

IOP Institute of Physics

Institute of Physics submission to the Department for Education consultation on postgraduate doctoral loans

Response ID ANON-83UV-DXWW-Z

Submitted to **Postgraduate doctoral loans**

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Introduction

1 Welcome - would you like to provide your e-mail address?

E-mail: :

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Respondent information

2 Are you answering on behalf of an organisation, or as an individual?

Please select::

On behalf of an organisation (please state name below)

If you are replying on behalf of an organisation, please state it's name below::

The Institute of Physics

3 If you are answering on behalf of an organisation which of the following stakeholder groups do you/your organisation belong to?

Learned societies

If selected 'Other', please specify: :

4 If you are answering as an individual, are you a current or a prospective student?

Please select: :

5 What is the highest education qualification you have obtained?

Please select::

Other

Individual eligibility

6 Restricting the availability of the loan to those aged 59 and under is intended to tackle the potential problem of low value for money, associated with lending large amounts of public money to cohorts of students who are unlikely to enter repayment. Do you think that an age eligibility restriction is a proportionate way of mitigating this risk?

No

Please explain your answer and give evidence where possible::

This kind of loan could incentivise study by those who are unlikely to undertake further employment and research, but this in itself should not be a concern - an educated population is valuable to society and the economy. However, without effective safeguards there are risks to research excellence in encouraging students to fund PhD study purely via access to loan finance. Particularly within science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) subjects, but in general across all postgraduate research, research funding should be driven, first and foremost, by research excellence – the importance of the project and quality of the student. For these reasons a PhD led first and foremost by the ability to pay has the potential to lack grounding in research excellence or be out of sync with the research environment. There is thus a risk that the UK's reputation for research excellence is undermined if important safeguards are not introduced to review and assess those who are applying for a PhD using this funding method. There is currently insufficient funding for the level of excellent research by high-quality researchers that can be pursued. In addition, the benefits of training for PhD students should be emphasised; particularly the importance of having sufficient support and capacity available within the research environment. The optimal solution would be to increase the funding available for PhD students in the form of grants. It is welcome that this is one of the elements of the announcement in the Autumn Statement of increased funding for R&D. However, if additional postgraduate students are to be funded by loan funding, all applications should be reviewed in the same way as any other PhD application so that the pursuit of research excellence is paramount.

7 The government is aware that some doctoral students may undertake study purely for personal benefit, with no particular intention to undertake further employment or research. A £25,000 income contingent loan may particularly incentivise this in older cohorts, as they are less likely to enter repayment. Whilst we recognise the value of doctoral study in and of itself, there is a risk that funding students who have no intention to undertake further employment or research would offer low value for money to the taxpayer. In your view is this loan likely to incentivise this kind of study?

No

Please explain your answer and give evidence where possible::

No comment.

8 Other than an age eligibility restriction, can you propose any other ways of mitigating the associated value for money issues?

Please explain your answer and give evidence where possible::

No comment.

9 We are intending to make the loan available for doctoral courses that last up to 6 years, and the older the doctoral student, the fewer the number of years they would have to repay the loan. In your view, which of the age eligibility restrictions below would best achieve the government's aims - broadening and strengthening the research base and addressing employer demand for high level skills - whilst also providing good value for money for the taxpayer?

Please select::

No age eligibility restriction

Please explain your answer and give evidence where possible::

If it is required that there is an age restriction on access to loan finance for postgraduate study then it should be within an age range that allows students the best opportunity to improve their career prospects, skills and knowledge.

Possible additional eligibility requirements

10 Do you have any views on using this metric as the basis for such an allocation, or on the level at which allocations to institutions should be capped?

Please explain your answer and give evidence where possible::

There should not be a metric which would cap the number of places available for doctoral loan funding, and which requires universities to choose which of their students to offer loan places to and which to offer other forms of funding to. It is unclear how departments would decide between grant and loan funding for students. Will those that receive grant funding be higher achievers? If so, what threshold will departments have to work with to distinguish between students? Will there instead be different mechanisms based on need?

