

EDI ACTION AWARD RESEARCH FELLOWSHIP

Beyond Full-Time

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Executive Summary

The Beyond Full-Time report provides an in-depth analysis of the main barriers facing Northern Bridge Consortium (NBC) award holders who are part-time students, parents and carers. This research is based on new data gathered in 2024–2025 from the NBC student cohort across seven universities in North East England and Northern Ireland. Quantitative and qualitative data was provided by a survey which asked doctoral students to identify a wide variety of complex challenges.

Headline statistics include:

- 100% of student parents find family/caring responsibilities challenging
- 100% of student carers find caring responsibilities a challenge
- 85% of part-time students said that carving out time for the PhD was challenging
- 83% of student parents struggle financially
- 70% of part-time students are challenged by loneliness and isolation

Further detailed quantitative data was drawn from semi-structured interviews conducted with a cross-section of the cohort. Interviewees were asked to reflect on their doctoral experiences, allowing understanding of barriers which exist for those who balance study with paid work, caring and/or parental responsibilities.

Following the introductory chapter, the second section of this report discusses situations where circumstances change, such as taking an interruption. The third section analyses experiences which are 'In Addition to the Thesis', for example, placements. Section four considers long- or short-term responsibilities identified by student carers. Our research recognises that student carers may have no choice but to prioritise another person's care above academic work and professional obligations. We draw attention to the added pressures

on intergenerational carers: those who have parental responsibilities and who also help care for an elderly parent.

The fifth section examines parental responsibilities and how the unpredictable nature of childcare results in different working and study patterns. A requirement for institutional flexibility when circumstances change was a common theme for interviewees. This section highlights problems with accessing paternal leave and the financial barriers to accessing government childcare grants. In the final section, intersections between isolation, networks and concepts of belonging are examined. Part-time students, parents and carers place a high value on accessible opportunities to socialise and network with their peers.

Key recommendations include:

- Introduce a DTP Carer's Policy. This could directly benefit student carers by incorporating provision for some costs associated with attending NBC activities.
- Avoid a 'first come first served' approach to enrolling on NBC training.
- Improve access to training, events, retreats and the NBC summer school, by extending grant funding to help students with childcare costs.
- Create a monthly online drop-in group aimed at part-time students, student carers and student parents.
- Eliminate barriers for recipients of the NBC stipend during paternity leave.

1 Introduction

1.1 Aims

The Beyond Full-Time research fellowship project was commissioned by the AHRC Northern Bridge Consortium (NBC) in 2024 and forms part of a broader Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Action Plan. By understanding and identifying the main challenges to doctoral study, the intention of this project was to identify and understand inequalities, discrimination and biases faced by part-time students, parents and carers. The aims of this project as defined by the NBC were:

- to undertake evidence-based processes to analyse the principal barriers faced by award-holders who are part-time and/or have caring responsibilities
- to examine relevant NBC policies and practices which detrimentally affect part-time students and/or student carers

In relation to these aims, an objective was to engage with the NBC cohort and provide flexible opportunities for a wide range of student voices to be heard. We were keen to include perspectives of those who are studying for different types of Northern Bridge doctorates, for example, both standard and collaborative; both practice- and non-practice-based. The project was given a timescale of nine months to gather evidence, with a timeline which incorporated the end and beginning of academic years. The quantitative and qualitative evidence we gathered across the calendar year 2024–2025 forms the basis for realistic recommendations to the NBC, which could also be considered more broadly by other Doctoral Training Partnerships (DTPs).

1.2 Approach/Methodology

The Beyond Full-Time project was primarily informed by new research into the lived experiences of a range of PhD students of different ages and life stages. All those who contributed to the project are NBC awardees studying at Queen's University Belfast or Ulster University in Northern Ireland or the universities of Teesside, Durham, Northumbria, Sunderland and Newcastle in North East England. Our methodology adapted Braun and Clarke's guidelines for six phases of thematic analysis, making it applicable to our research. Their framework begins with identifying common patterns in data, collating information and searching for themes. It moves onto reviewing themes and engaging with ongoing thematic analysis. The final phases involve selecting examples, writing up and presentation of findings.

The first phase of our research involved gathering evidence of the key challenges facing part-time students, student carers and student parents in relation to a range of issues including inequalities, biases and day-to-day problems. As part of the broader EDI Action Award project, we requested open feedback from the NBC cohort who attended the summer school held by Ulster University and Queens University Belfast in June 2024. This took the form of anonymous viewpoints written on cards and posted into a box. A wide range of challenges were raised at this early stage, which helped develop our understanding of perceptions of biases. These included the belief that full-time doctoral study was "default", and that part-time study was "discouraged". Furthermore, being a part-time student could lead to a feeling of "invisibility". Equality of access to NBC opportunities was raised as an issue with inequities created by, for example a "first come first served" approach to DTP training. A further problem was a perceived lack of accessible guidance or clarity on support options available to parents and carers. Areas of concern which emerged from the summer

school feedback were collated and evaluated. At this stage an assessment took place of existing support for part-time students, carers and parents, information for which could be easily accessed through the websites of the seven universities.

In phase two, a review of recent literature relevant to the project took place. Analysis of literature included academic papers and publications, in addition to reports and policy documents commissioned, for example by the AHRC (Mellors-Bourne, 2022) or for HEPI (Stephenson, 2024). Following an appraisal of recent literature and alongside assessment of summer school cohort feedback, we identified 10 salient topics to investigate. The following themes showed elements of commonality across the DTP:

- Financial constraints
- Community, connectivity and networking
- Equity of access to DTP training opportunities
- Conflicting timetabling and juggling professional/private obligations
- Reduction of negative impact of a change in candidature/interruption of studies
- The administrative burden
- Issues relating to practice-based PhDs and collaborative doctorates
- Supervisory relations and expectations
- Equity of access to placements, residencies and conferences
- The positives of part-time

An investigation of these 10 topics formed the basis for the next stage of the project.

Phase three involved the design of a nuanced, yet systematic and user-friendly online survey entitled Research, Work and Life. It was sent by email by the central NBC administration team and designed to take less than 10 minutes to complete. The purpose of the survey was to gather quantitative data, while also allowing for students to share their

perspectives on a variety of issues. We were keen to ensure that our research represented perspectives from across all seven NBC universities. To target those who may not have flagged the survey in their inbox, a follow-up link was sent by the Northern Bridge administrator responsible for each individual university. Using this method, we received feedback from a total of 69 PGRs from across the seven NBC universities. The survey was open to the whole cohort and around half of respondents were studying full-time and half were part-time. Our research also included consideration of those who switch candidature between full and part-time study. Due to the survey's effective design, and the willingness of students to contribute to the research, we gathered a significant amount of quantitative data at this stage. Participants expressed informally that having an opportunity to share their opinions was a positive experience which they had welcomed.

Phase four involved reviewing themes, based on detailed data and new perspectives provided by the survey. At this stage we gathered extensive qualitative data by conducting semi-structured interviews with 10 PGRs who had completed the survey and volunteered to share their lived experiences. We sought to find a cross-section of voices who represented different institutions and disciplines, including collaborative and practice-based doctoral study. Semi-structured interviews were conducted both in person and online to provide flexibility. This research recognises the relevance of narrative theory to help understand different perspectives and form an in-depth understanding of the subject. Note that we make use of pseudonyms for interview subjects in this report.

In phase five, in-depth analysis of quantitative data and qualitative research took place, and key themes were further defined. We refined the scope of the project to focus on specific areas in which it was possible to make concrete recommendations. The final phase involved an analysis of statistical data and the quantitative datasets to provide evidence for

our recommendations. During the writing up period, we also reflected on new guidance given by the publication of UKRI's policy statement for training grants in January 2025.

