Updating the London Weighting for Postgraduate Research Students

Executive Summary

This proposal outlines the reality of the financial precarity PhD students in London face and urgently calls on UKRI to fund an increase to the London weighting on PhD stipends. This is based on findings from research conducted across London Students' Unions with over 1,200 participants.

This research found that 90.8% of students struggle to cover their additional living expenses, 78.0% have had their mental health affected by their finances and 89.8% are dissatisfied with their funder's response to the cost-of-living crisis. Extensive free text comments showed high numbers of students with constant financial anxiety, no emergency funds, an inability to participate in full university life due to finances, and a concern that PhDs would become available only to the most privileged.

With the current London weighting 10% behind inflation levels, we recommend that UKRI:

- Immediately fund an increase to the London weighting based on the findings reported in this proposal.
- Establish a mechanism for the weighting to increase in line with inflation.
- Work with relevant stakeholders, including universities and student representatives, to gather data on the financial circumstances of PhD students in London to inform future adjustments.

Introduction

This proposal addresses the urgent need for UKRI to increase the London weighting to stipends for postgraduate research students to reflect the true, current cost of living in London. The London weighting set by UK Research and Innovation (UKRI), which has remained unchanged for over 20 years, is insufficient to meet the high cost of living in London and negatively impacts the financial well-being of PhD students.

As Russell Group institutions in London, we collectively conducted a survey on the financial situations of PhD students at our institutions. The results of this demonstrate the critical need for change to the London weighting on stipends.

Problem Statement

UKRI sets the minimum standard for all the PhD stipends across the UK and directly supports approximately 20% of UK-based postgraduate researchers. UKRI's current minimum stipend is £20,780 per annum across the UK, and £22,780 per annum for London[i]. The London weighting, which accounts for the difference in the cost of living, has remained unchanged from £2,000 per annum since at least 2006 [ii], and does not reflect the increased cost of living faced by PhD candidates and the economic reality of living in London.

Based on available data[ii-iv], UKRI minimum stipend levels are compared with adjusted stipends according to the Consumer Prices Index including owner-occupiers' housing costs (CPIH), for London and the rest of the UK, in *Figure 1*.

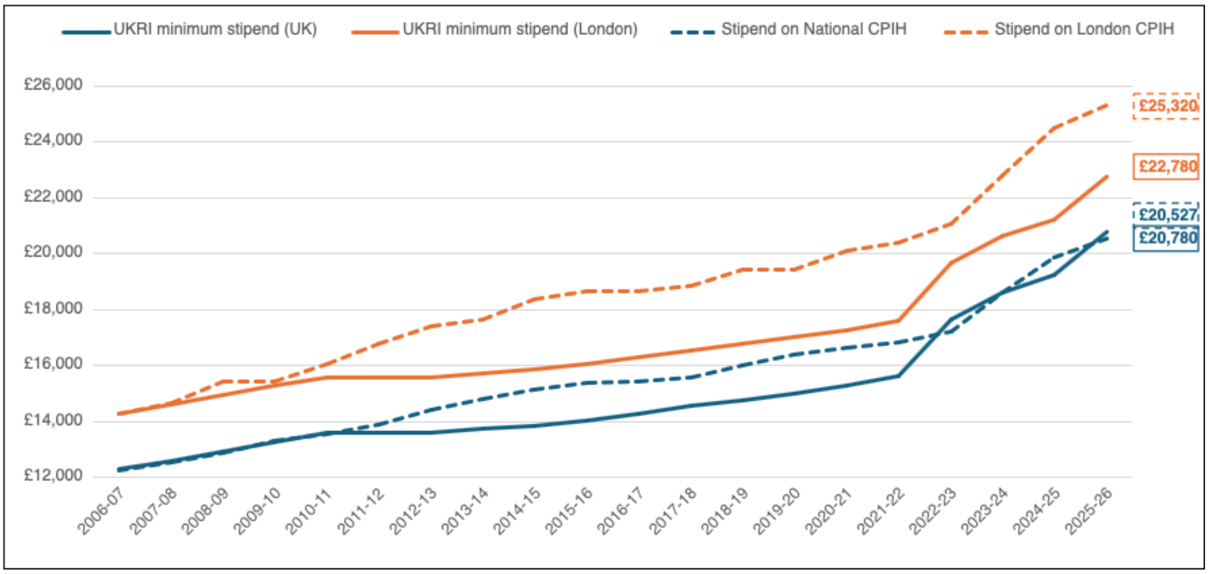

Figure 1. *The UKRI minimum stipend for UK and UKRI minimum stipend for London compared to national CPIH-adjusted minimum stipend for UK, and London CPIH-adjusted minimum stipend for years 2006 onwards. Showing the gap between rate of inflation and minimum stipend for London.*

