EQUALITY SCREENING PRO - FORMA

Policy Title: Guidance on Extension of Time for Postgraduate Researchers (PGRs)

Decision: Screen out

Contact: Patrick Dunlop

Date of Completion: 3 November 2026

Part 1: Policy Scoping

Information about the policy

Name of the Policy
Guidance on Extension of Time for Postgraduate Researchers (PGRs).

Is this an existing, revised, or new policy?
Revised

What is it trying to achieve? (For example, intended aims and outcomes)
The University offers a series of Postgraduate Research degrees with associated Regulations available on the Doctoral College website. Many Postgraduate Researchers (PGRs) receive funding to undertake their studies via a fixed term Studentship, which includes stipend, tuition fees and a research budget for the duration of the project (typically 3 years). Ulster offers PGR Studentships supported by the Northern Ireland Department for Economy (DfE), UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) - the national funding agency investing in science and research in the UK, and both public and private sources. Opportunity for self-funded study is available, and the University can support members of staff to undertake part time study. Updated DfE Studentship Terms and Conditions for 2026 include an extended range of funded and flexible provision (provision of part-time study, enhanced maternity arrangements, flexible study arrangements and family leave) to ensure equality of opportunity during the Scholarship. The updated DfE Terms and Conditions (T&Cs) were subject to equality screening in July 2025 and screened out for EQIA.

Postgraduate Researchers normally have a fixed period of time to study for their research degree and submit their thesis for examination (typically 3 years, full time). However, should the project not be completed at the programme end date, Extensions of Time (EoT) enable PGRs who are not yet ready to submit their thesis to extend the submission deadline and receive additional supervision, access to resources and support until thesis submission is possible.

The aim of the updated EoT guidance is to 1) reduce the frequency of the EoT paperwork for both PGRs and staff (moving from 3 monthly to 6 monthly paperwork), and 2) introduce a formal academic and wellbeing support checkpoint to tailor assistance to PGRs requesting extension of time (termed a review of progress against deadline (ROPAD) meeting).

Whilst the amount of annual fees payable for extensions of time has not changed, the updated guidance modifies the fee payment schedule to 6 monthly intervals. Support and advice remain available from Fees Office to help spread the costs of the payments, in line with Programme Regulations and Funder requirements.

Are there any Section 75 categories which might be expected to benefit from the policy? If so, explain how below
Religious Belief, Racial Group, Age, Men and Women Generally, Disability and Dependants. This policy applies equally to all Section 75 categories, however, we anticipate that these groups are likely to benefit from it.

Who initiated or wrote the policy?
The Dean of Doctoral College initiated the policy; Head of Doctoral College wrote the policy.

Who owns and implements the policy?
The Dean of Doctoral College owns the policy; Faculty staff implement the policy.

Implementation factors

Are there any factors which could contribute to or weaken the intended aim or outcome of the policy?

Yes

If yes, are they financial, legislative or other?

Financial: Changes to the PGR funding model (extension of funded period by, for example, DfE, UKRI, etcetera). Financial and economic climate in the HE sector.

Legislative: Changes to legislation (for example, SENDO).

Other: Inappropriate or inconsistent implementation of the policy by Faculty.

Main stakeholders affected

Who are the internal and external stakeholders (actual or potential) that the policy will impact upon?

- Staff
- Students
- Other service users (for example: prospective students)
- Other public sector organisations
- Voluntary sector organisations
- Community organisations
- Trade Unions
- Other: PGR funders, including private organisations

Other policies with a bearing on this policy

What are they and who owns them?

Policy: Ulster People Place and Partnership – Delivering Sustainable Futures for All Strategy
Policy owner: Vice Chancellor

Policy: Ulster University Research Strategy 2023-2028
Policy owner: Pro Vice-Chancellor Research

Policy: Code of Practice Professional Integrity in the Conduct of Research
Policy owner: Pro Vice-Chancellor Research

Policy: Tuition Fees policy and Miscellaneous Fees
Policy owner: Chief Finance Officer

Available evidence

What evidence or information (both qualitative and quantitative) have you gathered to inform this policy? Please specify details for each of the Section 75 categories below.

Religious Belief

The University's EO data were reviewed. On 6 February 2026, our staff profile was 53.9% Catholic and 46.1% Protestant. Compared with 6 February 2021, this indicates a 3.9% increase in Catholic staff.