1.3 Ethics

The Microsoft Forms survey was designed within a legal and ethical framework. It had clear information provided in an introductory email, in addition to an introduction which provided transparency. There was a guarantee of anonymity for all participants.

The ethical framework for carrying out semi-structured interviews followed guidance provided by the Oral History Society in which the interests of interviewees are protected. Ethical considerations adhered to the UK Data Archive which is reinforced by GDPR. A duty of anonymity was given to all participants, who were informed how their information would be shared. Interviewees signed an Informed Consent Form to allow their perspectives to be recorded and shared. Data was stored on a secure EDI server.

1.4 Researching issues of equity

The Beyond Full-Time report draws on existing research into competing and, at times, conflicting identity roles of "carer" and/or "parent" and "doctoral student". A review of AHRC and NBC data, academic papers and other previous studies informed the design of our survey. The literature review of recent work in this area also assisted our analysis of qualitative and quantitative data collected over the course of the project. For example, we acknowledge a report carried out by the Careers, Research & Advisory Centre (CRAC) on behalf of the AHRC (2022). The CRAC-Vitae report identified that prospective students, including mature applicants in employment were "hindered" because doctoral programmes were dominated by full-time students. One of CRAC's suggested new principles for doctoral

provision included the concept of a continuum between full and part-time study, as opposed to a binary choice.

CRAC's report also discussed the idea that students should be *easily* able to adjust their mode of study if their personal circumstances change. A third relevant point made by CRAC was that PGRs with dependents struggle to cope financially, even when fully funded by a DTP. This limits the range and diversity of those who can commit to doctoral research. An option presented by CRAC was the "provision of supplemental support funding for individuals on a needs basis, to increase and sustain access to doctoral study."¹

Reconsidering funding for parents and/or carers is viewed by CRAC as crucial to improving the diversity of doctoral cohorts.

The Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) also stated that there is an under-representation of students from diverse backgrounds at postgraduate level (2024). HEPI found that the challenge posed by widening participation is hampered by the lack of government childcare subsidies available to postgraduates.² Issues surrounding childcare and part-time doctoral study are also reflected by recent academic literature. Papers have explored the experiences of women studying for a part-time PhD while working and bringing up children. For example, part-time doctoral students who are also mothers are described as "marginalised" by Cronshaw et al. (2022, 2024). Furthermore, literature draws attention to the non-progression of an academic career, particularly for women with dependents (Neale-McFall 2020).

While the tensions which arise from doctoral studies for part-time mothers is well researched, the experiences of male doctoral students who are working fathers have often

¹ "Doctoral training in the arts and humanities: Engagement, review and future options", pp.3–5.

² HEPI "Policy Note 56", p.2.

been overlooked. To address this gender imbalance, male perspectives were sought and are included in this research. Similarly, the conflicting demands on doctoral student carers in the UK is not well documented. We acknowledge the statement that the "diverse, intersectional identities of student carers" have been left out of the conversation (Hook et al. 2022). This is significant and our research is concerned with the intersectionality between part-time study, caring, identity and gender (Crenshaw, 1989). By identifying and explaining how these complexities combine in the lived experience of postgraduate study, we seek to demonstrate how barriers have been created and may be overcome.

1.5 Limitation

The Beyond-Full Time project would have welcomed the opportunity to investigate barriers facing part-time students at application stage. Data concerning unsuccessful applications to NBC is not readily available. However, the Consortium fully disclosed its equal opportunities data from 2019–2024.

1.6 Ethos

This research is underpinned by The Equality Act (2010) with the following protected characteristics:

- Age
- Disability
- Gender reassignment
- Marriage and civil partnership
- Pregnancy and maternity
- Race or national origin

- Religion or belief
- Sex and sexual orientation

The Athena Swan Charter is also relevant to our research due to its gender equality principles including:

- addressing structural inequalities and social injustices
- mitigating the gendered impact of caring responsibilities

The Beyond Full-Time report is written with an ethos of positivity towards the representation of part-time doctoral students, and those who are parents and carers. Our research found that when these students are well supported by their university, their NBC experiences are overwhelmingly positive.

2 Changes of Circumstances

2.1 Survey findings

Our survey revealed interesting information regarding changes in circumstances during students' PhDs. Since 2019, and over six cohorts, 33 Northern Bridge studentships have been awarded to part-time applications, that is, out of all the successful applications, 9% were part-time projects applications. In this context, it was already surprising that, out of the 69 respondents to our survey, 13 were part-time students because this ratio of part-time to full-time students is over the double of the proportion of students starting their studentship part-time.

Of all the doctoral students we engaged with through our survey 19% were part-time. In addition, six out of the 13 part-time respondents to our survey said they switched from full-time to part-time studies, that is 46% of the part-time students consulted for this research did not start part-time. Even if our survey respondents were not perfectly representative of all the Northern Bridge students, from this information, we can already understand that a significant proportion of part-time PhD students do not start their PhD part-time but change their status after commencing their doctoral studies.

The data we were able to access does not include more precise numerical information. Northern Bridge does not (currently) keep an up-to-date record of part-time versus full-time registration as individual universities are in charge of administering such changes and students' registration.

Up-to-date records of registration circumstances which can change would be very beneficial for the Consortium. For example, 13% of our survey respondents answered that they live remotely from their university cities. We do not know how many of them are registered as distance learners, but our interviews demonstrate how this category of students have specific requirements, challenges, and study needs, and that changes in life circumstances can lead to such changes in student status.

Students who are parents and/or have caring responsibilities is not currently a registration category. However, it is also connected to life circumstances which can change, and, more relevant to university support, our research shows that these situations bring not only additional challenges related to the expectations university hold for their PhD students, but also specific needs which we explore in the next section. Students, staff, and institutions benefit from the taking into consideration of changes in life circumstances which impact PhD studies. So, while we would not recommend universities to keep a formal record of students who are parents and/or carers, we think that initiatives made for and with parents and carers should be more common practice, be normalised and promoted. They should be visible and known to all students, staff and prospective applicants.

2.2 Interview findings

Our research has found that some students are being denied the possibility to switch to part-time; students do not have equal access to such changes in registration. This problem seems connected to institutional regulations and mechanisms which grant the final word regarding the decision for students to switch from full-time to part-time to their supervisors, although it

is the student who is doing the PhD. Chloe explained how her supervisors declined her requests to move to part-time studies and that it was this lack of institutional support together with insufficient information which prevented her from doing her PhD following a timeline and rhythm which would have been more beneficial to her, her health/wellbeing, her family responsibilities and her creative practice. She also felt that her attempt to get support from Northern Bridge administrative staff was not initially successful either. The interviewee shared how she felt regarding her personal situation and made more general comments about her perceived lack of encouragement of part-time studies and insufficient consideration for family responsibilities:

I have asked multiple times if I could go part time, and was told no. On one occasion [my supervisors] said "people who go part time have jobs". I didn't feel like the care and responsibilities were seen as being of any value, which was hard. I'm not sure why there was such discouragement from doing part-time. You need your supervisors to support you to go to take it further. So that was the end of that. I couldn't find information about it. So, I didn't really know where I stood on in terms of arguing it, because if you're told "no", it's really hard to kind of keep saying "I think this could work". I did ask someone at Northern Bridge if it was possible and they said: "if your supervisors agree, it can be a conversation", but it all felt a bit vague and not encouraged either. (Chloe)

Even when changes in registration are granted, the administrative processes as they currently exist may create more problems for students (before they eventually obtain what they wanted in the first place). For example, one of our interviewees discussed how long and complicated her process of becoming a remote student had been:

I had the most difficulty with changing to be a remote student. My initial application was rejected. I had to put more detail into the application to explain how I was going to continue my PhD. I found this ridiculous at the time because my supervisors agreed, and the head of school agreed. The application was rejected by the Dean. I was surprised by this, as the process had taken so long. By the time the second application was approved, I had already moved to a different city. (Maija)

There also exists confusion around the end of funding and end of registration, and the distinctions which might exist between them. Because of such confusion, and limited funding, many PhD students finish their doctoral studies after their funding ends, that is they are still completing necessary research work without financial compensation. This problem has been identified by UKRI authorities, and it is one of the reasons behind the changes (especially around additional funded leave) which have been approved and will be implemented from the 2025-2026 academic year.³ Among our interviewees, Chloe is an example of a doctoral student currently finishing her studies without receiving any further studentship payments:

I took two interruptions and didn't realise that my registration period at my university, which is what I was working to with my supervisor, was different to my funding period. I think because of the interruptions, it kind of felt even more blurry because the dates kept shifting. I will have to finish the PhD unfunded.

