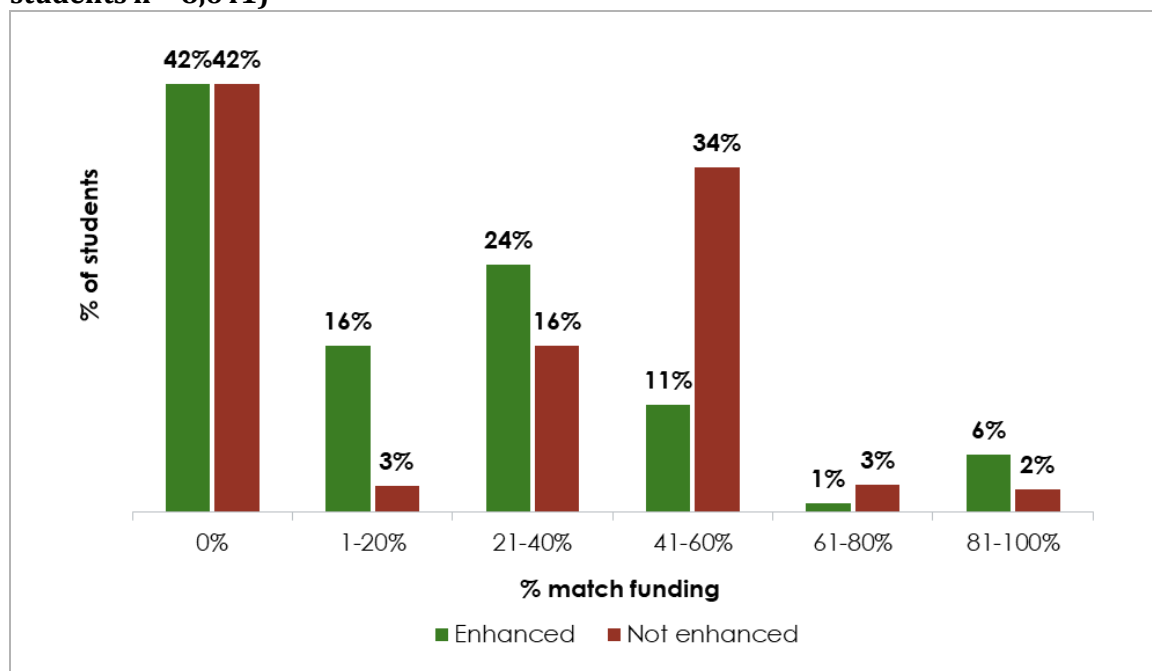
Table 4-2: Breakdown of UKRI-funded students receiving a stipend at / more than the FTE UKRI minimum level (TGH n = 139; students n = 8,641)

Category	Number of students	At the minimum level	More than the minimum level
All	8,641	79%	21%
UK, excl. London	7,151	83%	17%
London	1,490	55%	45%
AHRC	1,477	81%	19%
BBSRC	1,085	90%	10%
EPSRC	3,645	65%	35%
ESRC	961	98%	2%
MRC	324	58%	42%
NERC	1,047	98%	2%
STFC	102	93%	7%
TRAC group A	7,756	77%	23%
Non-TRAC group A	885	89%	11%
FT	8,174	78%	22%
PT	465	84%	16%
Period =12	7,143	78%	22%
Period <12	1,497	83%	17%

Source: SQW analysis of TGH survey data

- 4.9** Data from TGHs suggests that the mean amount of co-funding for stipends is 25%. Figure 4-2 summarises the percentage of stipends paid to UKRI-funded students that is made up of co-funding from a non-UKRI source, broken down by whether or not students are receiving an enhanced stipend. For both groups, about 40% of students receive a stipend that is not made up of any co-funding. For students on an enhanced stipend, around half receive between 1-60% of co-funding. For students not on an enhanced stipend, half receive 21-60% of co-funding. Very few students received a stipend that was over 60% co-funded, although this may be influenced by training grant conditions on the total level of co-funding a studentship can receive.

Figure 4-2: Stipend co-funding received by UKRI-funded students (TGH n = 139; students n = 8,641)



Source: SQW analysis of TGH survey data

Stipends for non-UKRI funded students

4.10 As part of the RO survey, respondents were asked to estimate the number of doctoral students who were funded but not by UKRI¹⁵, who started in the 2023-24 academic year and who received a stipend that was less than, at or more than the FTE-equivalent of the UKRI minimum. From the estimates, there are a few important points to highlight. First, most RO respondents said that all or most of their non-UKRI funded doctoral students receive a stipend at the UKRI minimum level (in open text responses, 21 ROs indicated they have an institutional commitment to match the UKRI stipend minimum for all students; others (17) indicated that they would match the minimum 'where possible' for non-UKRI, university-funded students). Specifically, three quarters of respondents said that at least around 50% of their non-UKRI doctoral students receive a stipend at UKRI's minimum level, and half of respondents said that this is the case for at least 90% of their students. This suggests that ROs use the UKRI minimum stipend level as a guide when setting non-UKRI doctoral students' stipends.

4.11 Second, there is a portion of ROs where all non-UKRI funded doctoral students receive a stipend less than the UKRI minimum level (9%), and there is also a smaller portion where all receive a stipend more than the UKRI minimum level (3%). The latter is not necessarily surprising where students receive funding from specific (non-UKRI) funders in areas such as

¹⁵ For example, funded by the RO or another research funder. This does not include self-funded students. Note some self-funded students may also receive funding directly from a third party, but as this funding is not managed by the RO we assume that such students are not included in the ROs' return to the survey.

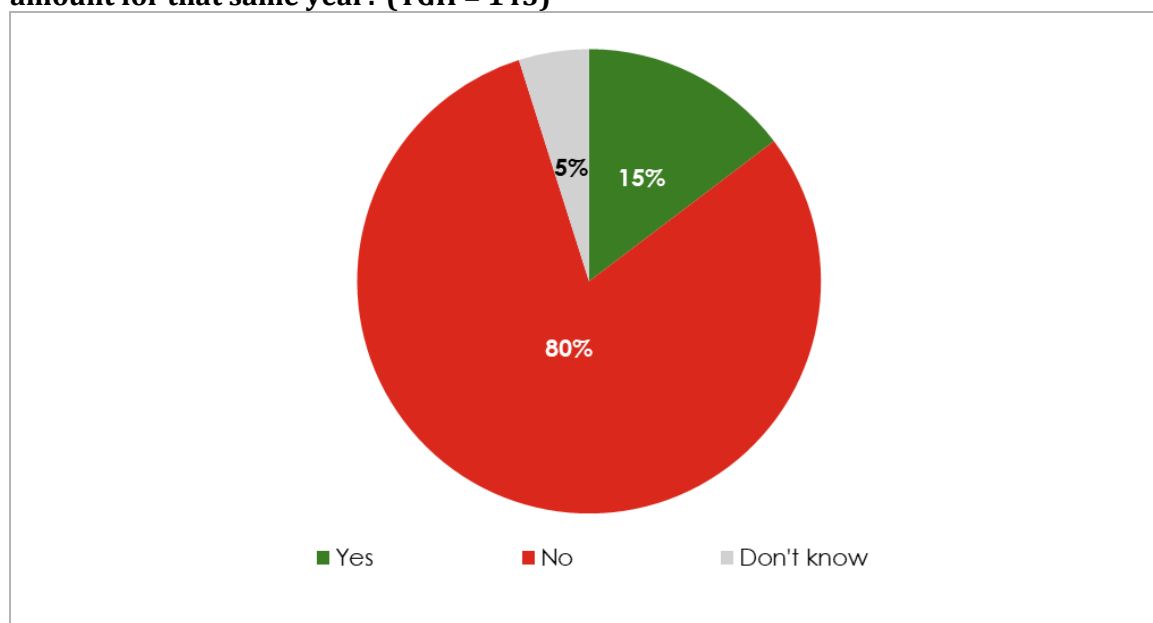
medicine and engineering. Further, the finding may suggest that although the UKRI minimum stipend guides many institutions in setting non-UKRI doctoral students' stipends, some set levels independent of the UKRI minimum rate.

Reasons for paying less than the minimum

4.12 UKRI had noted that data reported by ROs to it via its Joint electronic Submission system (Je-S) sometimes indicates that students receive less than the minimum stipend amount over the course of a year. Unlike our survey (which asked first about the rate of stipend), Je-S records actual spend on stipend. UKRI asked us to consider if there were legitimate reasons that the actual spend might be lower than the annualised rate of stipend. This was consequently something explored in greater depth through the TGH survey.

4.13 As discussed above, all students were paid at least the minimum stipend level. The survey also asked TGH respondents whether there are circumstances in which UKRI-funded students would receive less than the minimum stipend amount. As shown in Figure 4-4, 15% of TGH respondents responded "yes" to this question, while over four-fifths of respondents answered "no" and about 5% said that they were not sure.

Figure 4-3: Are there circumstances in which the annual stipend received by a student registered with UKRI through Je-S is or would be less than the UKRI minimum stipend amount for that same year? (TGH = 143)



Source: SQW analysis of TGH survey data

4.14 Some TGH respondents describe instances where the *rate* of stipend paid (i.e. £18,622, or £20,622 in London) is in line with the UKRI minimum but the actual *amount* paid (and recorded on Je-S) over the academic year is lower than the rate due to unpaid absences or other reasons.

Lower amounts

- 4.15** Of the 21 respondents who said that UKRI-funded students receive less than the UKRI minimum stipend amount, most cited legitimate circumstances where this would be the case. This includes: students are sick and away from study for longer than 13 weeks (9 respondents); students receiving external funding for a period in the year, e.g., earned during an industry placement or internship (8); students starting later in the year (5); students submitting their thesis and therefore completing their studies early (4); students withdrawing from their studies (3); and students receiving parental leave on a reduced stipend (2).
- 4.16** As per UKRI training grant terms and conditions, ROs will continue paying students who are sick and have a medical certificate for 13 weeks. However, beyond 13 weeks, students would only receive further support at an RO's discretion. For example, one institution said that while it would seek to provide some ongoing support to a student diagnosed with an acute physical illness (such as cancer), similar support for mental health conditions – while not impossible – may be more challenging, partly because such conditions may not have a clear diagnosis or prognosis. Furthermore, ROs said UKRI grant conditions are tailored towards more acute medical conditions, rather than chronic conditions and disabilities.¹⁶ We note that in its New Deal for Postgraduate Research: Response to the Call for Input (2023), UKRI has committed to reviewing the level of support it provides for its students and has now committed to increase the level of medical leave available to UKRI funded students from the 2025-26 academic year¹⁷.
- 4.17** Looking at non-UKRI-funded students, ROs said that they may pay less than the minimum stipend to some students on certain scholarships or bursaries, and this was more likely to be the case in certain disciplines such as the arts and humanities, where there tends to be less funding available for doctoral training. International students may be paid less than the minimum stipend where they are not UKRI-funded, although where the funding is not managed by the UK RO, they do not necessarily know definitively which or how many students are affected. One institution said that it knows of an RO that has cut ties with an international scholarship because it felt the stipend payments were too low.
- 4.18** Some TGH respondents noted that once the studentship (i.e. the UKRI funding) had finished, where a student has not yet submitted their thesis or equivalent, then they may still be registered as a student but no longer receive a stipend.

Enhancements

- 4.19** When asked to select reasons for paying UKRI or non-UKRI doctoral students more than the minimum stipend in a multi-code question, RO and TGH respondents who reported paying

¹⁶ Likewise, the Disabled Students' Allowance tends to support physical adjustments such as equipment and transport, but less so chronic conditions and neurodivergence.

¹⁷ See UKRI's Policy Statement: Review of the UKRI Standard Terms and Conditions of Training Grant

enhanced stipends most frequently cited requirements and commitments of a co-funder or partner organisation (RO 49%, TGH 46%). These options were closely followed by a goal to improve recruitment (RO 45%, TGH 46%) and then to increase the competitiveness of their offer relative to other graduate roles (RO 38%, TGH 29%). The location of the studentship and, for TGH respondents, a policy or commitment from their RO, were the least frequently cited reasons. On the RO survey, there are some noticeable differences between the percentage of respondents selecting each option and the percentage of students these respondents represent. This is partly driven by responses from institutions with a larger number of doctoral students and highlights the complexity of the landscape.