As seen, the minimum UK stipend adjusted for the 2025-26 term measures +1.2% more than the CPIH-adjusted stipend of £20,527, resulting in an awarded value of £20,780. In contrast, when London is considered, the set stipend of £22,780 for the 2025-26 term is 10% less than the CPIH-adjusted stipend of £25,320. The comparison between CPIH-adjusted values for the minimal national and London stipends suggests that the London weighting would have to be £4,540 per annum to account for the current cost of living.

Further data solidifies the extraordinary cost of living in London, with housing being the primary factor. Compared to the other regions[v], average rent in London (£1,625 per month) is significantly higher than the national average (£850 per month). The second most expensive region, south-east England, has an average accommodation cost of £1,050 per month, revealing an average housing cost difference of £6,900 per annum compared to London.

Further gaps in funding are illustrated by examining the undergraduate maintenance loan. This similarly has an additional weighting for students in London, currently at £3,218 – 61% higher than the London weighting on the minimum stipend of £2,000. This inconsistency lacks justification and further widens the gap in support for PhD students compared to their UG counterparts. Funders such as the British Heart Foundation[vi] and the Wellcome Trust[vii] are already offering stipends with London weightings above £2,000, this disparity creates an unfair system amongst PhD students.

The PhD student community in London has been severely and disproportionately affected by this disparity between the stipend levels and the economic reality in London.

Survey

To examine the impact of this disparity, we conducted a survey (see **appendix 1**) across London Russell Group universities open to all our PhD students. This survey was open from April to May 2025. 1,203 PhD students completed the survey from across Imperial College London, King's College London and University College London. Of these students, 618 were directly funded by UKRI.