Students can also struggle to consider changes in their personal life, such as having another child, because of financial concerns connected to the current amount of PhD studentships, the cost of childcare/lack of childcare provision for research students, and the limitations to six hours of paid work per week. For example, Lucy explained that "people assume that if you are part-time it is because you are working in parallel and bringing in more money. But this is not always the case". For her, the simultaneous pressure of studies, family life and financial concerns, have made it more complicated to make the decision and organise another personal life change:

I have given thought to having another baby and the biological clock is ticking. I don't know how things would work with Northern Bridge. I would love to continue doing work so I would have to time it well. I wouldn't be able to pay for two nurseries at the same time as I am struggling paying for one child's nursery.
(Lucy)

³ "Policy Statement: Review of the UKRI Standards Terms and Conditions of Training Grant", published on 30 January 2025

The seven-year part-time duration is prohibitive for some students, and some students who had to switch to part-time around a specific situation (raising young children) wish to switch back to full-time as soon as their personal circumstances will allow. Here, we can mention two interviewees, Maija, who started her PhD full-time and became a new parent during her studies and switched to part-time but would prefer to finish quickly. She said: "I'm trying to work on evenings and weekends. I'm planning to change back to full-time study because I want to finish the PhD as soon as I can". Isabel, who is a mother of three children and a full-time student noted: "I do like the idea of being part-time as it would be less stressful, but I also don't want to be doing the PhD for seven years". While both students acknowledge that there are advantages to part-time studies, their personal preference is to avoid it, if possible.

When individuals request to become remote or part-time PhD students or to take an interruption, it is usually out of necessity. Therefore, it is in the universities' interest to facilitate quicker and easier changes in registration. We interviewed two students who moved away from their university cities due to changes in their circumstances. Maija said: "I didn't have a choice because my husband had got a new job". For Lucy, moving away from her institution in Newcastle led to a better situation: "I have more access to resources in London than Newcastle, for the type of research I am doing. This works well for me."

When students feel adequately supported through their changes in status and registration, they often express profound gratefulness and appreciation towards the individual staff members who helped them, but also towards their own university and to the NBC. On top of discussing specific difficulties, our interviewees did have a lot of positives to share. For example, Maija had a positive experience with Northern Bridge's approach and good communication in regard to maternity leave and also the return to studies (see Section 5).

Being able to obtain leave or an interruption with continuation of the stipend is highly valued by students. Another student was able to access this support while on leave for medical reasons. Chloe pointed out the importance of funded leave and also the crucial role played by a staff member in obtaining the best support for student. This raises the issue of students' unequal access to opportunities because if adequate support depends on individual staff members extra effort, time and knowledge, and not information which is equally available to all students, then the processes to consider and access all support may not be equally available to every student.

The continuation of the bursary made it possible for me to have interruptions. It was definitely a very positive thing that Northern Bridge offered and my supervisor was really supportive of that. It helped me value my research and psychologically think "no, I'm just I'm off sick." Like I would be in my job and that's fine. I think there's a lot of pressure that comes with funding, and a sense of responsibility and wanting to produce something that's really meaningful. So being looked after as a student, while you're trying to do that, I think is important. (Chloe)

In some contexts, students' unequal access to information means that more work is required from staff members. Chloe also underlines the importance of having a good website where information is readily available to all, especially for students doing their PhD remotely. She explained that her supervisor advised her to take an interruption and following an online meeting with her Northern Bridge administrator, she was sent the relevant forms in order to make the request.

I was lucky that I had a supportive supervisor, and they did the work to find out what to do. Information/support is available but perhaps it's not common knowledge. When you are distance learner, and the only one at your university, there is no incidental information. So, you need a website that provides you with information, which would make it feel more concrete rather than an abstract thing that you don't feel very connected to. (Chloe)

In general, all students would benefit from having more detail, more clarity and an easier access to information regarding all the registration options which exist, the procedures to

switch from one option to another, and all the support that is available to them as Northern Bridge-funded PhD students (including who is responsible for what).

3 In Addition to the Thesis

PhD students are examined on their thesis, but there are other training requirements and opportunities which come with Northern Bridge funding. Therefore we considered what part-time and parents/carers students do in addition to their thesis (and parental/caring responsibilities). This section analyses their responses regarding any creative practice, hobby, volunteering, paid work, placement, summer school, writing retreat, and training workshop. We did not specifically research our respondents' experiences of academic publishing, conferences and teaching because we were more interested in additions to the thesis which are university requirements, additional funding opportunities, personal preferences beyond academia, and employment choices motivated by financial needs. None of our survey respondents mentioned teaching nor publishing. We are aware that other childfree part-time students may make building their academic CVs a higher priority than our interviewees are able to do.

3.1 Survey findings

"Finding time for your creative practices, hobbies, volunteering" was ranked the second most common and most difficult challenge that the respondents to our survey faced, with 68% of them mentioning it as a challenge (23% clicked "very challenging" and another 46% "somewhat challenging"). These results take into consideration all the 69 respondents. Among them, 65% of parents found it challenging (with 30% very challenging and another 35% somewhat challenging). More carers identified it as a challenge but to a lesser degree:

73% of carers clicked it challenging, with 18% very challenging and another 55% somewhat challenging. Part-time students were the category who had the most challenging time: 77% of them said that finding time for their creative practices, hobbies and volunteering was challenging, 38% very challenging and another 38% somewhat challenging.

"Finding time to fit in paid/contractual work/self-employment" is also a challenge for over half of our survey over respondent population (56%), with 19% of them clicking "very challenging" and another 37% "somewhat challenging". Our three groups struggle with this problem more than the average of the overall PhD students' population who answered our survey. Among parents, 74% said this issue was challenging, with 39% very challenging and another 35% somewhat challenging. Like above, more carers identified this as a challenge but to a lesser degree as 82% responded it was challenging, but 18% very challenging and another 64% somewhat challenging. Here again, part-time students' results highlight this group as the one facing the highest/most challenges: 77% of part-time students identified finding time to fit in paid/contractual work/self-employment challenging, with 54% very challenging and another 23% somewhat challenging.

We do not have data on the number of Northern Bridge students who do one or more placement(s) over the course of their studentship, or the proportion of part-time and parents/carers students among them. Northern Bridge funding is available for placement opportunities. It is important to note, however, that part-time students are at a disadvantage regarding placements for which they have to relocate because they can only obtain half the funding which full-time students can be offered. This unequal treatment seems based on the assumptions that part-time students can work on top of their PhD hours and have other

sources of income beside their studentship, which does not always match the real experiences of part-time students. Therefore, this policy establishes unfair treatment towards part-time students who cannot complement their studentship with paid work/government benefits/personal wealth/family support/other sources of funding.