4.20 To note, 75 TGH and 24 RO respondents selected ‘not applicable’, and were excluded from the analysis, suggesting that they do not offer enhanced stipends. Survey respondents were also invited to provide open text responses about the factors influencing decisions to provide enhanced stipends, and responses were very similar to those highlighted through the closed options.¹⁸

Table 4-3: What are the reasons for paying more than the minimum stipend (or more than the minimum and London allowance)? Please tick all that apply. (RO n = 55; TGH n = 68)

Reason	RO		TGH	
	% of respondents	% of students	% of respondents	% of students
Requirement of partner co-funding as part of relevant training grants	49%	28%	N/A	N/A
Requirement of institution co-funding as part of relevant training grants	38%	58%	N/A	N/A
A policy or commitment from a co-funder or partner	N/A	N/A	46%	51%
To improve recruitment	45%	83%	46%	38%
To increase competitiveness with other graduate roles	38%	70%	29%	24%
To address student needs	29%	43%	25%	23%
Location of studentship	9%	13%	10%	12%

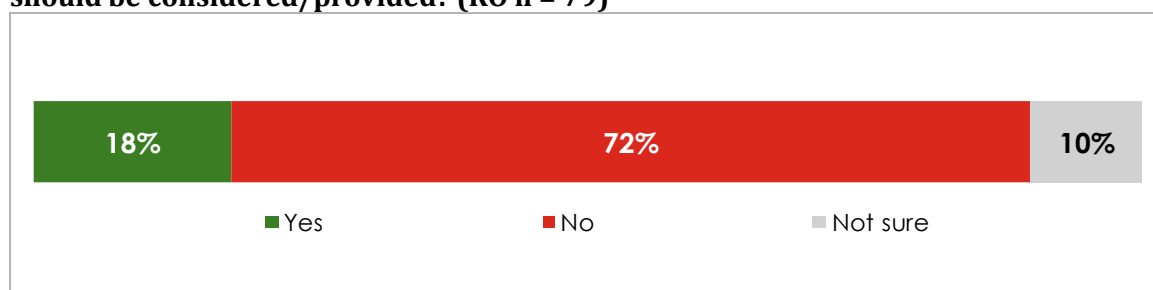
¹⁸ In open text responses, the most commonly cited factor was the availability of external, co-funding which can allow for enhanced stipends. This funding may come from an industry partner, or from specific funding bodies (such as Wellcome Trust or the British Heart Foundation) or university scholarship programmes which pay above the UKRI minimum. Some RCs have a requirement for an enhanced stipend for a particular group (e.g., BBSRC enhances stipends for those with a veterinary qualification). Other reasons, which were not as frequently cited, include discipline-specific considerations around training costs, student recruitment, particularly in areas where a studentship is ‘competing’ with high-paid industry jobs (e.g., engineering and computing), and to account for specific student circumstances (e.g., caring responsibilities).

Reason	RO		TGH	
	% of respondents	% of students	% of respondents	% of students
A policy or commitment from department/RO	N/A	N/A	6%	9%

Note: Figures are calculated as a percent of respondents, and students represented by respondents, who did offer enhanced stipends (excluding respondents who answered N/A to this question)
Source: SQW analysis of RO and TGH survey data

4.21 Nearly 1 in 5 (18%) of RO survey respondents have a policy or guidance on enhanced stipends at their organisation. Likewise, a relatively low proportion of TGH survey respondents cite a policy or commitment from their department or RO as a reason for paying more than the minimum stipend level.

Figure 4-4: Does your RO have any policies or guidance on when enhanced stipends should be considered/provided? (RO n = 79)



Source: SQW analysis of RO survey data

4.22 During interviews, few ROs said they have a formal, institution policy regarding stipend payments but many have a stated ambition (and, in cases, formal institutional policy) to pay all institution-funded doctoral students the UKRI-minimum stipend, whether or not students are funded by UKRI. This was generally motivated by two factors: 1), to pay all doctoral students funded by the RO the same; 2), to ensure that doctoral students have enough money to live on. One institution has an institution-wide policy to pay all doctoral students the Real Living Wage, which is more than the UKRI minimum stipend (by approximately £1,100 per student in 2023-24), because it felt the UKRI minimum stipend is not sufficient for students to live on.

4.23 Several ROs said that they are committed to ensuring that any student in receipt of at least some RO funding is 'topped up' to at least the UKRI minimum. In some cases this is a formalised, codified commitment in RO policy.

4.24 In others, the RO advises departments that they 'should' set stipends at a particular level but, in practice, this can be challenging to do for all funded students particularly in arts and humanities subjects where wider departmental budgets are under strain. Indeed, often, decisions around stipend enhancements are not taken at an RO-level. Instead, as has already been mentioned, decisions are made in response to circumstances, such as where there is match funding from partners (e.g., industry, Trusts, scholarships), or where competition with

industry makes recruitment particularly challenging (e.g., medicine, computer science, engineering).

- 4.25** Several ROs said that there is strong historical precedent for enhanced stipends in disciplines such as medicine and engineering. In some disciplines this is because UKRI studentships are in more direct competition with independent funders. For example, the Wellcome Trust has typically offered a higher stipend than the UKRI minimum (by around 30%), and high calibre students may be able to exercise choice depending on how important the stipend is to them (we look, below, at other factors students consider alongside the stipend).

Prioritisation of student numbers versus stipend level

- 4.26** Interviewees suggested that, generally, ROs prioritise the stipend level to ensure students are not underfunded. Institutions will generally always prioritise paying the minimum stipend - which can mean ROs reduce the number of studentships they offer (for example on UKRI training grants over time). Furthermore, there are fewer funded doctoral places in the arts and humanities than in other disciplines, making the maintenance of student numbers relatively more important. Changes to AHRC grant structures over the coming years may further reduce the flexibility and place greater pressure on maintaining student numbers. These comments imply that where grant conditions emphasise maintaining student numbers, ROs will do this, potentially using their own funds to do so. However, where flexibility allows, ROs will reduce numbers to maintain stipend level.

“We try to be careful where possible that we have parity, we don't want a situation where within the same groups we have students on very different stipends, because that doesn't create for a good research environment.”

RO interviewee

- 4.27** In open text survey responses, where TGHs said they would prioritise the stipend over numbers, this was to ensure students could afford their living costs and to make PGR more attractive. Grant holders prioritising numbers said it was to maximise the number of opportunities available.

5. Is the minimum stipend level adequate?

Key findings

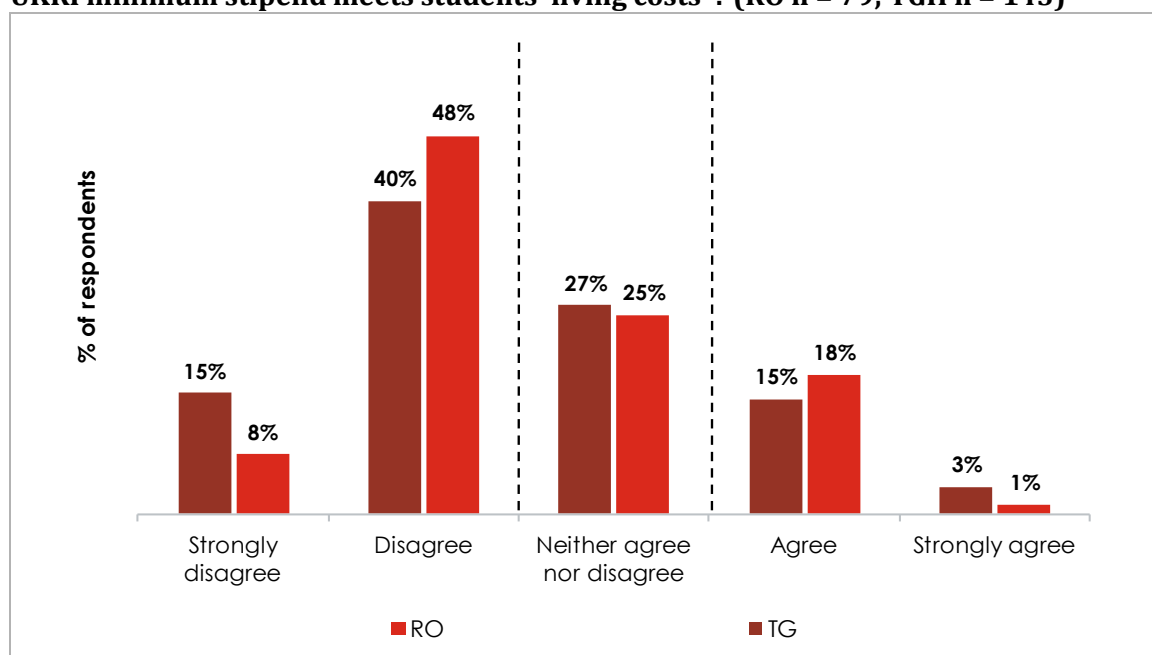
- Over half of both RO and TGH survey respondents felt that the UKRI minimum stipend does not meet students' living costs. Similarly, many of the ROs interviewed said that the UKRI minimum stipend is too low (e.g., in terms of living costs, rent, etc.) and gave examples of students struggling to get by on the minimum stipend.
- Just under half of TGH survey respondents thought that students in receipt of the minimum UKRI stipend cannot afford living costs without an external source of funding, such as income from taking on additional employment or support from their family. This does not generally lead to students dropping out of their courses completely. More commonly, it can mean doctoral study takes longer to complete where students must work alongside their studies.
- There is no consistent spatial trend across RO and TGH survey respondents in relation to the perception of the adequacy of the stipend level and the need for an alternative source of funding. This said, RO interviews did highlight a recognition that the relative value of the stipend does vary in different places, reflecting living costs in some parts of the country, including London.
- Survey evidence suggests that UKRI-funded students are eligible for hardship funds at a majority of ROs but data on the proportion of students applying and accessing hardship funds is much more limited.

5.1 This section provides a summary of evidence relating to TGH and RO perceptions about stipend adequacy and its attractiveness.

Stipend adequacy

5.2 Over half of both RO (56%) and TGH (55%) survey respondents felt that the UKRI minimum stipend does *not* meet students' living costs. About one in five agreed that the stipend was adequate to cover living costs. A higher proportion of TGH respondents strongly agreed or disagreed than RO respondents. About a quarter of both RO (27%) and TGH (25%) respondents answered neutrally.

Figure 5-1: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: “the UKRI minimum stipend meets students’ living costs”? (RO n = 79; TGH n = 143)



Source: SQW analysis of RO and TGH survey data

5.3 Table 5-1 shows the number of RO and TGH survey respondents in each region (Respondents in region) and the percentage of these who either disagreed or strongly disagreed that the UKRI minimum stipend meets students’ living costs (% Disagree or Strongly disagree). Overall, there is no clear pattern in the responses. A higher proportion of RO respondents in the South East and South West, as well as TGH respondents in the East, London and Yorkshire and The Humber disagreed that the stipend met living costs. However, given the relatively small number of respondents per region, it is important that this figure not be overinterpreted.