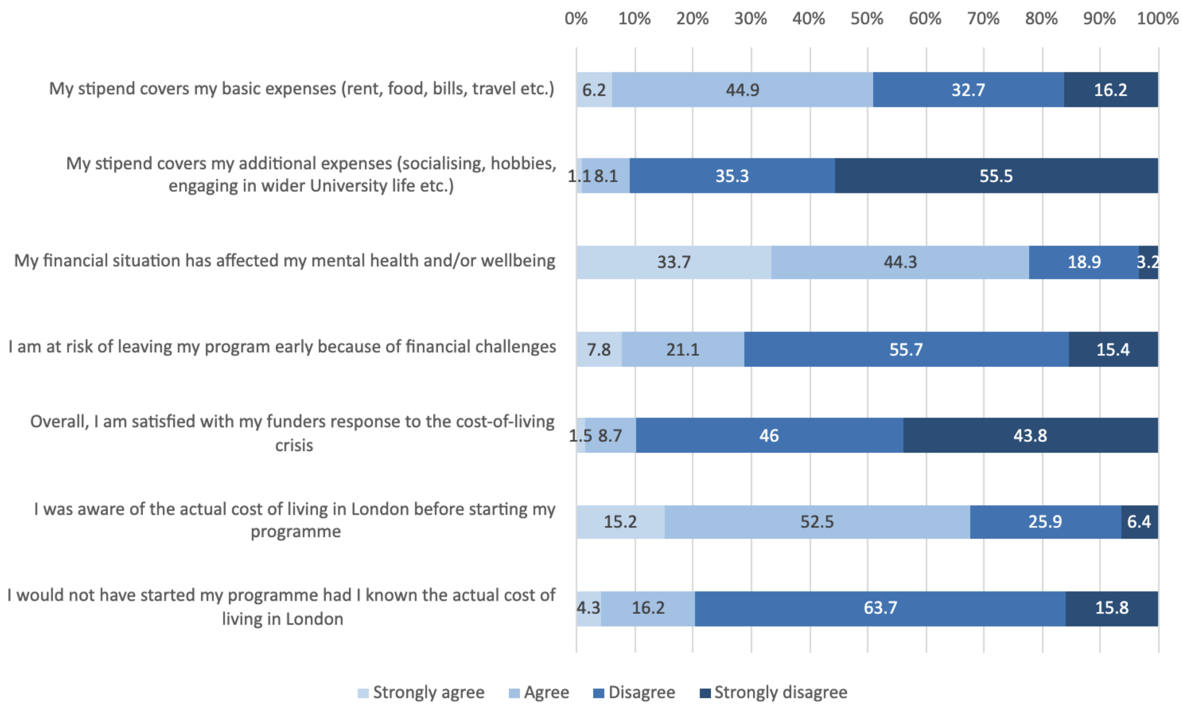

Figure 2. Results from the quantitative questions asked in the survey (Answered Agree/Disagree)

The findings in **Figure 2** illustrate the concerning financial reality of PhD students in London and demonstrate the urgent need for change**.** A close 50/50 split of students feel their stipend covers their basic expenses and overwhelmingly, 90.8% of students struggle to cover their additional expenses, such as engaging in wider university life. A concerning 78.0% of students have had their mental health or wellbeing impacted by their finances and 89.8% are dissatisfied with their funder's response to the cost-of-living crisis.

Considering whether students are at risk of leaving their program early, 71.1.% disagreed. Looking at the previous responses, this suggests that many students would rather continue to be unable to cover their basic and additional living expenses than leave their PhD. Getting to a PhD requires immense hard work, dedication and passion - clearly students do not want to leave their PhDs, but many are financially struggling to allow them to continue their PhD.

Illustrating a desperation to complete their PhD rather than evidence of a sufficient stiped. 28.9% agreed/strongly agreed they were at risk of leaving their program early due to financial challenges, this represents roughly 347 students.

Beyond the Numbers: The Reality of Financial Precarity

Respondents were also given the opportunity to leave free text comments, and 1,165 comments were provided. These comments illustrate the reality of most students living month to month, with no ability to save. The majority of comments mentioned the difficulties of having no emergency fund, with some being forced to take out credit cards to cover dental work for example.

"When I needed dental treatment I was not able comfortably pay for it, as the stipend did not allow me to build up an emergency fund after covering basic expenses. I ended up having to opt for a cheaper, more temporary option and spread the cost across multiple credit cards."

Comments also strongly emphasised the lack of ability to engage in life outside of their research. Many do not have funds to socialise or take part in university life and feel very distant from their peers.

"I actually put off doing a PhD to work and save up money because I wasn't sure that I could afford to do it without that, as the stipend (even with London weighting) did not look enough to survive on in the city. I budget extremely careful and scrape by every money, using my savings to pay for rent. At the end of last month (March 2025), I was down to 5p before the stipend was paid out. I find myself thinking about money all the time, and there are so many things I turn down doing, as I know I can't afford them."

Almost all comments to some extent expressed finances were a constant source of worry, causing significant levels of stress and anxiety.

"I am worried every day, I go to sleep worried, I wake up worried"

"Rent is ridiculously high but moving further out is not an option because that would increase travel costs. I knew these things would be an issue before, but I did not grasp the full scope of the impact. I would still go through with the program all over again because I love my subject and my lab group but it is objectively a bad life choice to do a PhD in London, at least if there is no financial support available in addition to the usual ~22k. Sometimes it feels like I can't breathe."

We know work is being done nationally and institutionally to improve research culture, diversify the research pipeline, create better work-life balance for PhD students and reduce the loneliness that PhD students face. This work will not be possible if students do not have the basic funds to live comfortably and engage in the full PhD experience.

"I believe that unless something changes, undertaking a PhD in London will become the preserve of independently wealthy individuals or those who are as lucky as I am to have a

working partner. This will only serve to widen the existing inequities in access to doctoral education experienced by working class and 'non-traditional' students"

These comments demonstrate the reality for many PhD students who are forced to turn to inadequate survival strategies, severe financial instability and conditions that do not support world-class research as they should.