3.2 Interview findings

Doctoral students who are also creative practitioners struggle to find time for their own practice. We did not interview any part-time student who was both an artist/writer and childfree, as those we interviewed who are creative practitioners also have children.

Answering the question of "Do you have enough time for your own creative practice?", Elise articulated the limitations of her situation as follows:

I was hoping to have enough time for a day a week for my own creative practice but that has been difficult as I am also the main carer for my children. There can be an expectation that part-time PhD students have time to teach or work on their own creative practice. However, when you are a parent, this throws a spanner in the works. Even though my kids are older and in high school, they are still dependents. (Elise)

Additionally, some students who were previously working full-time choose to do their PhD part-time because they cannot afford to leave their current job for the stipend, because it is too low by comparison. One of our interviewees discussed the Northern Bridge application process as follows:

I applied for a full-time doctorate but couldn't afford to give up my job. At the time there was a lack of clarity about part-time and a feeling that part-time study was an aside. I don't think part-time was encouraged or championed as a legitimate way to gain a PhD. (Camille)

Different students who were interviewed described juggling their PhD, paid work and parental/caring responsibilities. Their struggles were primarily financial, but also time

related. Some parents' whole stipend is used to pay for childcare. Others have no choice but to ignore the Northern Bridge cap on paid work (see Section 5). To the question "What about finances?" one student replied:

The main difficulty I have really is that my entire scholarship goes on childcare and travel. I am really self-financing. The stipend just covers my outgoings in order to be able to attend. That leaves me under pressure. Outside of my PhD hours I have to pick up work, and I am finding it tricky. (Orla)

Our research also found that students do not have equal access to placement opportunities. Some are enthusiastically looking into possibilities and receiving support from Northern Bridge and their supervisors, some are actively dissuaded by university staff. For example, Sarah is looking into placement options and feeling supported and enthusiastic, whereas Chloe's experience has been more negative. Chloe shared that:

There was a couple of placements that came up which I wanted to do, but I was dissuaded from doing them. One my supervisors refused to back up the placement applications. Another said that they felt it would take my attention and time away from the PhD. It's like they didn't understand the scheme. So that's a shame because in my head I was like, if I did a PhD, that's not really the most transferable thing for an employer, but if I'd done a placement, I could possibly develop some relationships and links. But that hasn't happened.

Some students face additional challenges regarding placements and parents/carers interviewed said that they would benefit from more support towards childcare/care work to enable them to participate in a placement. One of our interviewees explain how she accessed childcare funding for an additional study opportunity during her PhD and extrapolated to recommend Northern Bridge do the same and offer parents equal access to study-related travel. Her interesting experience and conclusions are as follows:

I asked the organisers if they had additional funding in order to attend an NBC event. I framed it as access funding, and they granted me the costs to cover childcare in order for me to attend. The issue is that the admin then has to go through the student's own university finance procedures, which does not have a built-in protocol in place for claiming back childcare costs. They will probably put it down as miscellaneous...

I'm going to add childcare onto future applications. They cover accommodation and travel, and I am definitely going to add childcare on. This is an access issue. If you want to include parents and carers, you aren't being truly inclusive unless you level the playing field. (Orla)

Part-time students might prefer – and are able – to do full-time placements. This is partly so part-time students are not compromised on the placements available, but also because a full-time placement might be more suitable. As Orla, a part-time student, said: "I want to be given the same opportunities as my colleagues who have no children. I do not want to be shelved as "busy mum". I do not want to be limited to local placements and would like to do the placements which mean the most to me. I want to be viewed as equally ambitious and able and capable." However, she highlighted confusion regarding the process of organising a full-time placement and the administrative burden connected such situation. In order to carry out a full-time placement over a month (rather than part-time for two months) she would have to change her mode of study.

I could switch to full time and do my placement as a full-time block. Then I will switch back to part-time as soon as I can, but no one has been able to help me with the admin for this yet. A bit more flexibility regarding the placements would be good. I am afraid that I will miss out on the opportunity to do the placement because it is so complicated to organise as a part-timer. No one has handed me a protocol for how to do a placement as a part-time student. I embrace my PhD, but there are definitely things that we could be doing better... The level of admin eats into your time as a part-timer. I have less time than a full-timer but we have the same amount of admin. Maybe we need a forum for part-time students to talk about placements, criteria and different issues. (Orla)

Another reason part-time students might be inclined to organise full-time placements is the current accommodation funding rule which states that, when doing a placement as a distance for which students would need to relocate for the duration of the placement, students can claim rent costs, but part-time students are at a structural disadvantage because they are not allowed equal compensation to full-time students, but can only claim half accommodation costs. One of our interviewees identified the general assumption this kind of unequal funding

rule is based upon: "People assume that if you are part-time it is because you are working in parallel and bringing in more money. But this is not always the case and not always the reality". A part-time student who would need to relocate to take advantage of a great placement opportunity and would have the capacity (health/disability-wise) to undertake a full-time placement might request to switch status in such a situation. Other part-time students who cannot sign up for full-time placements and who do not have additional income because they are not able to work 40 hour week (so it is easy to think that this would apply to chronically ill/disabled students) might have to give up on such great training opportunities because of the current funding limitations to part-time students.

Experiences of students who are parents and/or carers differ greatly to that of non-parents/carers, especially regarding social events and additional opportunities. It is important to highlight that not every student has equal access to summer school participation and other events which are an important part of the PhD experience. One interviewee said: "I couldn't go to the summer schools because of caring responsibilities." Another interviewee expressed concerns about issues of access in regard to Northern Bridge's compulsory events:

I am a little concerned about the compulsory summer school in terms of childcare. Perhaps the summer school could be hybrid and part-time students could be given a choice whether to attend in Year 1 or Year 2. Compulsory conferences, the summer school and the induction should be more accessible as not all parents have childcare overnight. If you are a parent, caring for children should also be a valid reason not to travel and to have an exemption. (Elise)

Overall, students want to see more awareness of specific challenges, needs and limitations when organising events, but also regarding requirements and opportunities which exist in addition to the PhD thesis. Elise added: "I feel quite different from other students. I feel excluded from additional training opportunities such as going to public lectures, talks, evening events and social activities."

Our research shows that part-time students would like to see the specificities of their situation, such as time limitations and the requirement for advance notice of opportunities, taken into account by Northern Bridge. As Orla said:

There was a workshop offered through Northern Bridge called Chrono Hacking that I was interested in. It is hard to sign up to these things because my time is so limited as a part-timer and dates can clash. There are certain workshops which would be good, but I can't take on a lot of extra things. I do need upskilling, but I usually have to learn on the job. That is the juggle for me.

4 Carers

4.1 Context

This report recognises the Carers Trust definition of a carer as being "anyone who cares, unpaid, for a friend or family member who due to illness, disability, a mental health problem or an addiction cannot cope without their support."⁴ The scope of this definition does not include on-going parental responsibilities, unless for a disabled child or children.

Student carers have either long- or short-term, sole or shared responsibilities, which must fit alongside their studies. A PGR may be a carer for a short period of time during their doctorate or could be a life-long carer. We recognise that any student can become a carer at any time, and this could be for more than one person.

In their recent work on undergraduate and postgraduate student carers, Hook et al. acknowledge the "invisibility" of student carers and note how difficult it can be to reconcile academic work and care work (2022). It is of interest that Hook et al. make use of a definition of carers – including all parents – which reflects an informal understanding of the term (2022). This definition of carer is much broader than that of organisations such as the Carers Trust or NHS England. The NHS England definition is recognised by some NBC universities and similar to that of the Carers Trust; however, the Carers Trust is UK-wide and is in alignment with the UKRI's policy towards student carers.