Table 5-1: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: “the UKRI minimum stipend meets students’ living costs”? – by region (RO n = 79; TGH n = 143)

Region	RO		TGH	
	Respondents in region	% Disagree or Strongly disagree	Respondents in region	% Disagree or Strongly disagree
East	5	60%	11	73%
East Midlands	5	60%	6	50%
London	15	53%	30	80%
North East	4	50%	6	50%
North West	11	55%	9	44%
Northern Ireland	1	*	N/A	N/A
Scotland	7	43%	13	23%

Region	RO		TGH	
	Respondents in region	% Disagree or Strongly disagree	Respondents in region	% Disagree or Strongly disagree
South East	10	90%	19	53%
South West	8	63%	18	50%
Wales	2	*	7	29%
West Midlands	6	17%	10	40%
Yorkshire and The Humber	5	60%	14	64%

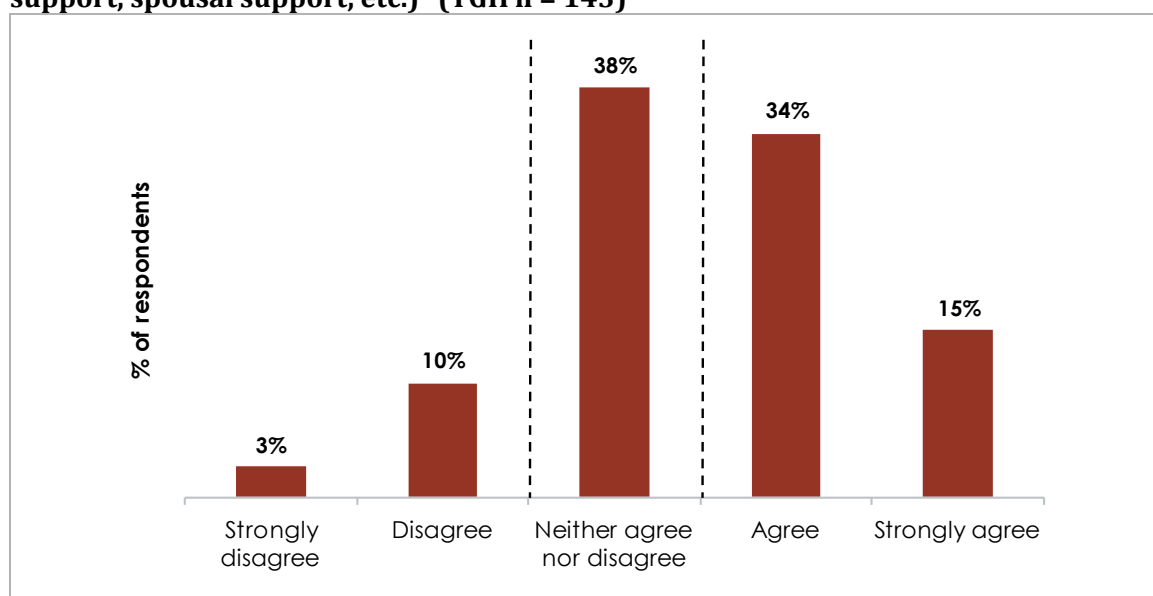
Please note that asterisks (*) indicate suppression, due to small sample sizes.
Source: SQW analysis of RO and TGH survey data

- 5.4** Many of the ROs interviewed, likewise, said that the UKRI minimum stipend is too low (e.g., in terms of living costs, rent, etc.). For example, one institution said it deviates from the UKRI minimum at every available opportunity, to pay doctoral stipends more. Several ROs said that, ideally, grant funding from UKRI would increase to allow the minimum stipend to align with the National Living Wage, which was thought to be reasonable and affordable. Some ROs also said during interviews that they would not be able to afford an unfunded increase to align the minimum stipend with the Real Living Wage (we explore this more, below).
- 5.5** Most interviewed ROs gave examples of students struggling to get by on the minimum stipend. The ROs said that this does not generally lead to students dropping out of their courses completely (although it can in some instances lead to this). More commonly, it can mean doctoral study takes longer to complete where students must work alongside their studies – indeed, some ROs said there is a perception among students that it is ‘normal’ to need additional financial support (from family or additional employment) while completing a doctorate.
- 5.6** Furthermore, interviewees recognised that, anecdotally, the stipend (including the London allowance) goes further in some areas in comparison with others, which reflects different costs of living across the UK.
- 5.7** Several interviewees hypothesised that there may be suitable prospective students who do not apply for doctoral degrees because they do not believe it would be financially viable. This is discussed in greater detail, below.
- 5.8** Some consultees from larger and TRAC A ROs did report that, anecdotally, they had heard of some home students choosing to study in European or US institutions where stipends are traditionally more generous.

External funding

- 5.9** Just under half of TGH survey respondents thought that students in receipt of the minimum UKRI stipend cannot afford living costs without an external source of funding, such as income from taking on additional employment or support from their family. With a relatively large proportion of neutral responses (38%), only about one in eight of TGHs said that students would be able to cover their living expenses using the stipend alone.

Figure 5-2: To what extent do you agree with the following statement: “students in receipt of a stipend for full time study cannot afford their living costs without taking on additional employment (or receiving additional external support e.g., parental support, spousal support, etc.)” (TGH n = 143)



Source: SQW analysis of TGH survey data

- 5.10** As shown in Table 5-2 the percentage of TGH respondents either agreeing or strongly agreeing (out of the total respondents for the region, recorded in the second column) to this statement varies. The highest proportion of respondents agreeing that students cannot afford living costs without an external source of funding were from London ROs, with lower proportions agreeing in Scotland, Wales and the North East. As above, it is important that the relatively small numbers of respondents in some regions should be taken into account when interpreting this figure.

Table 5-2: To what extent do you agree with the following statement: “students in receipt of a stipend for full time study cannot afford their living costs without taking on additional employment (or receiving additional external support e.g., parental support, spousal support, etc.)” – by region (TGH n = 143)

Region	Respondents in region	% Agree or Strongly agree
East	11	45%
East Midlands	6	67%

Region	Respondents in region	% Agree or Strongly agree
London	30	80%
North East	6	33%
North West	9	44%
Scotland	13	23%
South East	19	47%
South West	18	39%
Wales	7	29%
West Midlands	10	40%
Yorkshire and The Humber	14	43%

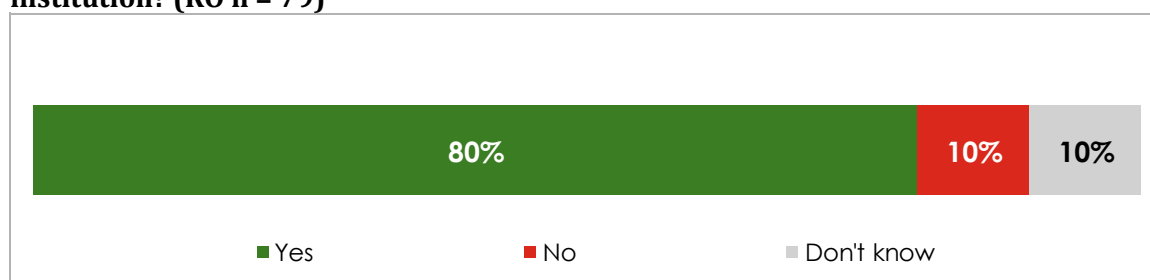
Source: SQW analysis of TGH survey data

5.11 Interviewees explained that many doctoral students teach alongside conducting their research (one interviewee from a large university described this as the ‘norm’).

Hardship funds

5.12 Survey evidence suggests that UKRI-funded students are eligible for hardship funds at a majority of ROs, with 80% of RO respondents saying that this was the case at their institution. The remaining one-fifth of respondents were split between ROs not making hardship funds open to UKRI-funded students, or not knowing whether this was the case.

Figure 5-3: Are UKRI-funded doctoral students eligible for hardship funds in your institution? (RO n = 79)



Source: SQW analysis of RO survey data

5.13 Data on the proportion of students applying and accessing hardship funds is much more limited, as many RO survey respondents expressed that they were either unable to provide this data due to confidentiality or did not have this data available. Of the 28 respondents that did provide data, over half said that no UKRI-funded doctoral students applied for or accessed hardship funds.¹⁹

¹⁹ Responses to this question may indicate that one or more ROs interpreted the question differently, with some interpreting this as ‘of all students, how many accessed hardship funds?’ and some interpreting it as ‘of all students who applied for hardship funds, how students of them accessed them?’.

Table 5-3: Roughly, what proportion of UKRI-funded doctoral students have applied for and accessed hardship funds in the 2023-24 academic year? (RO n = 28)

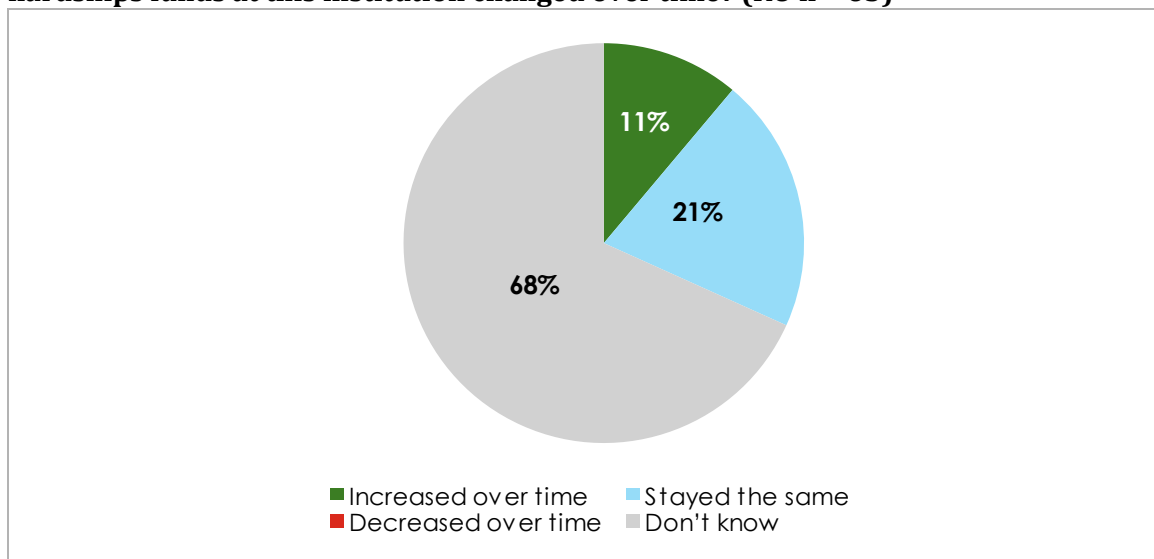
Metric	Applied	Accessed
Minimum	0%	0%
Median	0%	0%
Mean	2%	6%
Max	10%	100%

Source: SQW analysis of RO survey data

5.14 Open text RO survey responses and interviewees noted that hardship funds are generally institution-wide and needs-based (sometimes only for something “specific and usually one-off”). Consequently, because doctoral students receive the stipend, they may be deemed less ‘in need’ than other students not in receipt of any other financial support. Therefore, funded PGR students might be technically eligible for hardship funds, but less likely to make a successful claim than unfunded students.

5.15 In line with the above, the survey evidence is limited in its ability to answer how the number of UKRI-funded students applying for hardship funds has changed over time. About two-thirds of RO respondents at ROs where students were eligible to apply for hardship funds said that they did not know how hardship fund application numbers had changed over time. Of the remaining respondents, about twice as many said that there had been no change in hardship fund application numbers as said that these had increased.

Figure 5-4: How has the number of UKRI-funded doctoral students applying for hardships funds at this institution changed over time? (RO n = 63)

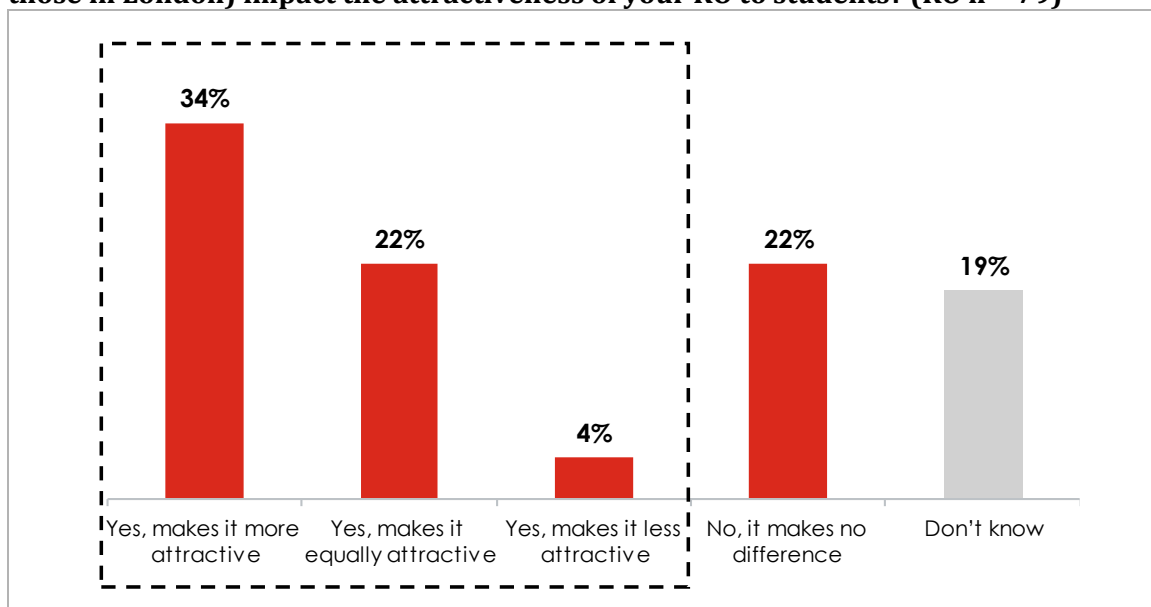


Source: SQW analysis of RO survey

Attractiveness of the stipend

5.16 About three-fifths of RO survey respondents felt that the UKRI minimum stipend level impacts the attractiveness of their organisation to students, whereas roughly one-fifth said that it makes no difference or that they are not sure. For those who felt that the stipend has an impact, the majority said that it makes their organisation either more or equally attractive, and a very small proportion said it makes it less attractive. In open text RO survey responses, several institutions commented that a universal minimum creates equality between ROs, allowing them to compete as equals. One respondent said they feel the minimum universal stipend makes ROs in the South of England less attractive as the money does not go as far. However, many ROs said the stipend makes little or no difference to the attractiveness of their RO to students, and, in open text responses and interviews, respondents suggested this is because other factors matter more, something that is explored in greater depth, below.

