

Policy Briefing – PGRs to be considered employees at UCL

October 2022

Audience: Education Zone

What is the current situation at UCL related to this proposal?

UCL has 24,357 postgraduate students, more than any other UK University. This represents 50.87% of all students at UCL, a very high proportion compared to other UK Universities¹. Of these, 6193 are postgraduate research students and 18,164 are postgraduate taught students.

PGRs are postgraduate research students completing their PhDs. Many postgraduate research students at UCL also undertake additional teaching roles, such as Postgraduate Teaching Assistants, during their time at the university.

There are three main types of employment status in the UK: worker, employee and self-employed. Each employment status carries with it differing employment rights and statutory responsibilities for employers. The policy proposes that the Union should lobby for UCL to consider PGRs employees. The policy proposal does not make clear whether it is referring to the teaching activities of PGRs or to their research activity, or both. Therefore, this briefing considers the implications and context of both.

PGRs are classified as 'workers' for their teaching activities. Workers, including those on zero-hour contracts, are entitled to a number of rights including the national minimum wage, the statutory minimum level of paid holiday and rest breaks and protection against unlawful discrimination. Workers may also be eligible for statutory sick pay, maternity and paternity pay and shared parental pay, depending on how much they earn.

When carrying out academic research for their PhD, PGRs are classified as 'students' rather than 'workers' or 'employees'. The majority of PGRs receive a stipend which is designed to cover fees and living costs, although some are self-funded. Stipends are usually non-taxable and do not need to be paid back². PGRs can receive additional income by undertaking teaching work within UCL.

What would change if the policy was successful?

What would change for PGRs?

If PGRs were classed as employees as opposed to workers for their teaching activities, they would be entitled to additional employment rights. Employees have additional employment rights compared to workers, including being protected against unfair dismissal, receiving statutory redundancy pay and being entitled to minimum notice periods if their employment will be ending. For example, workers are entitled to statutory sick pay of £99.35 per week for up to 28 weeks whereas employees at UCL receive full pay for up to 26 weeks and

¹ [Student statistics | Student and Registry Services - UCL – University College London](#)

² <https://www.ukri.org/what-we-offer/developing-people-and-skills/find-studentships-and-doctoral-training/get-a-studentship-to-fund-your-doctorate/#:~:text=The%20stipend%20is%20usually%20non,advert%20ofrom%20the%20research%20organisation.>

half pay for up to another 26 weeks³.

If PGRs were to be recognised as ‘staff’ rather than ‘students’ for their research activities they would no longer receive stipend funding and instead would be paid a wage or salary. The UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) minimum stipend, which UCL match for PGRs receiving a stipend directly from the University, is currently £17,668 full time equivalent. If PGRs were to receive the 2022 London living wage they would receive an annual salary of £23,302.50⁴.

Currently, PGRs do not usually pay tax on their stipend. If they instead received a salary as an employee for their research activities, they would pay tax. Additionally, employee status could reduce the flexibility available for PGRs and PGAs. As an employee you are often contracted to carry out a certain amount of work, whereas currently PGAs can decide when and how much they work depending on other commitments.

Furthermore, PGRs would no longer be members of Students’ Union UCL and so would no longer have access to the Unions student support services. They would also no longer be able to access UCL’s student hardship funds and other university student support services. There is also the potential for there to be implications for international students as the immigration requirements for employees are not the same as those for students.

What would change for UCL?

In some countries PGRs are already recognised as employees rather than students or workers, however this is usually government funded as opposed to being implemented by an individual university. If UCL were to recognise PGRs as employees for either their teaching or research activities in the absence of government funding, then this would mean increased costs for UCL. As well as wages UCL would need to pay for the increased overheads including pension contributions, payroll costs, national insurance, infrastructure, employee support and contract costs. UCL would either need to source additional income or reallocate existing funding from other sources.

What is the relevant national / international context to this situation?

The UK Government’s Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Department (BEIS) are conducting a review of PGR working conditions and have pledged to develop a ‘New Deal’ for PGRs⁵. The review recognises that ‘post-graduate research students face significant challenges, while the precarity of academic post-doctoral roles creates barriers to those needing greater financial security’. The BEIS review of PGR working conditions, which is being developed in consultation with UKRI, will review whether PGRs should be classified as students or staff for their research activities.

University and College Union (UCU) started a national campaign in 2020 calling for PGRs to be classified as employees for their research work. They argue that ‘the current model for postgraduate research does not meet the needs of different stakeholders in a way that is either fair or efficient’. They argue that recognising PGRs as employees for their research activities would ensure greater financial security for these students. Focus groups run by UCU found that impacts on PhD students health and wellbeing were widespread and

³ <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/human-resources/guidance-ucl-contracts-employment#5>

⁴ Assuming a 37.5 hour working week. [Real Living Wage increases to £10.90 in UK and £11.95 in London as the cost-of-living rises | Living Wage Foundation](#)

⁵ <https://www.ukri.org/what-we-offer/developing-people-and-skills/new-deal-for-postgraduate-research/#:~:text=New%20deal%20for%20PGR&text=to%20ensure%20doctoral%20training%20is,and%20innovation%20careers%20and%20training.>

‘inextricably linked to issues of work precarity, low pay and a lack of rights for people in roles such as graduate teaching assistants’. The same survey found that 86.2% of respondents considered extending staff status to all PGRs as important⁶.

Are there any legal implications to this policy proposal?

No.

Does this relate to any existing SU policy?

No.

Are there any financial, resource or stakeholder / public relations issues with this policy proposal?

No.

Are there any sustainability implications to this item for discussion?

No.

Are there any equity and inclusion implications to this item for discussion?

UCU and some academic staff working on this issue have argued that the precarious financial situation for PGRs disproportionately impacts PGRs from marginalised backgrounds⁷.

A UCU survey found that:

- Migrant PGRs are more likely to be unfunded/self-funded than non-migrant PGRs (20.1% compared to 10.7%) and 50% said their needs were either not met to some degree or not met at all⁸.
- PGRs from the following groups are less likely to feel their needs are met and are in more precarious financial situations:
 - Disabled, chronically ill and/or neurodivergent PGRs
 - PGRs with parental or other caring responsibilities
 - Working class or “first generation” PGRs
 - Black PGRs and other underrepresented minority ethnic PGRs

UCU and other bodies have argued that if PGRs were to be recognised as staff for their research activities they would be less reliant on external funding, and that this would have a positive impact on the marginalised groups mentioned above.

What would the next steps be if the proposal passed?

The SU would lobby UCL to recognise PGRs as employees for their research and/or teaching activities, depending on how this policy proposal is to be interpreted. The SU could also support national efforts to push BEIS to recognise PGRs as staff not students.

⁶ [UCU_-_Getting_a_better_deal_for_PGRS_-_summary__Jun_22.pdf](#) p27

⁷ E.g [The Broken Pipeline Report - Sept 2019 \(120919\).pdf \(ucl.ac.uk\)](#)

⁸ [UCU_-_Getting_a_better_deal_for_PGRS__Jun_22.pdf](#) p77