In 2025, the UKRI's Policy Statement introduced Additional Leave to help students take an interruption. This new category includes carers leave, bereavement and injury or serious illness on the grounds that programmes must: "provide sufficient flexibility and a supportive environment". All students are now entitled to five days leave a year for the care

⁴ Carers Trust (www.carers.org/carer-involvement).

of adults. Further guidance will be provided on how longer periods could be covered under Regulation Leave. The crucial point here concerns the continuation of a stipend while a student carer helps at a time of crisis, for example, a family member being diagnosed with a chronic illness. At the time of writing, doctoral students taking an official interruption of studies because of increased or emergency caring responsibilities (without a GP Fit Note) would lose their NBC stipend for the duration of the interruption.

4.2 Survey findings

Evidence gathered for this report was limited to those who care for family members, reflecting the feedback we received from the postgraduate cohort. Out of 69 survey participants, 11 students identified themselves as carers. Survey participants raised important issues about caring which chime with this report's overarching themes of parity and equality. One respondent noted that there is an "emotional toll of caring responsibilities which are *not* childcare responsibilities". While this student found there was departmental understanding of issues relating to childcare, there was a "complete lack" in empathy towards caring responsibilities for an elderly family member. Another PGR raised the problem of navigating government support such as Carer's Allowance or direct one-off payments while receiving a stipend and also in "precarious" employment. This report allows for an understanding of their different lived experiences and reflects the views of students who are carers for a child/children; for a young person/people (who are not living independently); for a sibling or siblings; or an elderly parent/parents.

4.3 Tensions between caring and academia

It is possible to plan ahead for some commitments, such as taking a cared-for person to weekly health appointments or quarterly clinic appointments which happen over the long-term. Other commitments can be as unpredictable as, for example, caring for a disabled child who falls sick, or for a parent following surgery or an accident. For doctoral students, such caring responsibilities require flexibility from both the NBC and universities. Part-time student Elise gives her perspective on the issue:

Having an understanding that parents and carers need to take time out to look after children or elderly parents would be good. There should be an awareness that school holidays are difficult, so you might not be able to attend events during the holidays. The social side and networking can't always be a priority for someone who has caring or parental responsibilities. I think that feeling supported by your university and by Northern Bridge is really important.

Elise highlights four important issues here: the necessity for carers to take "time out", for DTPs to have awareness of Local Authority school calendars when organising events and training, for consideration to be given for equal access to networking opportunities, and finally for carers to "feel" supported.

Another point of consideration is having no choice but to take time out to prioritise someone else's care, whether a sick or disabled child, a sibling, partner or a parent. This could be an emergency, such as an accident or the breakdown of usual care arrangements and may clash with departmental deadlines. Or a carer may need to adapt their life to a new or additional diagnosis, which can easily cut into the amount of time devoted to PhD research.

As Camille, a carer who is studying a part-time doctorate, outlines:

When you have a parent with an acute diagnosis, you sometimes have to battle for healthcare. This takes so much energy and time. I am also the driver and my mum's appointments have usually been on a Wednesday or Thursday which are my PhD days. However, I want to support her in the best way I can. In terms of taking time off

to help, the company I work for was amazing, but I wasn't certain where I stood with the university.

While Camille was clear about her employer's level of flexibility, the situation at her university was less transparent. Many UK companies offer flexibility to employees who are unpaid carers and some progressive employers have introduced paid Carer's Leave for those with caring responsibilities. The Carer's Leave Act (2024) gives all workers the legal right to five days unpaid carer's leave per annum and Carers UK is lobbying for a statutory right to two weeks of paid Carer's Leave per annum.

4.4 The effect of being "sandwiched"

Mature doctoral students may have dependent children or be providing financially for young people in higher education, while also informally caring for a sick or elderly parent/parents. Describing this set of circumstances, Dorothy Miller coined the term the “sandwich generation” in 1981 for middle-aged people who were exposed to the stress of looking after both children and parents. A recent Office for National Statistics (ONS) survey found that compared to the general population, "sandwich carers" in the UK were more likely to experience problems with their mental health.⁵ Nearly 41% of sandwich carers were unable to work as much as they would have liked and were more likely to be struggling financially compared with the general population.⁶ Aidan, a father with four dependents, who also helps care for his elderly mother outlined his view:

⁵ The last analysis of “sandwich carers” released by the Office for National Statistics (2019) was based on data from 2009–2017. The ONS found that 62% of sandwich carers in the UK were female and that 72% are aged between 35 and 54.

⁶ The ONS made comparisons with the general population, defined as aged between 16 to 70.

When you have a family, it is a different doctoral experience from what many other students experience. As a carer, I do hospital runs for my mum's appointments in addition to school runs. It would be nice if the responsibilities of students in this position were taken into account a bit more.

Here, Aidan points to the pressures of being sandwiched between two dependent generations and the conflicting demands of care work and academia. This poses the question of whether sufficient consideration is given to the fact that carers are in a significantly different position to those without caring responsibilities.

The financial pressures placed on those involved with intergenerational care, as analysed by the ONS report, are also important to consider, especially in the light of the cost-of-living crisis post-2021. Aidan makes the point that NBC's contractual limit on paid work of over six hours for full-time students causes problems for those with dependents: "Limiting paid work is not practical, particularly if you have a number of dependents. It stands to reason you will have more financial requirements than one student who has no dependents." Throughout his doctoral study Aidan, in a similar way to other students interviewed as part of this research project, has supplemented his income by working more than six hours in order to support his family.

4.5 Providing clarity

The AHRC is without an official Carers Policy and has allowed individual Doctoral Training Partnerships to draft their own. At the time of writing, the NBC did not have a policy for the seven universities and student carers defer to the policies of their own institutions, leading to a patchwork approach to this issue. The Scottish Graduate School for Arts & Humanities (SGSAH) has adopted a clear Carers Policy which is under discussion here as an example of

good practice.⁷ This policy relates to both doctoral researchers and the supervisory team, thus indicating that students and staff are placed on an equal footing in the implementation of guidance.

The SGSAH requires all Higher Education Institutes in Scotland to follow the same approach, although there is an acceptance that the degree of flexibility will vary between universities. The policy statement is as follows:

The DTP believes that caring should not prevent doctoral researchers from succeeding in their studies. Through our values of respect, integrity, creativity and collaboration, we enrich the many contributions made to our culture and society by doctoral researchers across our member HEIs. We are committed to providing support and flexibility to facilitate their success, ensuring that no one is disadvantaged whilst safeguarding academic standards.

This policy outlines support for carers with possible additional financial outlays which include:

- Out of pocket carer costs, where there is a requirement beyond the normal contracted requirements of the PhD programme, e.g. training events.
- Full additional costs where DTP activities are compulsory such as a summer school.
- Out of pocket costs where payment is to a registered third party, when attending programmes offered by the DTP that impact caring responsibilities.
- Childcare costs for a disabled child/children (over and above normal childcare costs (i.e. for evening / weekend events).

In Scotland, applications for such out of pocket expenses or childcare costs linked to caring are made by way of an expense claim form. For the NBC, increased clarity in regard to what costs can be mitigated would help student carers access the support necessary to fulfil their responsibilities, both academic and caregiving.

⁷ The SGSAH extends the Carer's Trust definition to include partners and neighbours.