Figure 5-5: Does a national UKRI minimum stipend level (with London weighting for those in London) impact the attractiveness of your RO to students? (RO n = 79)



Source: SQW analysis of RO survey

5.17 Looking at the regional breakdown in Table 5-4, the regions with the largest proportion of respondents saying that the UKRI minimum stipend level makes their RO more attractive to students were London, the North West and Scotland. By contrast, the regions where the largest proportion of respondents said that it makes no difference were the South West and the South East. Given small numbers of respondents in some regions, these figures should be interpreted with caution.

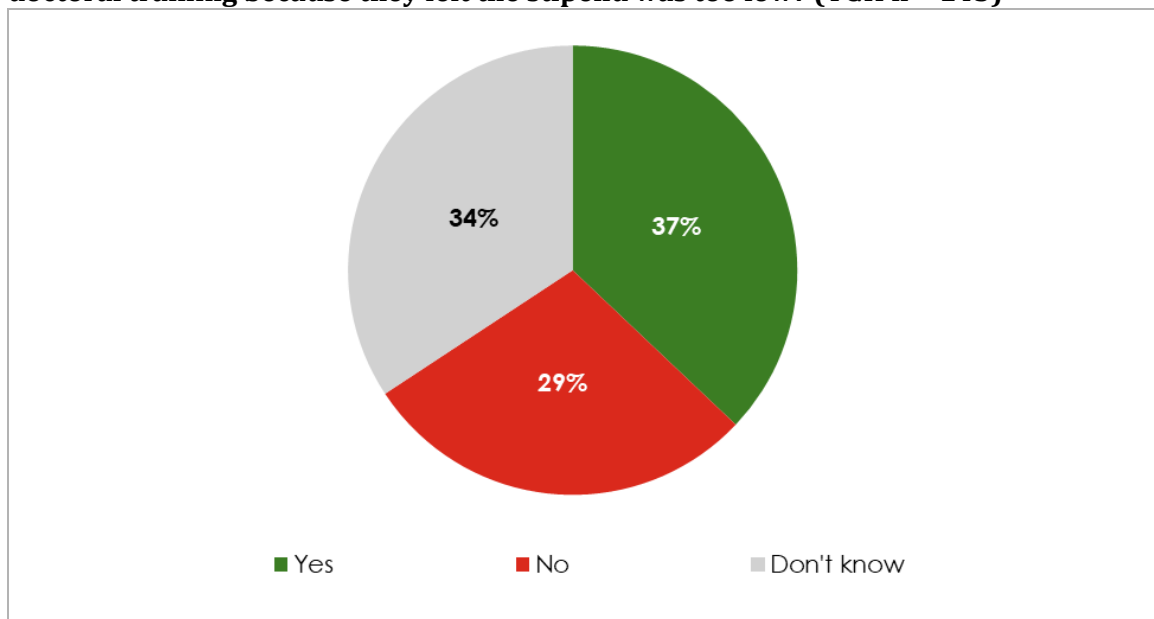
Table 5-4: Does a national UKRI minimum stipend level (with London weighting for those in London) impact the attractiveness of your RO to students? – by region (RO n = 79)

Region	Respondents in region	Yes, makes it more attractive	Yes, makes it equally attractive	Yes, makes it less attractive	No, it makes no difference	Don't know
East	5	40%	0%	0%	0%	60%
East Midlands	5	20%	60%	0%	0%	20%
London	15	67%	0%	0%	20%	13%
North East	4	0%	25%	0%	25%	50%
North West	11	45%	18%	9%	27%	0%
Northern Ireland	1	*	*	*	*	*
Scotland	7	43%	29%	0%	29%	0%
South East	10	20%	20%	20%	30%	10%
South West	8	13%	25%	0%	50%	13%
Wales	2	*	*	*	*	*
West Midlands	6	0%	50%	0%	17%	33%
Yorkshire and The Humber	5	20%	20%	0%	0%	60%

Please note that asterisks (*) indicate suppression, due to small sample sizes.
Source: Source: SQW analysis of RO survey

5.18 Approximately 38% of TGH survey respondents reported that they knew of at least one student who decided not to take up doctoral studies due to the stipend being too low; this represented over half (56%) of those who were able to respond to this question. Open text TGH survey responses indicate that this was sometimes because candidates took jobs in industry, which paid more, or because of cost of living concerns. A high percentage of 'Don't know' replies likely reflects the fact that, often, TGHs simply do not know why prospective students do not take up doctoral training. Furthermore, TGHs cannot, by definition, know how many prospective students consider doctoral training and decide against applying at all.

Figure 5-6: Are you aware of any person in the last three years who did not take up doctoral training because they felt the stipend was too low? (TGH n = 143)



Source: SQW analysis of TGH survey data

- 5.19** During interviews, many ROs said they have heard of prospective students deciding not to apply because of a perception they will be 'hard up'. However, this is inherently difficult to measure in data because universities do not have contact with potential applicants who decide not to apply in the first place (or the reasons for this).
- 5.20** Several ROs noted during interviews that home students may be more reticent to pursue doctoral study than international students, in part because they have a better sense of relative costs in the UK and consequently far the stipend might stretch. However, they said this is anecdotal rather than based on definitive data.

6. Does the stipend level support EDI?

Key findings

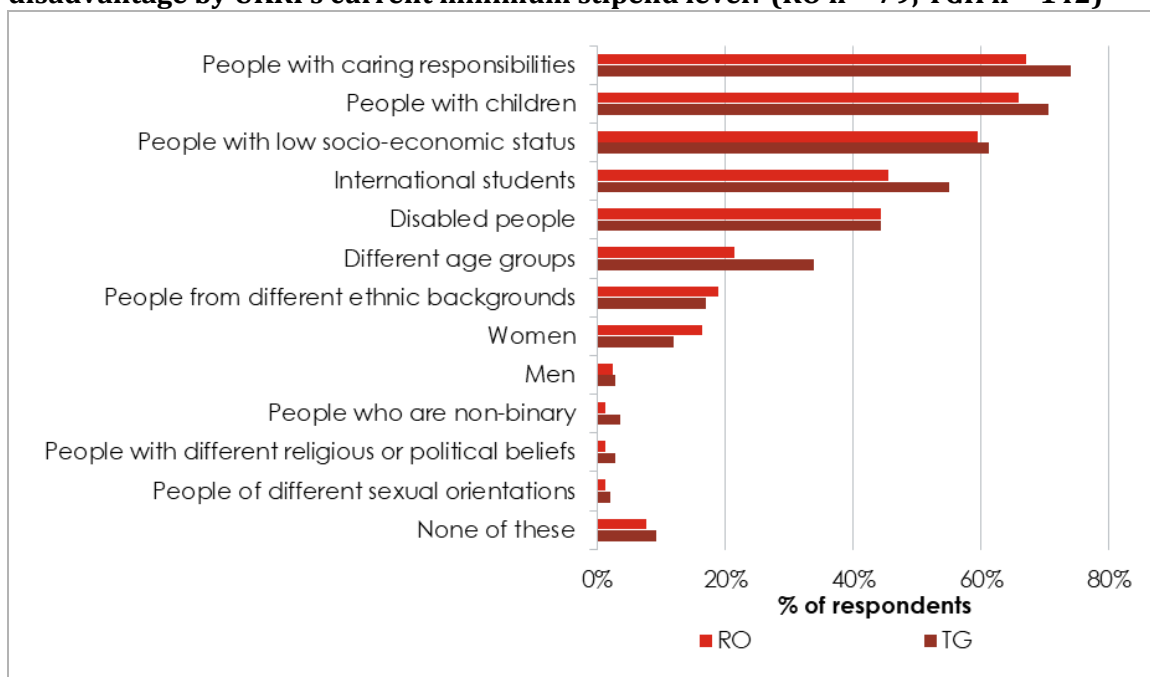
- The stipend is seen as a critical means – in principle – for supporting diversity among the doctoral student population. However, evidence from the RO and TGH surveys and the interviews with ROs suggests that there is a perception that some groups are put at a disadvantage by the current minimum stipend level.
- Groups perceived to be disadvantaged by the current minimum level included people with caring responsibilities, people with children and people from lower socio-economic backgrounds.
- Opinions varied between participants in the research on the balance between ‘universal’ and ‘targeted’ responses to these issues. For some, a consistent and equal minimum was seen as the ‘fairest’ way to fund doctoral students and support a diverse doctoral landscape. For others, a more targeted approach was preferred. Across this diversity, where more targeted funding was preferred, this was most commonly group/issue, rather than place-based.

- 6.1** The section explores the relationship between stipend level and diversity, and how TGHs and ROs view a universal minimum stipend versus targeted funding for improving diversity and access.

Relationship between stipend level and diversity

- 6.2** Evidence from the RO and TGH surveys suggests that there is a perception some groups are put at a substantial disadvantage by the current minimum stipend level. Both RO and TGH respondents most frequently agreed that people with caring responsibilities (RO 67%, TGH 74%) and people with children (RO 66%, TGH 70%) were at a disadvantage; this was followed by people with a low socio-economic status (RO 59%, TGH 61%) and international students (RO 46%, TGH 55%). The groups which the least respondents felt were at a substantial disadvantage were people of different sexual orientations; people with different religious or political beliefs; and people who are non-binary. Only about one in 10 (RO 8%, TGH 9%) said that no groups were disadvantaged. These figures should be interpreted with care; they demonstrate current perceptions within the sector and may or may not align with students’ lived experience.

Figure 6-1: Do you feel that any of the groups below are put at a substantial disadvantage by UKRI's current minimum stipend level? (RO n = 79; TGH n = 142)



Source: SQW analysis of RO and TGH survey data

- 6.3** Most ROs said that the stipend is a critical means for supporting diversity among the doctoral student population. However, in line with the survey responses, interviewees said doctoral education tends to be more affordable and feasible for younger students from wealthier socio-economic backgrounds with no caring responsibilities, minimal financial commitments and no physical or mental impairments. Furthermore, as has been mentioned, some ROs said the perception among students is that it is 'normal' to need additional financial support towards the end of a doctorate, something that makes completing doctoral studies especially challenging (or prohibitive) for students with caring responsibilities and/or without access to such support. Likewise, open text RO responses indicated that it is these students who can benefit the most from an adequate universal minimum. Some interviewees suggested that the level of stipend may therefore inadvertently disadvantage older students with higher financial commitments and caring responsibilities, students from poorer backgrounds without access to family financial support, and students with disabilities or neurodivergence who may not be able to take on additional work or access suitable support during their studies.
- 6.4** Many interviewees and open text RO survey respondents felt that the amount received through the minimum stipend is disproportionately important to students from poorer backgrounds.
- 6.5** It was also noted that changing the stipend level may not be the key driver to improving diversity and initiatives may need to be further 'upstream' (for example, targeting secondary school pupils) or focus on raising awareness or encouraging certain groups to consider postgraduate study.