There is significant anecdotal evidence from the sector which suggests that excellent science is already being turned down and excellent students turned away. Funding should be made available for departments and institutes to take advantage of this pool of talent. If there is excellent research that can be pursued within the context of a sufficient research environment, funding should be made available to pursue it and to support it. This need should be met, as far as possible, through grants, but if loans are necessary, a cap could make this more challenging, and introduce unnecessary bureaucratic and administrative burdens on departments. There are also questions around how an expansion of postgraduate students will be funded in terms of departments' capacity to provide the right support and resourcing, and this should be addressed in conjunction with the introduction of the new loan scheme.

It is important that there be no distinction between students in receipt of grant funding and those in receipt of loan funding in terms of their treatment and value within a department, as well as their support, opportunities and obligations. This extends in both directions – for example grant funded students should not expect more obligations for example in teaching; loan-funded students should not expect fewer opportunities for example to attend conferences.

11 Do you have any views on such a condition on institutions' eligibility in which loans would only be available to students wishing to study at HEIs that have been allocated a capped number of loan places?

Please explain your answer and give evidence where possible::

Loans should be available to individuals rather than institutions. As such, it should be up to the individual where they wish to undertake their qualification.

Course length

12 Does making the loan available for courses of up to 6 years, give a sufficient amount of time to enable part-time study, whilst also incentivising students to complete their doctorates within a set period of time?

No

Please explain your answer and give evidence where possible::

With no cut-off point for funding there is a risk that students could be likely to run up large debts in their pursuit of PhD. The average length of a typical research council stipend is three and a half years (<https://www.epsrc.ac.uk/skills/students/dta/length/>), but an increasing number of students are now funded for a full four years. EPSRC consider part-time degrees to take around twice the length of a full-time PhD, so eight years may be a more sensible cut-off point. However, given that those students who are likely to make use of postgraduate loans are those that are unable to afford PhD study in any other way, there is a risk that they are more likely to reach this cut-off point and have not completed their degree yet not have the means to continue. As such, there is need for the development of an effective support system to support any cohort of new PhD students, particularly those studying part-time. This system would ensure they are able to reach the conclusion of their work before a cut-off point is reached.

13 The Government has a duty to ensure that payments to students are made in step with, rather than in advance of, need. What can be done to ensure that students in receipt of a loan, who set out to complete their courses in a set period of time actually do so, so that payments are not made in advance of need if students take longer than intended, or longer than the six year completion limit?

Please explain your answer and give evidence where possible::

The funding mechanism used by research councils, and indeed for undergraduate students provide a balance in initiatives to encourage that students finish their courses in the set time period. However it should be noted that they are also flexible to take account of the personal circumstances of students. There are a number of students who may, for disability-related reasons, have to study part-time for some or all of their PhD, and may have to suspend studies for a period of time. The loan system must be responsive to their needs, and the needs of other students who may for example face challenges through external circumstances. A support system, and/or flexible and responsive 'customer support', needs to be designed and provided to ensure that students who may face additional challenges and barriers to completing a degree are able to do so, even if this goes beyond the agreed cut-off point.

14 Should the limit on course length refer to the submission of the thesis, or use another benchmark for completion?

Please select::

Submission of thesis

Please explain your answer and give evidence where possible::

No comment.

15 In your view, what is the main factor that impacts completion of doctorates?

Please select::

Other

Please explain your answer and give evidence where possible::

No comment.

Course eligibility

16 Do you have any views on the course eligibility for the loan?

Please explain your answer and give evidence where possible::

The eligibility for the loan should be based on the quality of the student and the pursuit of excellent research,

as well as a suitable environment being available to support the student within the research environment. It should not matter which course is being pursued if this is the principle guiding the eligibility of those applying for the loan. As such, any Level 8 doctoral degree under which it is possible to pursue excellent research should be eligible under the loan. However, if unlike the system for undergraduate student loans there is an identified cap in the number of loans able to be issued, preference should be given to those pursuing study within STEM subjects, given both their importance to the economy and the increasing skills gap employers report for STEM trained students.