5 Parents

5.1 Context

A complex mix of inter-related factors affect doctoral students who have caring responsibilities and/or also have on-going, day-to-day responsibilities for a child or children. Challenges are varied, as doctoral students may become first-time parents during their PhD; they may have a pre-school child or children; have school-age children; or have caring responsibilities for both children and an elderly relative/s (usually a parent). Over the course of our research, doctoral students who already have children or who become parents during their studies have described themselves as “the exception”, “an anomaly” or in an “abnormal position”. Our report examines the barriers which produce feelings of non-normativity, including the inflexibility of institutional structures. As Gardner (2008) acknowledges with reference to graduate schools in the USA: “Academic structures, conventions, traditions and normative socialization patterns are typically not designed to allow students with children, whose schedules and responsibilities are often demanding, much flexibility”. The notion of flexibility is significant when considering topics which intersect with parenthood and caring responsibilities, such as taking maternity and paternity leave, childcare, family finances, remote learning and time poverty.

5.2 Survey findings

A total of 23 students who responded to the Research, Work and Life survey identified as parents (a third of all respondents). Given an opportunity to express challenges which connect to childcare responsibilities, respondents made a variety of important points. On the issue of gender equality, one female student wrote that their research was viewed as "less

important in the household" and therefore they were expected to give up their time to cover, for example, children's sickness. On the topic of combining doctoral study with fatherhood, one student expressed that "becoming a new parent, specifically a father, has been extremely challenging with little to no support from the university and Northern Bridge".

The survey revealed that personal finances are an overarching issue for doctoral students who are caregivers. One student noted that they struggled with the precarious nature of short-term contracts and university teaching hours. A significant problem for parents/carers of young children or those who need help with wraparound childcare was voiced by one student who struggles to find "enough funds to cover childcare". There may also be the responsibility of "navigating a PhD as a new parent, who is also a primary/joint-primary earner for the family." Drawing on these themes, this report identifies the current and pressing challenges facing parents and caregivers.

5.3 Juggling life and research

For parents, the connection between the unpredictable nature of everyday life and the concept of being time poor is a recurrent theme. For doctoral students, the demands of their academic work often conflict with the familial demands of looking after children and/or young people. Isabel, a parent who studies remotely, outlined how personal obligations should be considered carefully by institutions: "Those who have caring responsibilities or children need more flexibility and may need to be able to work remotely and take interruptions to study. These are inter-related." Here, Isabel indicates the impact of complex individual circumstances, with a focus on the importance of a flexible approach to doctoral study.

Isabel also draws attention to having to accept the fact that, as a parent, "things go wrong", for example when children are unwell. Another parent commented on the

"inevitability" of facing unexpected problems. Sarah, a part-time student, identified her main challenges as non-academic parental responsibilities. "Occasionally the wheels do fall off. Children fall ill and then you can't stick to the routine and find yourself having to play catch-up. The main challenge is juggling your work and family commitments." When thrown out of a routine, academic work may suffer and Sarah is reconciled to "doing the best I can in the time that I've got." Daily responsibilities for carers and parents of school-age children also include, as another interviewee put it "being a kind of a taxi". For some students there is a constant tension between doctoral work and being available for school runs, children's evening activities, and regular clinic appointments or emergency hospital appointments.

When considering how unpredictable life can be for parents, it would be wrong to assume that those who have school-age children usually have approximately six hours of a school day during term time, in which to complete academic and/or paid work without having to turn their attention to family obligations. It is important to recognise that student parents may have a child or children who, for example, may suffer a chronic illness, are disabled, have mental health problems and/or are neurodivergent. Children with complex health problems and/or neurodivergence are not always able to access mainstream education and may be out of school for extended periods of time. Thus, the impact of a child/children's needs on a student parent's doctoral study must be considered. As Chloe, a parent of neurodivergent children, points out that:

Children's needs are dynamic, in that they change in intensity. There have been long periods when my children were not able to access schooling, or when they did attend school I would be contacted by the school to attend meetings. I would also need to collect them from school at different times of day.

Such complexities are compounded by the necessity to also access counselling or therapeutic services, for example for disabled and/or neurodivergent children/young people. As Chloe, a

distance learner, noted: "This is not just about the physical time, it is the mental energy it takes to do those things. Similarly, a PhD is about mental space and energy." Thus, the amount of time which appointments take, intersecting with a lack of mainstream education provision, can have a significant effect on doctoral study.

Our research found that doctoral studies often take place at unsociable hours, including (or only) taking place during evenings, weekends or in some cases, the early hours. Chloe, who was denied the opportunity to study part-time, would get up at 4.30am to work on her PhD before her children woke up. She said: "Then I was making myself quite ill from sleep deprivation." Approaches to study by students we interviewed include fitting part-time research into two ten-hour days each week or dedicating three seven-hour days per week to study. However, even with a timetable Sarah acknowledged that flexibility was required: "I started my PhD with set times and days, but it has now become more fluid. Sometimes I need to work harder because of a deadline but this has the benefit of being able to take more time off during the school holidays." Such perspectives help show how 'routines' vary. As Isabel noted: "There is a culture among PhD students generally that you have to spend a certain amount of hours per week on research. More recognition of different working patterns would be good. These can be just as successful." This raises the issue of students who are more productive when they experience reduced working hours, perhaps when constrained by childcare or the school day. Isabel also draws attention to the benefits of doctoral students being supported to manage their own study patterns, possibly by planning out available hours or time-periods over a month or year, rather than a week.

5.4 Ad-hoc childcare

Several respondents, when asked about the difficulties involved with finding and paying for childcare, stated how useful creches and after-school clubs located at universities would be. The availability of creches would allow parents valuable flexibility for when they require a short amount of childcare, such as an hour to hold a meeting, as opposed to a full or half day as stipulated by a nursery. Part-time student parent Orla, points to a complex issue: a lack of consideration by institutions for students with care-giving responsibilities. She highlights how institutional failings, for example in making funding streams to help with childcare available, enforces the idea that doctoral study and parenthood are mutually exclusive.

This makes me feel excluded as a student who is trying to manage parenthood and my postgraduate studies. There is zero thought to childcare by my university. If Ikea can do it then so can universities. Even if there was a play centre where you can put your kids for an hour while you go to the library.

In a similar way to other participants in this project, Orla pointed towards best practice models in other countries in Europe, suggesting that "creativity" could be employed in this area. Another parent suggested that creches could be partially staffed by parent volunteers who had completed safeguarding measures such as Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) checks.

5.5 Provision for new parents

Becoming a parent during doctoral study is considered a “change of circumstances” and Northern Bridge’s maternity policy is clear-cut. For the first 26 weeks of maternity leave, a student is entitled to a full-stipend rate (pro-rata for part-time) after which they receive 13 weeks paid at a level commensurate with Statutory Maternity Pay. The situation for those who become fathers during doctoral studies is less straightforward. New fathers are entitled

to two weeks of Ordinary Paternity Leave paid at a full stipend rate beginning from the birth of their child. However, taking paternity leave during a doctorate may be dependent on being granted an interruption to studies. As Jon stated:

There should be two weeks fully paid paternity leave for Northern Bridge students, but I was unable to take an interruption of less than four weeks. In my view, paternity leave was functionally useless. One of the biggest drivers of the gender wage gap and gender division of labour is not having paid paternity leave.

Here Jon referred to two factors within the significant issue of unequal parental leave. Firstly, an entitlement to paid paternity leave helps share how unpaid care responsibilities for children are distributed between parents. Secondly, paid paternity leave helps reduce the structural and historical inequalities in pay. The issue of equality for parental leave is of importance to both PGRs and to postdoctoral researchers seeking teaching posts. In "Show me the money", a comprehensive report into the gender pay gap, published in 2024, HEPI found the median pay gap in English universities to be 11.9%. The "Show me the money" report was supported by Durham University and, in the key findings, Vice Chancellor Karen O'Brien acknowledged that: "Real progress will require long-term strategies and action plans to address inequalities and bring about systemic change." One recommendation by HEPI and Durham University which is relevant to this research was for universities to "encourage and normalise" the uptake of paternity leave and shared parental leave. Normalising family friendly policies, not only in regard to university employees, but also to doctoral students, could lead to a more progressive and proactive approach to paternity leave.