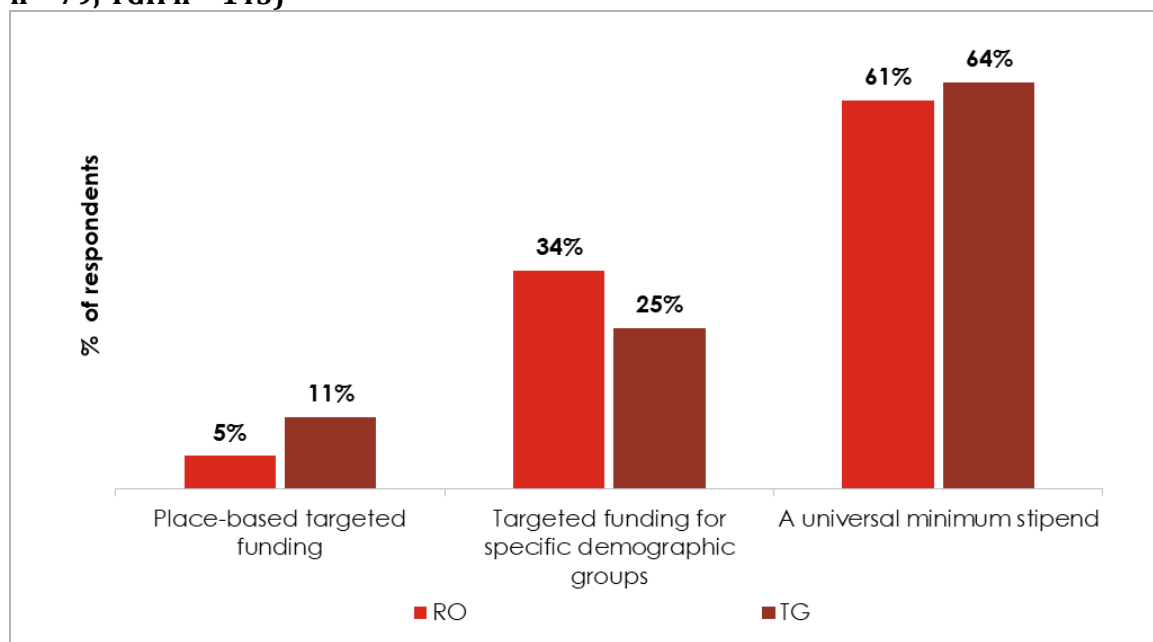
- 6.6** One RO said high calibre (but financially poor) students from abroad (particularly from Middle- and Low-Income countries) may not see study in the UK as a viable option for doctoral study because of insufficient financial support. Furthermore, international students face a range of ‘hidden costs’ including the NHS surcharge and visa costs and may be unable to ‘shop around’ for cheaper accommodation or lack an understanding on the cost of living in the UK, compounding the financial pressures they face. However, whilst these are important considerations, it is worth noting that some of these upfront costs are outside the remit of UKRI. Accepting international students presents challenges for ROs, too, because in England these students do not attract RDP²⁰ funding and institutions cannot reclaim more than the home tuition fee from UKRI.
- 6.7** One RO said that it would value making stipend payments in advance to some international students to help with upfront costs. However, it is worth noting that there is nothing in UKRI grant terms and conditions that prevents early payments where this is deemed necessary.
- 6.8** One RO noted during interviews that the stipend level may affect take up of doctoral training across disciplines. Specifically, some studentships in subjects that compete with industry (e.g., engineering) pay higher stipends than the UKRI minimum and it was hypothesised that this may support greater diversity than disciplines that ‘only’ pay the UKRI minimum. Furthermore, fully funded doctorates in some areas (e.g., arts, humanities and social sciences) are (much) fewer in number than, say, medicine or engineering. This may mean, a), that arts, humanities and social science students are more willing to accept a lower stipend because there are fewer funded places and, b), that the students who can do so come from backgrounds where they have other, wider financial support available (such as through family or savings). This may impede diversity in certain disciplines. However, this has not been tested as part of this study.
- 6.9** ROs generally felt there was a plausible and potentially strong link between the stipend level and students’ wellbeing, for the simple reason that not having enough money is stressful. Other factors are also very important, though, including students’ relationships with their supervisors.

Universal minimum vs targeting funding

- 6.10** Asked to choose between a universal minimum stipend or targeted funding by either place or demographic group, approximately three-fifths of both RO (61%) and TGH (64%) respondents said that they would prefer a universal minimum over a targeted approach. Where targeted funding was selected, targeting by demographic groups rather than by place was favoured by both RO and TGH respondents (RO 34%, TGH 25%).

²⁰ For more information on Quality-related Research (QR) funding and the Research Development Programme (RDP) fund in England, see [Research England’s Explainer: QR Funding and the REF \(UKRI website\)](#).

Figure 6-2: Thinking about how the stipend can best support a diverse doctoral student intake, do you think this is better achieved through a universal minimum stipend or targeted funding by place or targeted funding by demographic group? (RO n = 79; TGH n = 143)



Source: SQW analysis of RO and TGH survey data

6.11 As shown in Table 6-1, there does not appear to be a strong regional pattern for respondents answering that placed-based targeted funding is the best approach to supporting a diverse doctoral student intake. The highest proportion of RO respondents from the North East and East selected this option, while for TGH respondents the highest proportions from the South West and South East did so.

Table 6-1: Thinking about how the stipend can best support a diverse doctoral student intake, do you think this is better achieved through a universal minimum stipend or targeted funding by place and/or demographic group? - by region (RO n = 79; TGH n = 143)

Region	RO		TGH	
	Respondents in region	% answering 'Place-based targeted funding'	Respondents in region	% answering 'Place-based targeted funding'
East	5	20%	11	9%
East Midlands	5	0%	6	0%
London	15	7%	30	13%
North East	4	25%	6	0%
North West	11	0%	9	0%
Northern Ireland	1	0%	N/A	N/A

Region	RO		TGH	
	Respondents in region	% answering 'Place-based targeted funding'	Respondents in region	% answering 'Place-based targeted funding'
Scotland	7	0%	13	8%
South East	10	10%	19	21%
South West	8	0%	18	28%
Wales	2	0%	7	0%
West Midlands	6	0%	10	0%
Yorkshire and The Humber	5	0%	14	7%

Source: SQW analysis of RO and TGH survey data

- 6.12** In open text survey responses, and during interviews, respondents suggested that a higher minimum stipend (funded by UKRI) combined with targeted funding (responsive to particular training needs, including related to students' needs) would be their preferred means of improving access.
- 6.13** Where TGHs and ROs commented in survey open text responses about the universal minimum stipend, many said they felt it was the fairest means of funding students. One RO survey respondent said a high universal minimum provides "fairness and simplicity" and "predictability and stability" for students and minimises the administrative burden for institutions, something that TGHs also emphasised in open text survey responses. Where students study, work or live in multiple locations during their studentship, an adequate universal minimum stipend would provide greater flexibility than place-based funding. Likewise, it could sometimes be challenging to allocate place-based funding on this basis.
- 6.14** Open text RO and TGH survey responses about targeted support suggested that it may help route funding towards students facing barriers or disadvantage such as those from poor backgrounds or with caring responsibilities. However, one RO suggested in an open text survey response that a universal minimum stipend mitigates any stigma associated with certain circumstances or needs. Another indicated that targeted funding by place might lead to discrepancies in the amount of support received by students with similar needs but studying in different institutions.
- 6.15** Several ROs said that place-based funding could improve access in more expensive locations. However, one interviewee from a large RO with lots of doctoral students said they were not sure how place-based funding could be allocated fairly in practice, and what the criteria would be for doing so. In open text RO survey responses, two ROs suggested that place-based funding could be detrimental to recruitment by institutions in parts of the country with lower living costs. Some ROs also said (in interviews and survey response) that ring-fencing funding for

particular demographics could help to encourage certain groups to take up postgraduate study.

7. What would be the effect of UKRI increasing the stipend level?

Key findings

- During interviews, ROs felt strongly that UKRI should set a minimum stipend. Doing so provides an ‘industry standard’. While the stipend is not considered by ROs to be adequate in many cases, ROs nonetheless feel it provides a useful minimum benchmark and helps to ensure a broad parity of experience and fairness across the system.
- Responses to the RO survey suggest that institutions would be either somewhat or very likely to raise their institution-wide stipend level for all funded doctoral students if the UKRI minimum stipend was anchored to price inflation, and potentially the National Living Wage and Real Living Wage although this is less certain.
- Sentiment during interviews broadly aligned with the survey results. Institutions would endorse in principle an increase in line with price inflation (at a minimum) or National Living Wage (which institutions feel, morally, would be preferable) and thought they would be able to match this for university-funded stipends. However, it was noted that, were the stipend to be raised significantly, ROs would still try to match this for university-funded students, but it would have negative implications on student numbers.
- When asked more broadly about the effects of an increase to the UKRI universal minimum stipend, most RO respondents felt that study time and submission and completion rates would increase.
- Perhaps paradoxically, ROs said during interviews that while the minimum stipend level is crucially important for students’ wellbeing and access (and for diversity of doctoral intake), other factors may be more important *to students* in their decision to apply for doctoral training.

- 7.1** This section explores whether or not UKRI should set a minimum stipend, how changes to the stipend might affect student numbers, the stipend and student recruitment and study experience, and the relative importance of the stipend versus other factors.

Setting the stipend in future

Should UKRI set a minimum stipend?

- 7.2** During interviews, ROs felt strongly that UKRI should set a minimum stipend. Doing so provides an ‘industry standard’. While the stipend is not considered by ROs to be adequate in many cases, ROs nonetheless feel it provides a useful minimum benchmark and helps to ensure a broad parity of experience and fairness across the system. Were UKRI to cease setting a minimum stipend, ROs suggested they would set their own institutional minimums,

primarily in reference to what other ‘similar’ (in terms of rankings, doctoral training grant composition, research intensity, etc.) universities do. A few institutions, mainly those in high cost areas and/or larger cities, commented that they would consider local living costs and/or the living wage. Beyond this, ROs were unclear what metrics they might use to set a stipend (as it is not something they have previously had to consider).

- 7.3** Institutions said it is difficult to predict whether stipends would go up or down if UKRI did not set a minimum. Some felt that, to remain competitive, some institutions would raise their minimum stipends. However, many institutions thought that removing the UKRI minimum stipend would lead to increased competition between institutions. For instance, institutions may face pressure to lower the stipend they offer, especially in subjects where few doctoral training places are available and/or in light of wider financial pressures faced across the HE sector. This would also have negative implications for inclusivity. Both larger and smaller ROs raised concerns that this would lead to a tiered system whereby TRAC A institutions, who can afford to set a higher stipend, would attract the best talent. One RO suggested it might place the UK at a disadvantage internationally, as European and US institutions often pay more generous stipends – the removal of a minimum stipend in the UK might put prospective (particularly international) applicants off.

“The minimum or a range is really helpful. When UKRI raised the stipend, we all thought it was the right thing to do – we wouldn’t have been able to persuade colleagues without that UKRI shift. It sets an expectation across the institution.”