Proposed Solution

While 2025 saw an 8% increase in the national UKRI stipend [viii] and we appreciate UKRI's investment into stipends in recent years, alongside the tight fiscal environment of the sector, the increases do not address the significant gap in support for students in London and a weighting which has not been reviewed since before 2006. Coupled with the rising cost of living in London and the increased financial pressures on PhD students studying in London, it is proposed that the London weighting applied to the stipends of UKRI postgraduate research students based in London sees a step increase, funded by UKRI, that reflects the true cost of living in London. In addition, the weighting should be indexed to an appropriate measure of inflation to maintain its real value over time. This would also be in alignment with the recommendations that funding bodies should look deeper into the experiences of London students, as reported in the SQW's research [ix] commissioned by UKRI in 2024.

Through working in close collaboration with universities across London to create this proposal, we understand it would be not practicable for universities to increase their PhD stipend London weighting internally. It would dramatically reduce the number of PhD studentships available, in direct opposition to commitments made in the Industrial Strategy to meet the demand of STEM skills through a skills pipeline and R&D funding, and create a fragmented, inequitable system that leaves London positions even more competitive for disadvantaged candidates. As UKRI sets the standard across PhD funders, we urge UKRI to fund this increase across all London universities.

It is recommended that UKRI:

- Immediately fund an increase to the London weighting based on the findings reported in this proposal.
- Establish a mechanism for the weighting to increase in line with inflation.
- Work with relevant stakeholders, including universities and student representatives, to gather data on the financial circumstances of PhD students in London to inform future adjustments.

Call to Action

We, the undersigned, urge UKRI to consider and adopt these recommendations to ensure that postgraduate research students in London are adequately supported, and that the city can continue to attract and retain diverse and top research talent.

We would also welcome the opportunity to discuss the issues raised in this report with UKRI directly.

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Appendix 1 – survey analysis

PhD stipends survey results

1,203 responses to our survey were received from across the Russell Group London-based universities. 708 from Imperial, 428 from King's College London, 88 from University College London and 11 from Queen Mary University London (noting some students are based at more than one institution).

The vast majority (1,181) of these students were full-time.

618 students were funded by UKRI. 438 were funded by their university, 89 by a UK charity and the others a combination of self-funded, industry partners and non-UK research charities etc. Acknowledging that UKRI sets the standard for stipend rates at other funders, we have amalgamated most of the results to include responses from students funded through a variety of sources.

Quantitative data analysis

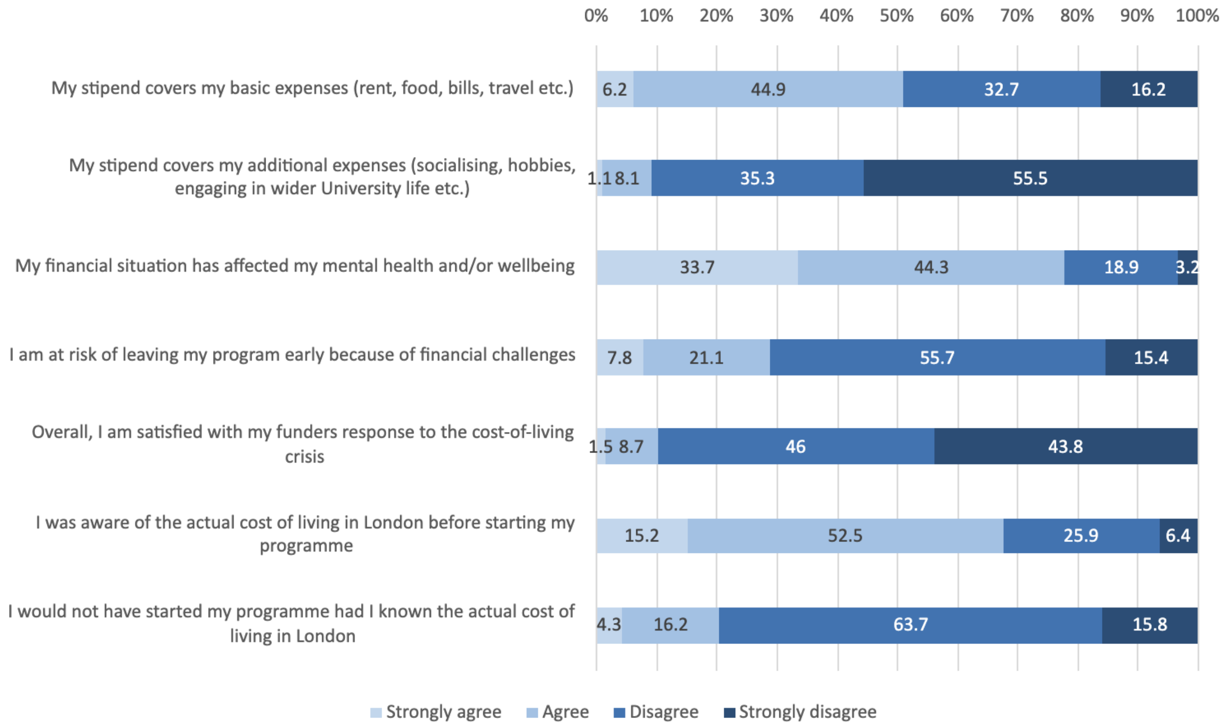
The majority of students (790) live in private accommodation with housemates, with 130 living alone in private accommodation and 105 living in student accommodation.

