



## **IrishRSA Statement on State Supports for PhD Scholars**

**The Irish Research Staff Association (IrishRSA)** represents research staff, including postdoctoral researchers, research fellows, and research assistants, in higher education and other research performing institutions across Ireland. IrishRSA advocates for the common interests of research staff at national and international levels, particularly toward the goal of sustainable research careers.

As relevant stakeholders, IrishRSA is pleased to have had the recent opportunity to contribute to the National Review of State Supports for PhD Scholars, and looks forward to continued making further contributions.

PhD scholarship or research is the foundation of the academic research and education ecosystem. It produces discovery and knowledge central to human advancement and social progress. Its resultant competencies and skills drive the advancement of the research professions and workforce. It makes serious and quantifiable contributions to the social fabric, the Irish economy, and to human wellbeing, regionally, nationally, and internationally. PhD scholars are intrinsically integral to the functioning of the research and academic system.

Furthermore, in very often responding to demands far beyond their individual PhD scholarship, PhD scholars across the country provide research and teaching that is absolutely essential to the day-to-day functioning of their institutions and to a range of important outcomes for universities.

**Presently, however, the typical PhD researcher is finding it extraordinarily difficult to make ends meet. Recent survey data from the Postgraduate Workers Organisation indicates that remuneration from stipends and wages tends to be so low as to strand PhD scholars at the poverty line. The hardship of low income levels is exacerbated by the persistent housing crisis and the cost-of-living crisis.**

**Evidence abounds on the deleterious effects of precarious work, poverty, and stress on health, mental health, quality of life, and, though no person's reasonable standard of living ought to be contingent upon it, productivity.**

Precarity is particularly common in Irish academia. The deleterious effects of precarity, insecure employment, and effective poverty for researchers and academics are no less severe than outside the sector.

Precarity, low pay, poor working conditions, exploitative practices, and absent safeguards present serious additional difficulties and barriers to participation in research and academia for numerous groups, particularly people with disabilities, women and gender minorities, members of the Travelling community, international researchers, and researchers from less affluent backgrounds, among others.

Such precarity also presents a major systemic risk to the sustainability and reputation of the Irish research and academic ecosystem. PhD scholars or others labouring under precarity cannot be expected to do their best work. A system that allowed such an intolerable situation to persist, or encouraged such a situation even, would not be aligned with the rights-based order and the values professed by those in the sector: progress, inclusion, openness, equity, reason, and evidence.

The chief outcome of a PhD researcher's scholarship is that scholarship itself. That is inherently worth public support, whether or not researchers are engaged in additional teaching and research in their institutions.

IrishRSA supports PhD scholars and their representatives in their calls for a living wage, at a minimum, to be paid to researchers. A path forward must also be found so that PhD scholars are not locked out of the social protection system, which is essentially the case at present.

IrishRSA notes that it is not appropriate for institutions to engage PhD scholars in routine, casualised labour without appropriate remuneration, conditions, contracts, or safeguards. This remains a common problem in the sector.

IrishRSA notes that many PhD scholars are seeking reform of the system toward contracts of employment. There are several models internationally which may serve as a guide. If implemented, such a system must contain appropriate safeguards to protect independent scholarship and academic freedom and guard against the exploitation of PhD scholars' labour.

Above all, PhD scholars must be afforded agency and voice regarding decisions and policies that affect their profession, standards of living, and wellbeing.

These issues must be considered from a systemic perspective. Should the issues relating to remuneration, working conditions, contracts of employment, social protection, safeguards, and international researchers' conditions be resolved to the satisfaction of PhD scholars, there remains the risk of 'graduating' into the research precariat. This is not sustainable. Stakeholders must cooperate to design and provide sustainable and meaningful research career pathways, frameworks, contracts, and conditions, particularly within academia.

IrishRSA, in various fora, has previously outlined several options, including, inter alia: a research career track that is parallel and equivalent to that of traditional, teaching academics; staff researcher positions; reformed career frameworks; research assessment reform, and; ring-fenced funding and instruments for secure, independent research.

We strongly believe that such measures would not only strengthen the research professions in Ireland and address persistent precarity in the sector, but enable researchers to reach their full potential and best contribute to their institutions and research ecosystems in the longer term.

IrishRSA notes especially the following recommendations from the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science's *Report on the Future Funding of Higher Education*:

*The issues of Staffing Levels and Precarious Employment in both the traditional and Technological Universities need to be reviewed urgently or by end of 2022 at the latest, by the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, in liaison with the Universities. [...] there needs to be an analysis / workforce plan of staffing requirements to restore staff levels. [...] The aim must be to ensure there are sufficient staff at all grades to deal with the projected increase of students, extra courses and increased services. Regarding Precarious Employment, the Review should include an examination of Hourly Paid Academic Contracts, Researchers, Postgraduate Workers and outsourcing of Support staff roles.*

IrishRSA acknowledges that the research and academic system is a complex, interactive web, with competing demands and diverse stakeholders. However, the conditions in which PhD scholars undertake their scholarship and work, and the fundamental living standards and wellbeing of PhD scholars, are priority issues. These are issues that speak to core values of academia: reason, evidence, progress, and humanism.

IrishRSA reaffirms its ongoing commitment to constructive engagement with all relevant stakeholders and encourages expeditious and comprehensive resolution of these issues.



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Dr Richard Vance

**Chairperson, IrishRSA**

On behalf of the IrishRSA Committee

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