RO interviewee

“The stipend ensures a level playing field where everyone’s got the same. The other issue would be some institutions would offer really low stipends which would be disastrous for inclusivity”

RO interviewee

Likelihood of raising stipends for all students according to different mechanisms

- 7.4** In the online survey, the highest number of ROs said that their organisation would be either somewhat or very likely to raise their institution-wide stipend level for all funded doctoral students if the UKRI minimum stipend was anchored to price inflation (89%) versus any other anchor point. The next most likely options were anchoring to National Living Wage (72%) or not increasing the minimum stipend (71%). RO responses suggest that anchoring the UKRI minimum stipend level to average graduate or postdoctoral salaries would result in the lowest levels of change amongst ROs, as only 25% and 9% of RO respondents, respectively,

said that they would be somewhat or very likely to change their stipend levels in line with these points.²¹

Table 7-1: Thinking about the following options UKRI could use for setting the minimum stipend in future, how likely, if at all, would your RO be to change stipends for other students in line with this? (RO n = 79)

Option	Estimate of stipend	Not likely at all	Not very likely	Somewhat likely	Very likely
No increase	£18,622	11%	8%	19%	52%
Anchored to price inflation	£19,200	4%	4%	27%	62%
Anchored to NLW	£19,500	5%	16%	24%	48%
Anchored to RLW	£21,000	6%	19%	43%	23%
Anchored to average graduate salary	£25,100	28%	34%	19%	6%
Anchored to postdoc salaries	£26,560 to £31,600	56%	24%	8%	1%

Source: SQW analysis of RO survey data

Note: Rows do not sum to 100%, due to "Don't know" proportions being excluded from this table

- 7.5** Sentiment during interviews broadly aligned with the survey results, in so far as ROs said they would expect the UKRI minimum stipend to increase year-on-year (and therefore the stipend ROs generally pay to non-UKRI students). Institutions would endorse in principle an increase in line with price inflation (at a minimum) or National Living Wage (which institutions feel, morally, would be preferable) and thought they would be able to match this for university-funded stipends. However, for UKRI training grants, were such a raise not accompanied by additional grant funding from UKRI, ROs might need to reduce student numbers in the future to ensure they can continue paying the minimum stipend. In addition, were the stipend to be raised significantly, ROs would still try to match this for university-funded students, but it would have negative implications on student numbers.
- 7.6** Several interviewees and open text RO survey responses indicated that while institutions would generally request that external funders increase contributions to align with the UKRI minimum, where partners do not, ROs may make up any shortfall.
- 7.7** ROs said they would endeavour to meet rises in the stipend as soon as possible, if not immediately. For a larger raise in the minimum stipend, ROs would want a longer lead in time to help them prepare (and, if necessary, find the funds). One large RO said it would need a year if a larger increase were made, to plan accordingly (in part because it is committed to

²¹ It is worth noting that there may be several additional reasons for this. While efforts were made to present options in the survey neutrally, the order of the options may have nonetheless implied to respondents that salaried options involved larger year-on-year increases than other options. Relatedly, the graduate and postdoctoral salaried options *would* involve a significant raise in the minimum stipend level when introduced, even if the year-on-year increases were similar (or lower) than other options such as price inflation or RLW.

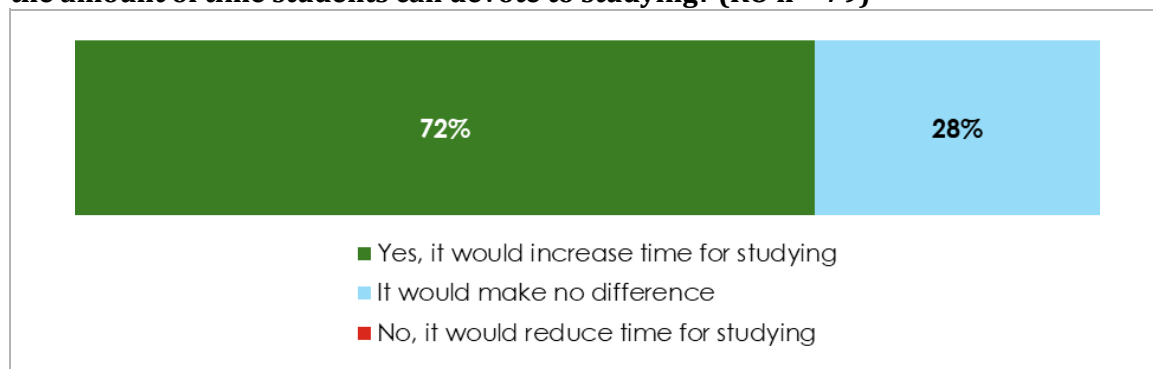
ensuring all its funded doctoral students receive the UKRI minimum). Where relevant, ROs would seek to involve partners and other funders in supporting raises to the minimum stipend.

- 7.8** One RO noted during interview that matching a salary would represent a significant increase in the cost of the stipend. This may – in cases – be warranted, in disciplines that compete with industries that have (traditionally) high/competitive starting salaries for recent graduates (such as engineering, chemistry, computing etc.). In their view, the interviewee said, researchers are effectively doing a job and so a stipend closer to a salary is potentially appropriate. Other interviewees noted that doctoral students are technically still ‘in training’ so matching their stipend to graduate salaries was not thought to be appropriate.

Impact of stipend increases on student experiences

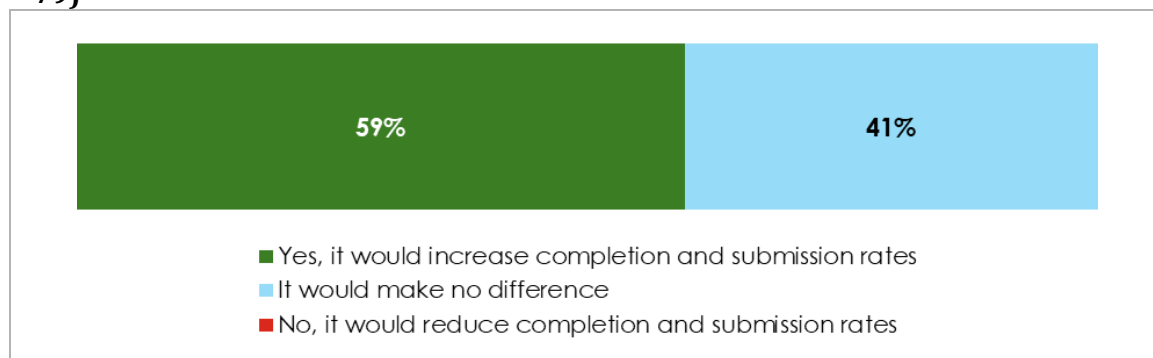
- 7.9** When asked more broadly about the effects of an increase to the UKRI universal minimum stipend, most RO respondents felt that study time (72%) and submission and completion rates (59%) would increase. The remaining respondents said that the increased stipend level would have no influence over these outcomes, and no respondents felt that it would lead to reductions in study time nor completion and submission rates. For context, we note that submission within the funded period is relatively infrequent, estimated at around one-fifth to one-quarter of students.

Figure 7-1: In theory, would increasing the UKRI universal minimum stipend increase the amount of time students can devote to studying? (RO n = 79)



Source: SQW analysis of RO survey data

Figure 7-2: In theory, would increasing the UKRI universal minimum stipend increase students' doctoral completion and submission rates within the funded period? (RO n = 79)



Source: SQW analysis of RO survey data

7.10 In the surveys, respondents were asked about studentship places, applications and recruitment during and after the recent 20% uplift in the UKRI stipend. Most RO survey respondents said that there had been no change or did not know how metrics had changed since 2021, such as the number of available places; the quality of applications; student retention and student completion. However, approximately a quarter of both RO (25%) and TGH (25%) respondents felt that the number of applications to postgraduate study had increased since the uplift was introduced. In addition, 32% of TGH respondents (and 14% of ROs) expressed that recruitment of domestic students had decreased.²² Overall, responses to this question need to be interpreted with caution, as it is possible that responses reflect general trends observed since 2021 (including due to Covid, rising living costs, etc.), rather than trends which can be directly attributable to the 2021 uplift in the UKRI minimum stipend.

Table 7-2: Thinking about your UKRI training grant/s in general, since 2021 and the 20% uplift in the UKRI minimum stipend (and in comparison to the period prior to this), how have the following changed since UKRI increased the stipend? (RO n = 79; TGH n = 142)

Metric	Survey	Increased	No change	Decreased	Don't know
The number of places that were available	RO	8%	59%	18%	15%
The number of applications	RO	25%	42%	8%	25%
	TG	25%	49%	13%	13%
The quality of applications	RO	10%	54%	5%	30%

²² This was: 50% of NERC; 40% of AHRC; 36% of both BBSRC and ESRC; 33% of MRC; 30% of EPSRC and 8% of STFC respondents. However, please note that some of these percentages are based on small sample sizes so the numbers should be treated with caution.

Metric	Survey	Increased	No change	Decreased	Don't know
	TG	6%	70%	11%	13%
Recruitment of domestic students	RO	11%	56%	14%	19%
	TG	6%	51%	32%	11%
Student retention	RO	5%	66%	5%	24%
	TG	5%	73%	5%	17%
Completion rates	RO	6%	58%	5%	30%
	TG	1%	70%	3%	26%

Source: SQW analysis of RO and TGH survey data

- 7.11** Interviewees suggested that the stipend increase post-2021 was not something most students lauded, partly because students felt it was so necessary. Indeed, one academic at a large RO with lots of doctoral students said that to *not* have raised the stipend to this degree could have been “catastrophic” in terms of student retention. In open text RO survey responses, 21 ROs said that they had pre-existing institutional commitments to matching the UKRI minimum stipend for all students, and that this therefore applied instantly to the 2021 hike.
- 7.12** ROs did not think it was possible to quantify the impact of the raises on student recruitment and retention, notwithstanding a more general set of comments that the higher the universal stipend, the less it inadvertently disadvantages some students (see above). We do not know the counterfactual – what would have happened had the UKRI stipend not risen to this extent or ROs not increased university-funded stipends in line with this.
- 7.13** Perhaps paradoxically, ROs said during interviews that while the minimum stipend level is crucially important for students’ wellbeing and access (and for diversity of doctoral intake), other factors may be more important *to students* in their decision to apply for doctoral training. One institution said that patterns of applications, recruitment and retention might only change were the stipend amount to change dramatically.
- 7.14** During interviews, ROs described some of the factors alongside the stipend that affect students’ decisions to apply for and remain in doctoral training. The issues raised were generally rooted in anecdotal evidence rather than quantitative data, but nevertheless there were consistencies across answers that we flag here:
- ROs suggested that, for many doctoral applicants, the stipend value is not their main consideration or reason for accepting a place on a particular doctoral programme. Interviewees said students place a high premium on institutional reputation and might be

willing to work more or live more cheaply to attend a high-ranking institution. To a lesser extent, some students may prioritise their choice of supervisor.

- Interviewees felt that students particularly (but not exclusively) in STEM subjects such as engineering, physical sciences, medicine, computer science, etc., weigh up the value of pursuing a doctorate versus what they would earn in employment. Higher salaries may entice students into industry.
- Interviewees stressed that obtaining a funded doctoral training place or scholarship is an achievement, and this especially true in subjects where fewer funded places are available, such as in the arts, humanities and social sciences. Students may therefore be prepared to accept a lower stipend (even though it is not realistic to live off it) because it is the best option available for the course they want to pursue. In other words, interviewees said, doctoral training is pursued despite the stipend rather than because of (or enabled by) it. One interviewee from a large RO said arts and humanities are in a 'vulnerable' position because obtaining any funding at all is hugely competitive and these students may be forced to accept something they know is too low.
- Sometimes students may prioritise studying in cheaper locations with more affordable rent, to make the stipend go further.

7.15 Interviewees said that, in some cases, students (either from home or international backgrounds) may not be aware of the stipend level to begin with. This may be because their priority is the doctoral study first and foremost, and they simply trust that the stipend will be adequate. In some cases, students may be from sufficiently wealthy backgrounds that they are not reliant on the stipend at all (which raises questions about stipend targeting). However, what is more likely (according to several institutions interviewed) is that prospective students do not necessarily 'shop around' for the best stipend – they may not realise different stipends are available. This may be because other factors are more important to them, such as those described, above. Or it may be that the information about stipends is spread across different websites, and not necessarily easy to access or interpret, or that in certain disciplines there is limited variation and therefore scope to 'shop around'.

8. Management of the stipend

Key findings

- About three-quarters of RO respondents, representing 73% of active UKRI-funded doctoral students in 2023-24, said that students at their organisation receive stipends payments monthly. At the majority of RO survey respondents' institutions, students receive their first stipend payment fairly soon after commencing study.
- When asked about the timing of the announcement of the UKRI stipend level, the largest proportion of respondents said the ideal time for this announcement was approximately a year in advance – i.e. September or October – or at the start of the calendar year – i.e., January. Most RO and TGH respondents felt that the timing of the announcement of the minimum stipend level was either very or fairly important.
- When asked about the flexibility of training grant collaboration agreements, TGH survey respondents provided mixed responses on whether these offered sufficient flexibility to react to changes in the minimum stipend level set by UKRI.