In the Academic Year (AY) 2025 to 2026, 70.1% of our students identified as Christian and 12.9% identified as having 'No Religion'. Compared with AY 2020 to 2021, this indicates an 3.7% increase in students who identified as Christian and a 2.4% increase in students who identified as having 'No Religion'.

In the Academic Year (AY) 2025 to 2026, 59.9% of our PGR identified as Christian and 18.4% identified as having 'No Religion'. Compared with AY 2021 to 2022, this indicates an 24.1% increase in students who identified as Christian and a 5.5% increase in students who identified as having 'No Religion'. We also note a 17.9% decrease in PGR students who identified as Muslim during this time period, we attribute this to changes in UK Home Office policy and student visa regulations.

Political Opinion

The University does not collect information on Political Opinion or make assumptions regarding Political Opinion based on Community Background.

Racial Group

The University's EO data were reviewed. On 6 February 2026, our staff profile was 92.0% White and 8.0% Black and Minority Ethnic (BME). This indicates a 2% increase in BME staff compared with 2021.

In AY 2025 - 2026, 11.6% of students identified as BME. This indicates a 5.8% increase in BME students compared with AY 2020 to 2021.

In AY 2025 - 2026, 23.7% of PGRs identified as BME. This indicates a 22.4% decrease in BME PGRs compared with AY 2020 to 2021. However, the PGR community remains more diverse than the staff and undergraduate community, and

the local NI population, as the Northern Ireland Census 2021 suggests that 3.4% of the NI population is BME.

Age

The University's EO data were reviewed. On 6 February 2026, 29.7% of our staff were in the 46-55 age band and 26.0% of staff were in the 36-45 age band. 25.2% of staff were aged '56 and above', which represents a 0.8% increase in staff aged '56 and above' compared to 2021.

In AY 2025 to 2026, the majority of students (57.2%) were aged '21 and under 40'. This indicates a 7.6% decrease in students in this category since AY 2020 to 2021. The proportion of students within the '18 and under 21' category has increased by 9% compared to 2021, sitting now at 33.7%.

In AY 2025 to 2026, the majority of PGRs (72.6%) were aged '21 and under 40'. This indicates a 7.3% decrease in PGR in this category since AY 2020 to 2021. The proportion of PGRs aged 40+ has increased by 7.3% compared to 2021, now at 27.5% of the cohort.

Marital Status

The University's EO data were reviewed. In February 2026, 55.1% of staff were 'Married or in a Civil Partnership', a decrease of 4.8% compared to 2021.

In AY 2025 to 2026, 77.8% of students were 'Single', a 9.3% increase compared with AY 2020 to 2021.

In AY 2025 to 2026, 34.9% of PGRs were 'married or in a registered civil partnership' a 6.0% increase compared with AY 2020 to 2021.

Sexual Orientation

The University's EO data were reviewed. In 2026, 75.5% of staff were 'Heterosexual'; 5.0% were 'Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual (LGB)' and 19.5% were 'Not Known'. This indicates a 2.3% increase in LGB staff compared with 2021.

Although we collect student data, including PGR, on sexual orientation, this is not considered to be reliable.

Men and Women generally

The University's EO data were reviewed. In 2026, 58.0% of staff were 'Female'. This indicates a 2% increase in female staff compared with 2021.

In AY 2025 to 2026, 58.8% of students were 'Female', a 0.4% decrease compared with AY 2020 to 2021.

In AY 2025 to 2026, 55.3% of PGRs were 'Female', a 6.9% increase compared with AY 2020 to 2021.

Disability

The University's EO data were reviewed. In 2026, 7.2% of staff declared a disability, an increase of 2.3% compared with 2021.

In AY 2025 to 2026, 8.3% of students declared a disability, a decrease of 3.8% compared with AY 2020 to 2021.

In AY 2025 to 2026, 13.0% of PGRs declared a disability, an increase of 4.0% compared with AY 2020 to 2021.

Our disability declaration rate is lower than expected, compared with the local population. The NI Census (2021) found that 24% of the NI population stated that their day-to-day activities were limited because of a long-standing health problem or disability.

Dependants

The University's EO data were reviewed. In 2026, 43.4% of staff had dependants. This indicates an increase of 5% compared with 2021.