When students were asked if they have any additional forms of income on top of their stipend, 736 are undertaking teaching alongside their research. Other common sources of income included 424 using their savings, 361 doing other part-time work, 390 receiving contributions from their family/friends/guardians. 135 students also relied on their partner's salary and a concerning 71 students are using bank loans, credit cards or high interest loans to help fund their expenses.

Most respondents are receiving some form(s) of additional income with only 135 receiving no additional income.

Graph 1 examines seven agree/disagree questions students were asked.

Graph 1



When asked whether stipends cover basic expenses, there is almost a 50/50 split between those who agree and those who disagree. This is a concerning number with 16.2% strongly disagreeing - at a most basic level, the stipend is failing to support half of the respondents in London.

The majority of respondents did not feel their stipend covers their additional expenses. 90.8% disagreed with 55.5% strongly disagreeing. This strongly suggests the stipend is significantly insufficient in allowing PhD students to fully participate in university life and life outside of their research. This is particularly concerning in light of ongoing work nationally around research culture, improving the loneliness PhD students can face and promoting a better work-life balance. These efforts will all be hindered if students cannot afford to engage in life outside of their research.

Of further concern, 78% agreed to some extent that their financial situation had affected their mental health and/or wellbeing, with 33.7% strongly agreeing.

Considering whether students are at risk of leaving their program early, 71.1.% disagreed. Looking at the previous responses, this suggests that many students would rather continue to be unable to cover their basic and additional living expenses than leave their PhD. Getting to a PhD requires immense hard work, dedication and passion - clearly students do not want to leave their PhDs, but many seem to be financially struggling to allow them to continue their PhD. 28.9% agreed/strongly agreed they were at risk of leaving their program early due to financial challenges, this represents roughly 347 students.

Looking at whether students were satisfied with their funder's response to the cost-of-living crisis, 89.8% disagreed overall (55.7% strongly). Isolating only those funded by UKRI, 91.9% disagreed to some extent, with 46.2% strongly disagreeing. While overall, responses to the cost-of-living crisis are also the responsibility of the university, charities, non-UK organisations etc., UKRI's response is clearly not seen to be sufficient for PhD students in London.

Assessing students' knowledge of the cost of living in London before they started their programme, the majority were already aware (67.7%). 32.3% disagreed to some extent suggesting more transparency on living and completing a PhD in London is needed. When asked whether they would have not started the programme if they had been aware of the full costs, 79.5% disagreed to some extent but 20.5% (roughly 246 students) agreed/strongly agreed that they would not have started their programme. More financial support is needed to allow all students from any financial background and to be able to complete a PhD in London. These results are particularly concerning considering ongoing work in the sector to diversify research pipelines, which will not be possible if students from all backgrounds are not financially supported to do a PhD.

Qualitative analysis

We asked students if they had had financial worries during their PhD and if so, how had it impacted them, 706 students chose to leave a free text comment.

Overwhelmingly, students expressed facing significant financial difficulties. Common themes which emerged across the comments included having to live month to month with no ability to save. This impacted both students' ability to plan for the future (e.g. family planning, getting married, house deposits etc.) and also their ability to cover emergencies with a large number of comments referring to having no money in the case of an emergency. Some students expressed eating less or eating less healthy food to cut back on expenses, others don't socialise or take part in wider university life and feel very distant from their peers.