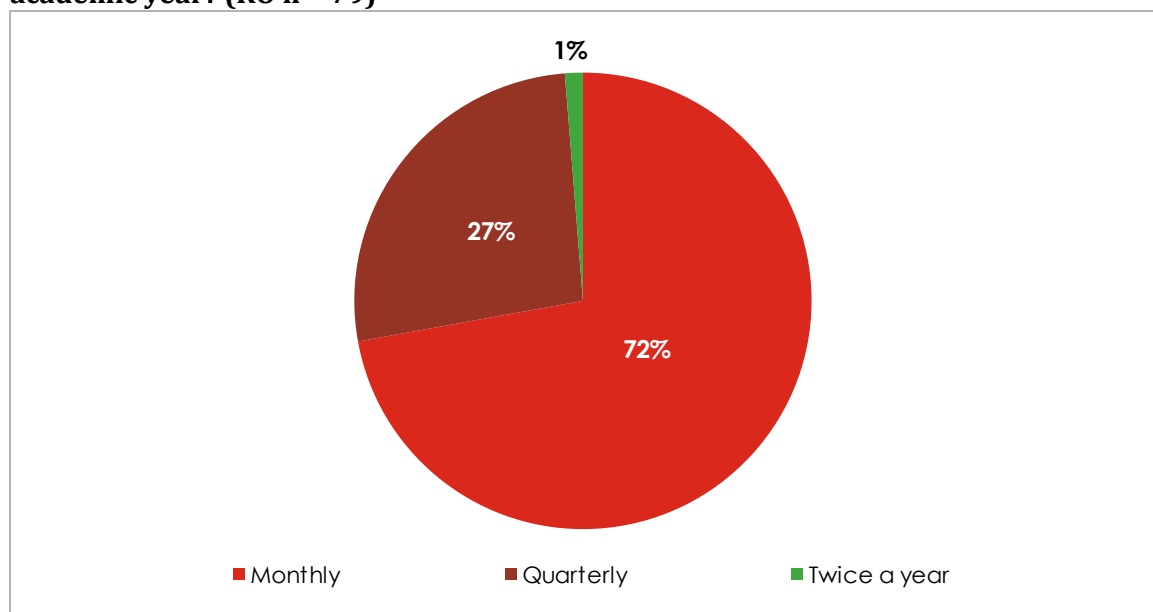
8.1 This section covers the management of the stipend and flexibility, how ROs view their legal commitments to students, and the extent to which students work alongside study.

Management of stipend and flexibility

8.2 About three-quarters of RO respondents (72%), representing 73% of active UKRI-funded doctoral students in 2023-24, said that students at their organisation receive stipends payments monthly.²³ Almost all other respondents said that stipends were paid out quarterly, and only one said that payments are made twice a year.

²³ Data on active UKRI-funded doctoral students were provided by UKRI.

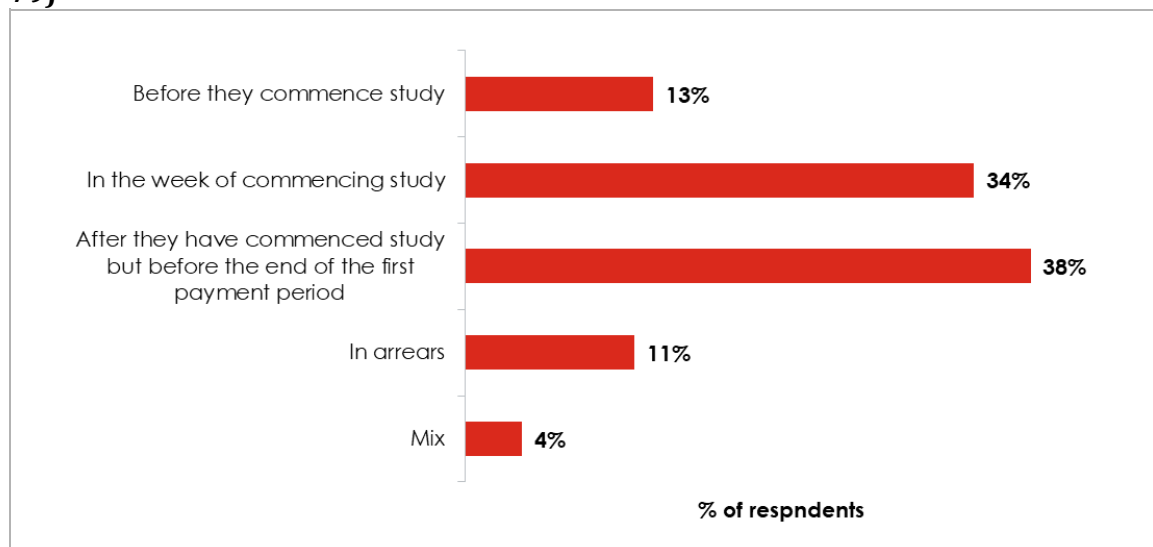
Figure 8-1: When did students receive stipends payments throughout the 2023-24 academic year? (RO n = 79)



Source: SQW analysis of RO survey data

8.3 At the majority of RO survey respondents' institutions, students are paid after commencing study, either in the week of commencing (34%) or after they have commenced study but before the end of the first payment period (38%). At a smaller proportion of organisations, students receive their first payment before they commence study (13%) or in arrears (11%). The respondents who answered 'in arrears' come from ROs which host fewer UKRI-funded doctoral students; together, they host 2% of students in the wider RO respondent sample. In some instances, UKRI- and non-UKRI-funded students have different payment schedules, with UKRI students receiving their payment in advance, and non-UKRI students receiving payment in arrears.

Figure 8-2: Generally, when do students receive their first stipend payment? (RO n = 79)



Source: SQW analysis of RO survey data

8.4 UKRI tends to announce the rate of the stipend in January, with this coming into effect the next academic year. RO and TGH survey respondents' preferences on the earliest, latest and ideal month for UKRI to announce the minimum stipend level for the next academic year are mixed. The largest proportions of respondents said that the ideal time for this announcement was approximately a year in advance – i.e. September or October (RO 30%; TGH 29%) – or at the start of the calendar year – i.e., January (RO 29%; TGH 30%). These months were also the most popular as responses for the earliest time. Approximately half of RO (48%) and TGH (50%) respondents said that the quarter from January to March was the latest time that the minimum stipend level should be announced.

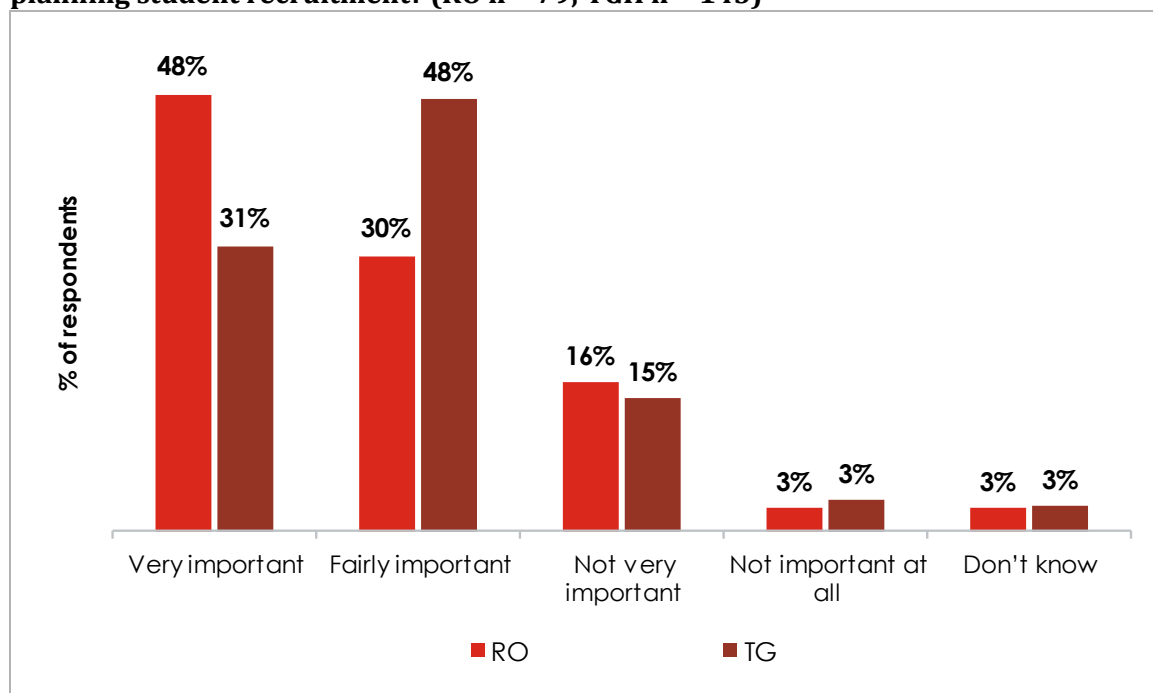
Table 8-1: What is the earliest / latest / ideal month that UKRI should announce the stipend level for the next academic year so as not to disrupt your recruitment processes? (RO n = 79; TGH n = 143)

	Earliest		Latest		Ideal	
	RO	TGH	RO	TGH	RO	TGH
September	15%	14%	5%	8%	11%	12%
October	22%	23%	4%	3%	19%	17%
November	3%	4%	1%	2%	5%	5%
December	5%	5%	6%	6%	5%	6%
January	33%	36%	16%	15%	29%	30%
February	5%	0%	19%	15%	10%	8%
March	4%	2%	13%	20%	3%	6%
April	5%	3%	6%	9%	9%	3%
May	1%	1%	11%	8%	4%	2%
June	1%	2%	8%	6%	1%	3%
July	4%	3%	8%	5%	1%	3%
August	3%	7%	3%	3%	3%	5%

Source: SQW analysis of RO survey data

8.5 Most RO and TGH respondents felt that the timing of the announcement of the minimum stipend level was important. Four-fifths of both RO (78%) and TGH (79%) said it was either very or fairly important. However, more RO respondents said that it was very important (48%) and more TGH respondents said that it was fairly important (48%). Interviewees stressed that this is because a longer lead in period gives ROs greater time to plan. A small proportion of both RO and TGH respondents said that the timing of the announcement was not very important, very few respondents felt that it was not important at all (RO 3%, TGH 3%).

Figure 8-3: How important or unimportant is the timing of the announcement for planning student recruitment? (RO n = 79; TGH n = 143)

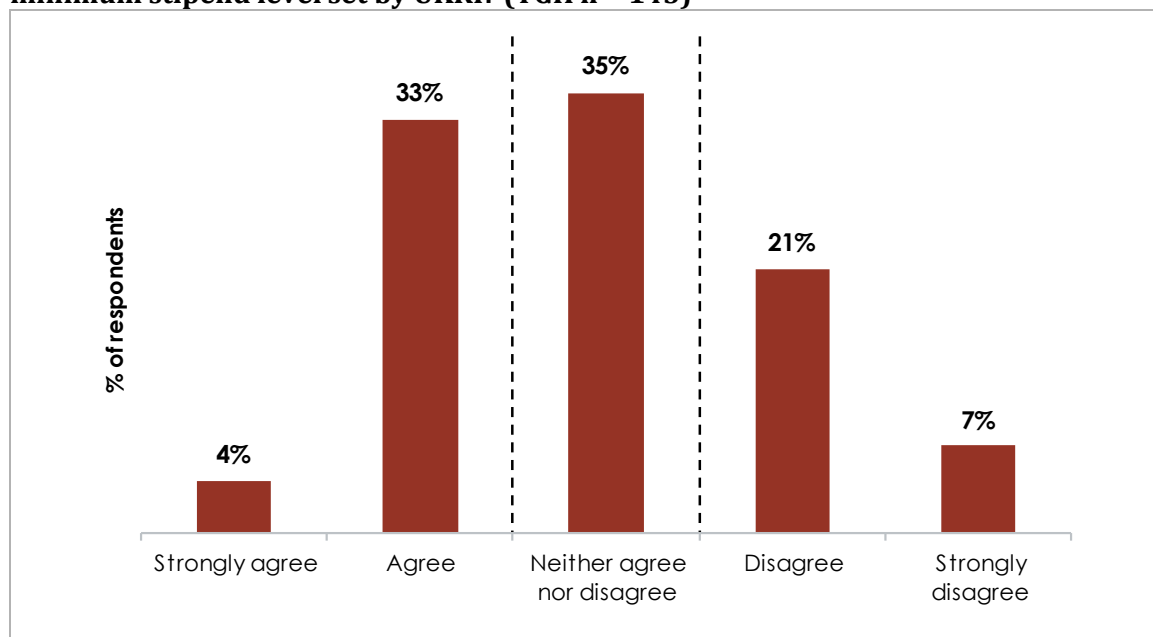


Source: SQW analysis of RO and TGH survey data

8.6 When asked about the flexibility of training grant collaboration agreements with co-funders, TGH survey respondents provided mixed responses, as 37% agreed that these offered sufficient flexibility to react to changes in the UKRI minimum stipend, 28% disagreed that this was the case, and 35% were neutral.²⁴ In open text responses, TGHs who do *not* tend to apply flexibility said this was to ensure fairness across students. Other grant holders said that their desire to apply greater flexibility can sometimes be curtailed by RO budgets, or the increased administrative complexity arising from increasing the stipend for some students. Some TGHs said they feel contracts or collaboration agreements sometimes lack flexibility.