5.6 Childcare and issues of equity

For doctoral students who either become new parents or who already have pre-school children, there are two significant interconnecting challenges: accessing childcare and the

cost of childcare. Parents of young children must generally fit their doctorate within the number of childcare hours for which they can afford to pay a nursery or childminder. In rare instances, students benefit from free childcare hours given voluntarily, usually by a family member(s). Remote student Maija, who switched from full-time candidature to part-time after giving birth to her first child, explained: “Ultimately my problems come down to childcare. I have to work on my PhD on evenings and weekends because of a lack of help with childcare.” Another part-time mother, also a remote student said: “My daughter’s care is a priority that I have to factor in. It is either me taking care of my daughter or paying someone else to do this.” Both parents identify the cost of childcare as a common theme for those who have children between the age of nine months and four-years-old.

Financial assistance for childcare from the government is inaccessible for postgraduates because they do not qualify for the Childcare Grant which is available to undergraduates in England (who are eligible for student finance). Neither can postgraduate researchers access UK government free childcare benefits for workers. To be eligible for 15 hours per week of free childcare for children up to two years of age or for 30 hours for three- and four-year-olds, a parent must earn more than £9,518 p.a.⁸ However, those in receipt of AHRC funding for postgraduate research find they do not qualify for free childcare due to the tax-free status of the stipend.

Research students are exempt from receiving any help with childcare. This is the biggest issue for me. If I declared my stipend as income and paid tax, I would be better off as I would qualify for childcare hours. Or if I got a job and earned over £180 a week and I paid tax, I could qualify. But I don't have the time to work, do a PhD and look after a baby. (Maija)

⁸ From September 2025, eligible working parents in England will receive 30 hours of childcare support for children between nine months and school age. There is no comparative scheme in Northern Ireland. There are additional Tax-Free Childcare schemes in England and Northern Ireland.

This is a complex issue and another interviewee described government legislation in regard to the Northern Bridge stipend as a "grey area", saying that "there is nothing that explicitly rules the stipend out". The financial pressures of starting a family meant that as a new father Jon (a full-time student) had no choice but to increase his hours in paid employment, in order to continue his doctoral studies. By increasing paid work he was able to pay sufficient tax on his income and benefit from free childcare hours. However, in doing so, he exceeded the number of paid work hours stipulated by Northern Bridge. Jon said: "We can't afford childcare otherwise. The other option would have been to drop out of my PhD." Given that on average full-time care for a child costs £14,000 p.a., doctoral students interviewed for this study consistently raised the question of additional support for parents.⁹

A national campaign by the GW4 Alliance, asking for the government to reconsider the gap in subsidised childcare support for postgraduates, is relevant to the findings of this report.¹⁰ The alliance has shown that a lack of entitlement to childcare support creates a financial barrier for parents. GW4's Childcare Campaign also argues that this has created an inequitable system which disproportionately affects lower-income students and/or women. GW4's position, as stated by director Dr Joanna Jenkinson, is that a lack of childcare limits opportunities for the most economically disadvantaged and has a negative impact on the diversity and inclusivity of postgraduate research. In 2025, the alliance called upon the government to make both the government's Childcare Grant and free childcare entitlement accessible to postgraduates.

⁹ This is for a nursery place for a child under the age of two. Data from the Coram Childcare Survey 2023.

¹⁰ GW4 is an alliance of the universities of Bath, Bristol, Cardiff and Exeter. In 2025, GW4's Childcare Campaign call for action referred to Phase 2 of the Government's Spending Review.

6 Networks

6.1 Context

Building or joining and subsequently maintaining a support network aids the development of intellectual and interpersonal connections among postgraduate students. Networks help students negotiate, for example, institutional bureaucracy or departmental issues. Such peer "villages" aid in understanding expectations and offer a sense of belonging (Rainford and Guccione 2024). Networks may also provide broader emotional or wellbeing support and are usually of mutual benefit to all who belong. A supportive "village" could represent a safe space to test out emerging ideas and also function as a place to alert others of opportunities, such as conferences. Existing research demonstrates that networks which allow for honest conversations help with doctoral development (Wilson et al. 2023). Support of this kind may, in the first instance, be as informal as a group messaging service such as WhatsApp.

More formal support networks already in existence tend to be tailored towards specific support groups by individual institutions. These include the Women's Network at Ulster University and the Carers' Network at Newcastle University. The Mothers and Mothers-to-be Support (MAMS) network was established as a grassroots group for staff and postgraduates at Durham University. Overall, support is varied, inconsistent and seemingly under-prioritised.

Barriers to networking are complex and intersect with a sense of belonging. This is significant for part-time PGRs whose professional, private and academic identities may become blurred and possibly messy. On the other hand, their identities might be "compartmentalised and distinct" leading to the sense that they do not quite fit with any networking group (Rainford and Guccione 2024). One interviewee, who is a parent studying

part-time, described how she overcame a feeling of having "my head in two different places" by aiming to have specific hours dedicated either to her academic or to her family life. This feeling has resonance with our investigation into how multiple identities can combine to form highly complex barriers for doctoral students.

6.2 Survey findings

Our research examined disparate experiences of students regarding the concept of "belonging", alongside broader issues of feeling isolated during a doctorate. One research question was: is there equity for all students when it comes to the accessibility and availability of support networks? As part of our evidence-gathering we recognised that a wide range of students struggle with issues raised by our survey. These include confidently identifying oneself as a doctoral student or having difficulty in attaining a sense of belonging within one's institution. Survey participants identified barriers such as age or gender when it comes to feeling like they belonged to a department, to doctoral study or more broadly to a university. A survey respondent wrote that they struggled with a "lack of recognition of being a mature student with other commitments". Another participant raised the issue of age-ism as a "silent prejudice especially if you are a woman".

Balancing roles or juggling different identities, including a day job, self-employment or working short-term contracts may create tensions: often connected to time poverty. Responding to the survey, 56% of respondents said that it was very/somewhat challenging to find time to fit in their paid work around their research. Conversely, our research also highlights those who have a positive part-time experience, precisely because being involved in contrasting or complementing academic and professional disciplines can be beneficial to their development.

The survey found that when asked if loneliness and/or isolation was a challenge, 66% of respondents said it was either very or somewhat challenging. This data is commensurate with 65% of respondents who answered that finding a "good support network that suits you" was either very or somewhat challenging. A third question seeking perspectives on the feeling of "belonging" to a doctoral programme had similar findings. The question asked if "feeling like you don't belong as a postgraduate" was a challenge. It was deliberately phrased to encompass a broad range of issues including, but not limited to, imposter syndrome. In answer to the question, 63% of respondents agreed that feeling like they "belong" was very/somewhat challenging. Feelings of isolation, difficulties of establishing or joining a support network and a sense of belonging all connect to the formation of one's identity as a doctoral researcher. Follow-up interviews to the survey, conducted with volunteers, examined the connections between these areas of concern.