"I have often worried that I will graduate when I am 28 with no savings or anything to my name because I live paycheck to paycheck"

"When I needed dental treatment I was not able comfortably pay for it, as the stipend did not allow me to build up an emergency fund after covering basic expenses. I ended up having to opt for a cheaper, more temporary option and spread the cost across multiple credit cards."

"I actually put off doing a PhD to work and save up money because I wasn't sure that I could afford to do it without that, as the stipend (even with London weighting) did not look enough to survive on in the city. I budget extremely careful and scrape by every money, using my savings to pay for rent. At the end of last month (March 2025), I was down to 5p before the stipend

was paid out. I find myself thinking about money all the time, and there are so many things I turn down doing, as I know I can't afford them."

Concerning London, the majority of students mentioned increasing rent costs as a huge burden on their finances. Several students stated rent taking between 50-70% of their stipend and that the likelihood of rent continuing to increase was a constant stress for many. Others have chosen to live outside of London to avoid the rent costs. This leaves students with extremely long commutes and increased travel costs that results in fewer days on campus.

"Rent is ridiculously high but moving further out is not an option because that would increase travel costs. I knew these things would be an issue before, but I did not grasp the full scope of the impact. I would still go through with the program all over again because I love my subject and my lab group but it is objectively a bad life choice to do a PhD in London, at least if there is no financial support available in addition to the usual ~22k. Sometimes it feels like I can't breathe."

"I have had days where I have to choose between travelling in to do my PhD work or eating"

"I had rented an apartment starting during Covid and got a good price, however my rent increased by 80% over 2 years so I had to move out. I couldn't afford anywhere else so I had to move home with my family. Even then. I couldn't afford the season ticket from out of London into London for peak times so had to travel off peak and borrow money to afford the cost. I am autistic and find it really difficult to commute such a long way everyday, and also find it very difficult to live with other people in shares. The financial strain has impacted my family now and I feel very guilty and the long commutes are leading to burn out where I feel I need to recover for a day every time I go to uni. It is not sustainable and very worrying."

Almost all comments expressed finances were a constant worry causing significant levels of stress and anxiety. Some students are relying on overdrafts and credit cards to cover expenses. Others rely heavily on family/partners. They expressed feeling a lack of independence and security in that if anything were to cause a breakdown in these relationships, they would not be able to cover their expenses.

"I am worried every day, I go to sleep worried, I wake up worried"

"I believe the London weighting should be increased. Its not just about hardship; its about basic rights and fairness. The current amount is far too low. It has remained the same or seen only minimal increase for over 30 years or so. This really needs attention."

Nearing the end of the PhD was also a particular concern. Students felt the unfunded write-up period was unacceptable and caused significant stress. Many explained they would have to find a job as soon as their PhD was finished as they had no savings, this would mean job searching while writing up their PhD and students worried about the impact of this. They also outlined the impact of teaching work reducing over summer and that this placed huge financial strain on those who rely on it. Almost all comments expressed having to work alongside their PhD to cover their expenses, often an unreasonable amount affecting their research but with no choice.

"Yes, it makes me feel restless and incapable of doing my PhD work. This is especially true during term/summer break when there are no teaching duties. I am trying to get a part-time job to help with this, but my supervisor was already unhappy with me pursuing teaching duties, so I will probably not let them know about this."

When asked if there was anything else they wanted to add, 459 students left a final comment.

Many of these comments reemphasised the points made above and called for more financial support to allow students to complete a PhD. Others described supervisors being unsupportive of part-time work. Students expressed feelings of exploitation and precarity due to a lack of pension, parental leave, overtime, set working hours, Union representation etc. Some also referred to the research pipeline and that without increased financial support, PhDs will only be possible for those most privileged. Comments also emphasised soaring costs in London that show no sign of slowing and additional costs for international students. Finally, many called for PhDs to be made full-time employees and paid a full wage to reduce these financial pressures and recognise their contributions and value to research.

"I believe that unless something changes, undertaking a PhD in London will become the preserve of independently wealthy individuals or those who are as lucky as I am to have a working partner. This will only serve to widen the existing inequities in access to doctoral education experienced by working class and 'non-traditional' students"