²⁴ There was some variation in responses by awarding RC. Specifically, a higher proportion of grant holders under the following RCs agreed AHRC (80% agreed), EPSRC (41%), BBSRC (36%). A higher proportion of ESRC (45%) of respondents disagreed. Please note that for some RCs, these percentages are based on relatively small sample sizes so the numbers should be treated with caution.

Figure 8-4: To what extent do you agree that your training grant collaboration agreements with co-funders have sufficient flexibility to react to changes in the minimum stipend level set by UKRI? (TGH n = 143)

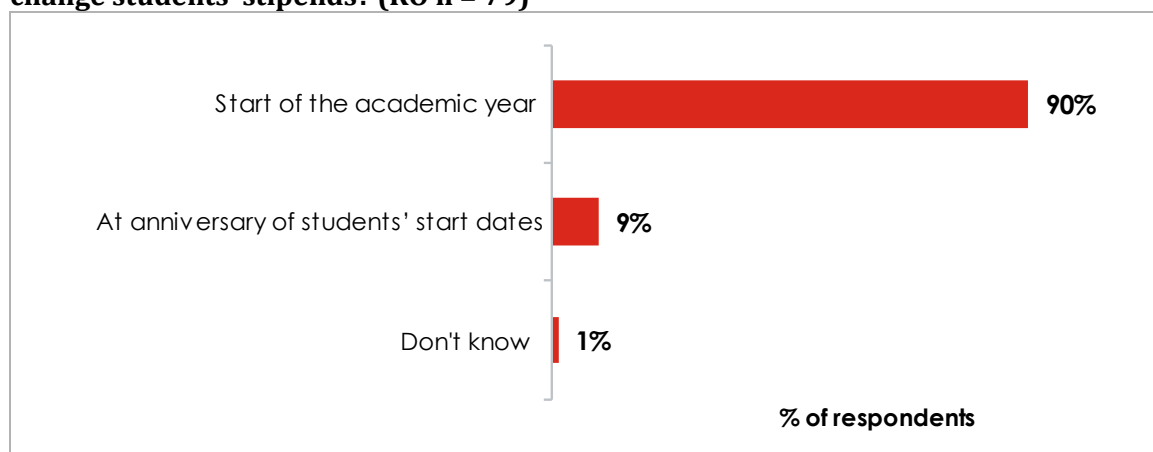


Source: SQW analysis of TGH survey data

Legal commitments

- 8.7** The majority of RO survey respondents (90%, representing 89% of students in the RO respondent sample) said that their RO changes students' stipends at the start of the academic year, with only a small percentage saying that they do so at the anniversary of students' start dates.

Figure 8-5: UKRI requires that its students receive the minimum stipend for the relevant academic year. How do you interpret this rule, that is, when do you normally change students' stipends? (RO n = 79)



Source: SQW analysis of RO survey data

8.8 During interviews, ROs were clear that they make a commitment to students about the stipend level, and that this commitment must be fulfilled – if necessary, through lowering student numbers in future years.

8.9 Most RO respondents' ROs make indicative commitments to students about how the stipend might change in the future (59%). Similarly, of the 14 respondents who provided 'other' responses, eight said that they provide an indicative commitment by communicating to students that they will increase stipends in line with the UKRI minimum. Only about 15% of respondents said that they provide no commitment at all.

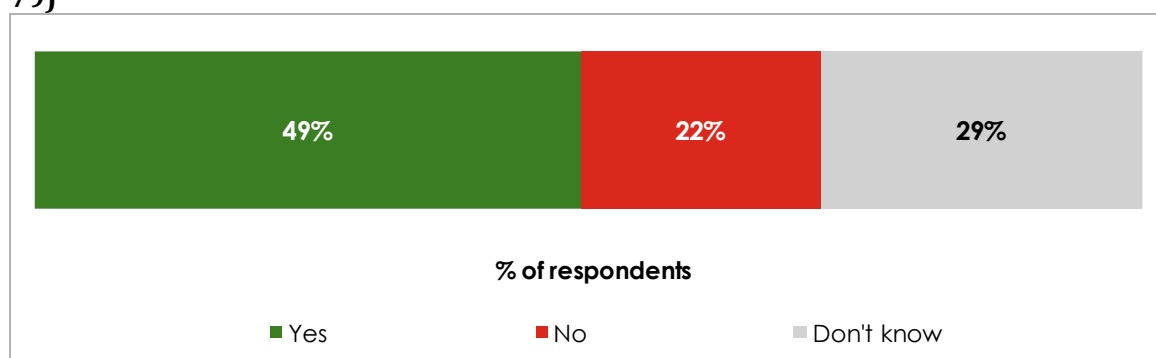
Table 8-2: Do you make commitments to students about how the stipend might change in the future? (RO n = 79)

Closed responses	Count	%
We commit to specific amounts	4	5%
We provide an indicative commitment through describing how the stipend might change	47	59%
We do not provide any commitment	12	15%
Don't know	2	3%
'Other' responses	14	18%

Source: SQW analysis of RO survey data

8.10 Only about half of RO survey respondents viewed commitments to students about how the stipend might change in the future as legally binding on their RO. About one in five respondents did not view it as legally binding, and the rest were not sure.

Figure 8-6: Do you view any such commitments as legally binding on your RO? (RO n = 79)

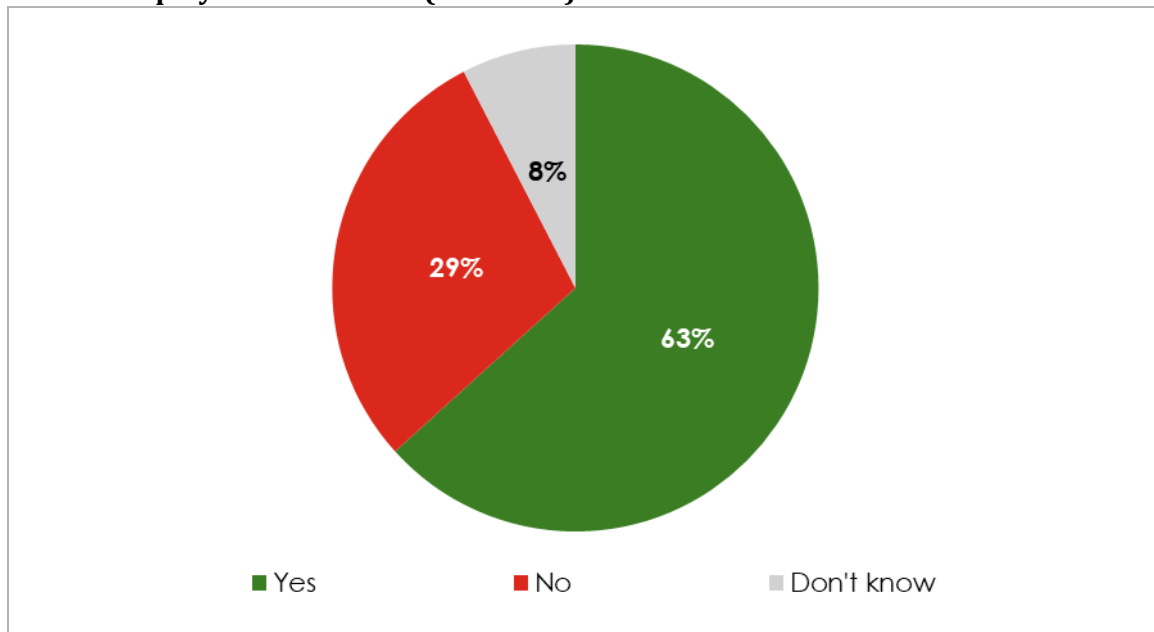


Source: SQW analysis of RO survey data

8.11 About three-fifths of ROs said that they had at least one member of staff studying as part of an employment contract; these ROs had relatively more UKRI-funded doctoral students, hosting approximately 78% of students at the ROs in the respondent sample. Such staff are likely to be receiving a wage commensurate with the relevant pay scales at their organisation, rather than a stipend. RO survey open text responses indicate that this can

include salaried Fellows working towards a PhD as part of their work, or students linked to clinical or medical roles.

Figure 8-7: Does your institution have any doctoral students who are studying as part of their employment contract? (RO n = 79)



Source: SQW analysis of RO survey data

9. Conclusions

- 9.1** As noted in the Introduction, this study was exploratory, to provide evidence to inform decisions about setting the stipend level for UKRI-funded doctoral students. In this context, in this final section of the report, we draw together some of the key themes from the research, that can help to inform discussion and thinking going forward by UKRI. Six points are highlighted.
- 9.2 First, the UKRI minimum stipend level is recognised as fundamentally important and valuable to the sector.** Further to its core role in supporting UKRI-funded students, it plays several roles as a benchmark, guide and way of supporting diversity in doctoral research across the wider landscape. It is demonstrably influencing institutional practice for setting stipend levels for non-UKRI funded students, and without it ROs would need to think carefully about how to determine an appropriate stipend level, with potential unintended consequences and different capacities across the sector to realise this effectively. Removing the minimum stipend level may also lead to damaging consequences around access, consistency and the viability of doctoral research for some students.
- 9.3 Second, positively, the data collected suggests that at least the minimum stipend level is being paid to all UKRI-funded students on the training grants that were surveyed.** There are however a range of legitimate circumstances that mean the amount students actually receive can be less than the minimum over the course of a year. For example, this could include students who are sick and away from study for longer than 13 weeks; students receiving external funding for a period in the year, e.g., earned during an industry placement or internship; or students starting later in the year.
- 9.4 Third, and these points noted, there is clear evidence that in 2023-24 the minimum stipend level was seen as too low by ROs.** There is also evidence that ROs use the UKRI minimum stipend as a guide when setting stipend levels for their non-UKRI funded students. Related, the evidence suggests that systems and mechanisms for tracking UKRI and non-UKRI stipend levels are very varied and at times informal across the sector, with gaps in understanding across and within institutions on for example policies for enhanced stipends and the trade-offs with student numbers. This may be an area that warrants further consideration by UKRI.
- 9.5 Fourth, ROs generally say the minimum stipend level inadvertently disadvantages certain groups, especially those with caring responsibilities, children or a lower socio-economic status.** In order to support diversity, a higher universal minimum stipend was seen as the priority, but accompanying targeted and responsive funding for specific student needs would be welcomed for some. There are no clear answers on how to address this, with various trade-offs for each of these different options, but may be an area that UKRI should consider in

more detail. Further consultation with the sector due to the different views expressed during this research study may be warranted.

- 9.6 Fifth, the research highlighted that the minimum stipend level is one of a wide range of factors influencing decisions taken by both ROs and students, and there is a need to recognise the complexity of this landscape in progressing plans for the stipend going forward.** RO feedback suggest that, in some cases, there may be a lack of knowledge or understanding among students on the stipend level which may suggest a need for better or clearer communication with prospective doctoral students.
- 9.7 Sixth, whilst there is broad agreement at an aggregate level on the inadequacy of the current minimum stipend level to meet living costs, feedback from ROs varied across the country, and there is no single or simple story here.** Whilst the issues related to costs of living in some parts of the country were highlighted, this is not restricted to the Greater South East, and this needs to be recognised fully. There was also limited enthusiasm for a place-based approach to targeted funding from the sector.

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