17 The intention is that eligibility for the doctoral loan would depend on the exit qualification expected from any course of study. Doctoral loans would be available where the expected exit qualification is a doctorate, and we would expect students to state their intended exit qualification at the outset of their course. If a student's intention from the outset is to exit with a doctorate they would be eligible for a doctoral loan to cover the course, even if it includes a period of master's level study, e.g. an MRes. A student in this scenario would not be eligible for a postgraduate master's loan. Are there any practical implications of the interaction of the two loan products that we should consider with regard to course eligibility?

No

Please explain your answer and give evidence where possible::

No comment.

Other sources of funding

18 What current sources of finance do other bodies provide that might enable students to meet the costs of pursuing doctoral study (i.e. on top of the doctoral loan)?

Please explain your answer and give evidence where possible::

Currently the primary method by which postgraduate physics students fund their study is from stipends from the UK research councils. A 2014 survey conducted by the IOP of physics and astronomy PhD students showed that, for British non-CDT students, 74% of students received at least some of their funding from this source. Just 3% of British non-CDT students and 10% of non-British non-CDT students stated that they were funding their doctorates themselves. The survey also noted that the stipend is often insufficient to cover postgraduate students' living and working costs. In the 2014 IOP survey, 40% of students reported struggling financially.

The aim of the loans programme is to enable more students to study for a PhD and so the scheme should primarily be targeted at those with no alternative funding as well as easing the financial burden for those in receipt of research council or other full-cost funding.

19 How might HEIs and others provide new and innovative packages of support to help meet the costs of study not covered by the loan?

Please explain your answer and give evidence where possible::

No comment.

Duplicative funding

20 Apart from Research Council studentships and fees only awards, how should other

sources of public funding be treated when considering whether to offer a loan (e.g. funding for professional doctorates from other sources)?

Please explain your answer and give evidence where possible::

Eligibility for a loan should be based on the principle that the student will be pursuing excellent research as well as sufficient support being available for students within the research environment. Loan funding should thus be available to students already in receipt of funding, whether this is through Research Council studentships, through employer sponsorship or other means. Consideration should be given to the extent of the available loan with respect to existing funding, but if a student considers the additional support from loan funding to be important to their ability to continue and complete their postgraduate studies then they should remain eligible for such funding.

Repayment terms

21 Are there any potential impacts of students taking out a doctoral loan on top of a master's loan, which we may not have considered?

No

Please explain your answer and give evidence where possible::

No comment.

Other considerations

22 Is there anything else we should take into consideration in the practical implementation of the doctoral loan product?

Yes

Please explain your answer and give evidence where possible::

The introduction of postgraduate student loans should be in addition to, rather than replacing any existing grant funding. Should this be the case, it will logically result in an increase in the overall number of PhD students by attracting a number of new entrants into the system. In order to cater for such an influx there are existing funding limitations which need to be taken into account. Postgraduate study in physics in particular has higher costs than many other subjects due to the need for well-resourced laboratories and equipment (<http://www.rsc.org/globalassets/04-campaigning-outreach/policy/education-policy/university-chemistry-and-physics-finances-report.pdf>). Departments need to have the funding available to receive more students, including enough laboratory space and time, equipment, and staff resource for support and supervision. As such, additional funding needs to be available alongside postgraduate loan funding to enable departments to effectively support an increased cohort of students within departments. Without this, there is a chance that departments will struggle to accommodate new PhD students either physically or pastorally.

Public Sector Equality Duty

23 Are there other issues the Government should be aware of, which would impact on the take-up of this proposed loan by those with any of the protected characteristics, and what steps might the Government take to mitigate any negative impact?

Yes

Please explain your answer and give evidence where possible::

No comment.

Impact on employers and business

24 In which of the areas below does the proposed new loan offer advantages to employers?

Increased supply of high level skills, Increased employability, Increased innovation, Increased supply of specialist knowledge

25 If administered through payroll, what difficulties, if any, do employers think this new loan scheme would present for them?

Please explain your answer and give evidence where possible::

No comment.

26 How might the Government mitigate these challenges?

Please explain your answer and give evidence where possible::

No comment.

27 Based on the contribution to costs principle, are there features of the proposed loan scheme that you feel could be changed or enhanced that would encourage you as an employer or business to contribute to your employees undertaking a doctoral training programme?

No

Please explain your answer and give evidence where possible::

No comment.

**For further information, please contact
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