

Give all PhD scholars a living wage now

The cost-of-living crisis is a fundamental threat for PhD scholars and early-career researchers. They need to be paid properly.

Nature's periodic survey of PhD candidates and postgraduate students is our regular check-in with the next generation of scholarly talent. This year's survey should set loud alarm bells ringing for anyone involved with recruiting and training the next generation of researchers. It demands swift, decisive action from governments and funding agencies to secure the future of science and the broader economic and social benefits that flow from it.

As we report on page 189, some 85% of the self-selected 3,253 respondents from around the world are concerned about surging inflation. Three-quarters of them are PhD candidates. Forty-five per cent of all respondents tell us that inflation will "negatively impact" their decision to complete their projects or courses. "It's hard to feel like I'm valued as a researcher when I'm worrying about paying for car repairs or getting groceries from the food bank," one master's student told us in the survey's free-text section. This is by no means an isolated comment in our survey.

Financial distress isn't a rite of passage or a temporary inconvenience. It could be an existential threat to today's PhD scholars and master's students. If it is, then it will also be an existential threat to research itself. If students don't have the resources to support themselves, they can't put their full efforts into their training and development. And if their stipends aren't keeping pace with rising rents and the cost of groceries and fuel, any gaps will only grow with time – with devastating results for the ability of research to attract the best talent.

Student walkouts

Not that these results come as any surprise. Organizations that represent students and early-career researchers have already been trying to attract attention to their plight. On 11 October, a graduate-student group at Dartmouth College in Hanover, New Hampshire, staged a walkout as part of an ongoing protest calling for a guaranteed living wage and for the kinds of rights and benefits that come with academic employment contracts. The group is also looking to form a union, which it wants Dartmouth to recognize.

In September, Ireland's PhD students organized a protest in Dublin, as part of a campaign with the country's university association for a substantial increase in PhD stipends. They are also calling for paid sick leave and parental leave. In July, UK graduate students similarly organized protests

and launched a campaign demanding more funding support from the country's largest public funder, UK Research and Innovation (UKRI).

At the time, a UKRI representative told *Nature*: "We recognize the rising cost of living is affecting postgraduate researchers. As such, we are actively talking to other bodies across the sector about whether we could provide further support." To its credit, the agency followed through, on 1 October, by increasing the minimum PhD student stipend for 2022–23 to £17,668 (US\$20,400), a boost of more than £2,000 per year. However, even the boosted amount is still below £20,000, which is the amount a full-time worker paid the UK 'real living wage' of £10.90 an hour would earn over a year.

Graduate students' stipends are also well below the cost of living in the United States, a gap that has widened with increasing inflation, according to a survey conducted in May by two graduate students: Michelle Gaynor, a fourth-year PhD student in evolutionary biology at the University of Florida in Gainesville, and Rhett Rautsaw, a fifth-year PhD student in evolutionary biology at Clemson University in South Carolina. Globally, in fact, there are few examples of PhD programmes that pay a living wage.

The resulting financial pressures weigh more heavily on some than on others. They bear down particularly hard on people from low-income households, those who might be first in their families to go to university, and people from under-represented or historically marginalized groups – the very people whom universities are working diligently to recruit and retain.

If these students are unable to complete their research programmes, then research's mission to increase inclusion and diversity will be in jeopardy, too. "If programmes aren't meeting the basic cost of living, who are we selecting for? People who have financial support or external fellowships?" Gaynor told *Nature* in May (see *Nature* 605, 775–777; 2022).

Institutions need to re-evaluate their approach to PhD support. They could, for example, regard PhD candidates as employees subject to local living-wage rules. However, this might not be possible everywhere. Those universities unable to support a living wage should consider waiving any prohibitions on graduate students working during their PhD.

Advocating for change is physically and emotionally taxing for students and scholars on top of their day jobs. It shouldn't have to be like this. It shouldn't take organized protests and letter-writing campaigns to spur action. Stipends must pay a living wage, and it must be recognized that inflation erodes the value of salaries.

Greater funding is not always the answer to problems in research. But this isn't just a case of dollars, euros, pounds, or yuan. It's a matter of priorities. Universities, funding agencies and governments know that today's PhD candidates and master's students will be tomorrow's principal investigators and team leaders. They will be in academia, in industry, in the public sector and in non-governmental organizations. Research needs researchers to stay on to complete their studies – and that requires them to be able to pay their way.

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