6.3 Either/or: academia versus networking

Time constraints posed by non-academic demands on doctoral students affect their ability to form professional connections and be part of a support network. Time poverty certainly applies to part-time doctoral students who are in paid work and the lack of opportunities for socialisation is intensified for parents or those who care for children or other family members. This can be connected to for example, the school day, school holidays, appointments (whether regular or emergency) and scheduled caring duties. Our research points to networking as severely problematic for those who are juggling a multiplicity of identities. Given our EDI remit, this applies to PGRs who are in paid work, are parents, have caring responsibilities and who also live remotely. Aidan, a carer and father expressed the difficulties he found in building either a professional or a support network:

I do feel disconnected. Caring responsibilities reduce networking from a support point of view. Emails come in about film nights and writing retreats and I haven't done any of these things. Some bits of the summer schools are online so you can be there for the talks, but you miss out on the social aspect. In that regard the PhD experience isn't as socially as rich as if you were living near the university and didn't have responsibilities.

Aidan stated that he has kept his academic studies on track by being able to, for example, visit the university library in the evenings. However, his familial, caring and work commitments have made socialising and networking within the NBC community an impossibility.

6.4 Positive networking and remote study

Part-time students, parents and carers may require plenty of notice (months rather than weeks) before being able to commit to training, conferences or retreats. Likewise, school holidays are a significant issue for parents to negotiate and one student raised the issue of some NBC training events scheduled outside school term times as being prohibitive to those with dependents. Writing retreats and other relevant opportunities which have a fair process of application (rather than first come first served), are found to be positive opportunities for postgraduates who are unable to access other groups or networking opportunities.

Students who live at a distance from their institution are identified as a particular demographic who struggle to either socialise or join networks. A Collaborative Doctoral student, who is a parent and carer, spoke about feeling a sense of isolation during her PhD. She also drew attention to a general lack of support and understanding of the non-academic demands placed on her. However, when she did attend a five-day-long Northern Bridge writing retreat, she found it a beneficial experience.

Having the opportunity to spend time with people and be completely immersed in your own research is a positive experience. Perhaps these opportunities are more

positive for distance learners. I liked that it was facilitated, and it was really important to have the opportunity to meet other candidates. Every single person I talked to brought something to my own research. (Chloe)

This comment highlights the significance of finding a community, if even for a short amount of time. She added: "Having the sustained time to talk to people about their research has felt incredibly valuable. That has done more for my research process than any of the other things." Chloe's experiences chime with the idea of the "village" as a safe space for honest conversations to take place between peers, helping students feel less isolated, if only for short period of time.

6.5 Compulsory events

One problem identified by part-time students in work or with other responsibilities is that they may not necessarily be able to attend compulsory department conferences, thus missing out on networking opportunities. Our research recognises that academic supervisors generally provide good levels of flexibility and understanding. However, such flexibility is not always reflected at an institutional level, as Camille outlines:

I do sometimes feel quite silo-ed and isolated. I was unable to attend a compulsory departmental conference and there was no consideration given to the fact it crossed over with my work days and also that I had caring commitments.

This interviewee said that while she is very well supported by her supervisor who sees the benefits in part-time study, the university can be "tone deaf" to the private and professional commitments of part-time PGRs.

On the other hand, Camille has had positive experiences at the summer schools due the social opportunities because you "get to chat to people". She reflects the consensus from part-time students, parents and carers, that well designed opportunities for networking with their peers are like gold dust. However, our research shows that such opportunities are not

always easily accessible to students who are part-time and/or who are parents or have caring responsibilities. These demographics require time, support and flexibility to organise childcare, take time off work and make alternative arrangements for those they care for. One interviewee suggested that family accommodation be provided at summer schools for parents and/or carers with children or young people. This resonates requests for a more flexible approach generally in terms of access to events for those with commitments.

6.6 Proactive networking

Our quantitative research shows that students who have complex commitments place a high value on opportunities to network and socialise. However, the perception is that such opportunities are generally designed for the majority cohort: full-time students with no dependents who have possibly already formed their own network/s. Thus, at NBC compulsory events such as the summer school, more support could be put in place for those who have not been able to form a peer group. Furthermore, the idea of certain opportunities such as a short writing retreat or event being tailored specifically for part-time students was raised by Camille. "We do have an affiliation and commonality in being part-time. Having a convivial space for us to come together, maybe on a shorter timeframe would work."

With further consultation and reflection, the NBC could consider a proactive solution to the problem of isolation by creating a drop-in monthly online support group. This could be aimed at part-time students, parents and carers, but in line with EDI ethos should not be discriminatory or selective. An online support group could be created at low cost to the NBC, organised and moderated by an administrator. This would allow for honest conversations in a supportive environment, which could lessen feelings of isolation and help doctoral development.

7 Recommendations

The following recommendations are based on evidence gathered during the Beyond Full-Time project. Our recommendations highlight the principle that part-time students, carers and parents should neither be directly nor indirectly discriminated against. This is in accord with the Review of the UKRI Standard Terms and Conditions of Training Grant 2025. The first section of recommendations is relevant to both the NBC and each university and the second section is specific to the NBC, encouraging a progressive and proactive approach.

7.1 Recommendations to the Northern Bridge Consortium and Institutions:

- To provide a consistency of approach to entitle part-time students the flexibility to plot their own hours, allowing for individual work deadlines, teaching hours, training, school holidays etc.
- To introduce a DTP-wide Carer's Policy. Students to be made aware of entitlement to five days of annual Carers Leave and the existence of Regulation Leave for longer term caring. Introduce an easy to navigate system for all carer's leave which is accessible to all.
- To normalise family friendly policies for doctoral students, including the introduction of a more progressive and accessible approach to paternity leave. Partners (those who share primary responsibility for a child) are entitled to two weeks leave on stipend and this should be easily accessible. In accordance with Paternity Leave (Amendment) Regulations 2024, two weeks paid leave may be taken at any point within 52 weeks of a child's birth.
- With the help of media professionals at each university, *actively* promote, publicise and normalise part-time doctoral study, in addition to postgraduate study for parents or carers.

This includes making equal the information available to prospective students in regard to full-time and part-time study.

- Adapt and review the requirements of skills training for students who begin their PhD following a career and/or part-time students who are currently in the workplace. Also to provide more varied training options and career development opportunities.
- Promote the standardisation and availability of childcare on campuses, providing equality of access to PGRs and staff.

7.2 Recommendations to the Northern Bridge Consortium:

- Avoid a first come first served approach to accessing training and always give advance notice of all opportunities. Ensure that overall support available to current part-time students is equal to the support on offer to full-time students. For example, Northern Bridge could fund more training opportunities which are part-time 'friendly'.
- Create an informal online drop-in community aimed at all NBC students who are part-time, carers or parents. This could be a one-hour session held at the same time at monthly intervals. It would be facilitated by one of the NBC administrators who would remain present during the meeting. Consultation and further research would be advisable as to how to further improve networking opportunities.
- Northern Bridge to keep an up-to-date record of part-time students and keep track of changes in status. This will allow for more tailored and effective support.
- To re-evaluate the limit to six hours paid week of work (full-time) for those with dependents or caring responsibilities.
- To consider taking parental and caring responsibilities into account when calculating the stipend.

- To extend large/small grant funding to help with childcare costs. This will improve access to specific or compulsory events such as writing retreats and the summer school.
- To consider ways to provide childcare and family accommodation at the locale of compulsory in-person events such as summer school.
- Be a more visible and active support of parent students. For instance, add the NBC voice to support for the campaign for childcare entitlements to be extended to doctoral researchers.
- Lessen the burden of administrative tasks, e.g. simplify the process of funding travel and accommodation costs.
- Further EDI research is required into the issue of whether the support for student carers, parents and part-timers is adequate, transparent and non-discriminatory. Similarly, research would be welcomed to analyse whether there is parity between full and part-time students regarding official deadlines such as Differentiation/Annual Monitoring Reviews/Annual Progression Reviews.

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