In AY 2025 to 2026, 11.2% of students declared they had dependants, a decrease of 1.4% compared to AY 2020 to 2021.

In AY 2025 to 2026, 28.6% of PGR declared they had dependants, a decrease of 7.8% compared to AY 2020 to 2021.

Needs, experience and priorities

Taking into account the information referred to above, what are the different needs, experiences and priorities of each of the following categories, in relation to the particular policy or decision? (Please specify for each of the Section 75 categories below the needs, experiences and priorities)

The following sources were reviewed in relation to PGR needs, experiences and priorities:

- A review into the working environment of PhD students, PhD Life: The UK student experience (HEPI Report 131), Bethan Cornell (2020), ISBN: 978-1-908240-67-5.
- The Nature Global PhD Experience Survey 2025, Linda Nordling, *Nature* 646, 247-250 (2025).
- Assessment of UKRI's Terms and Conditions of Training Grants from an Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Perspective, Ellen Pugh for Advance HE, (2023).
- Literature review on EDI barriers to postgraduate research relevant to funding, Panagiota Sotiropoulou for Advance HE (2022).
- Survey of UK practice in relation to monitoring and calculating PGR completion rates, distributed via the Academic Registrar's Council, available within papers from Ulster Doctoral College Board, 23rd April 2026.

Religious Belief

Anecdotally, the majority of international PGRs are from minoritised ethnic groups with non-Christian religious beliefs. Financial pressures can provide significant challenge for international students when their stipend has finished (typically after 3-years) and extensions are required. Some PGRs could require alternative payment structures or grace periods due to religious fasting schedules or observances, which can be managed by the Fees Office. International students require a Student Visa to be issued by the Home Office UK Visas and Immigration (UKVI) authority - for PGRs this is usually of 4 year duration to cover 3 year programme, plus an additional year for viva examination and corrections. For this group, an increase in visa related stress is sometimes observed in the latter stages of their programme, however, a process to apply for a visa extension is available, with advice provided by the University UKVI Attendance and Engagement Team and the International Student Advisory Service.

Political Opinion

None identified

Racial Group

Anecdotally, the majority of international PGRs are from minoritised ethnic groups. Financial pressures add significant challenge to this group when their stipend has finished (typically after 3-years) and extensions are required. UKVI Student Visa conditions add pressure to complete by a specific deadline (typically 4-years), however PGRs are supported by a process to apply for a visa extension with advice provided by the University UKVI Attendance and Engagement Team and the International Student Advisory Service.

Age

Older PGRs are more likely to have caring responsibilities for elderly parents and children, with increasing demands on their time leading to request for extension. The Nature Global PhD Experience Survey 2025 identifies that 25% of PGRs worry about balancing their studies with family and caring responsibilities.

Older PGRs returning to study may be impacted financially by lower levels of stipend than previous salaried employment.

As PGRs age they are more likely to acquire disability that requires additional time off.

Marital Status

None identified

Sexual Orientation

None identified

Men and Women generally

PGRs may require time off during pregnancy and maternity (supported provision is available during funded period with extension to submission date) but this could contribute to requests for extension of time.

The recent Advance HE review describes that women are more likely to drop out due to a financial hardship associated with childcare costs and caring responsibilities than males.

Disability

In accordance with legislation, PGRs are supported by Student Wellbeing during their study with Reasonable Adjustments, however, as PGRs age they are more likely to acquire disability that requires additional time off.

An Open University report recognises increasing prevalence of mental health challenges (and awareness of) within the PGR community, with the Nature Global

PhD Experience Survey 2025 citing mental health as a concern for 31% of the global sample. A recent Advance HE review describes that 1 in 2 PGR students experienced mental health difficulties and 1 in 3 PGR students were at risk of experiencing depression during their course. Challenges associated with mental health were cited as the most common reason for dropping out of a postgraduate research degree.

Dependants
Older PGRs may have more caring responsibilities for elderly parents and children with increasing demands on their time leading to request for extension.

The recent Advance HE review describes that student parents may consider dropping out of their degrees due to demands associated with being a student and a parent.

Normally a higher proportion of international PGRs have dependants when compared to members of the 'home' PGR community.

Consultation

Consultation with relevant groups, organisations or individuals about the policy can provide useful information about issues or opportunities which are specifically related to them (that is evidence to inform the policy).

Please indicate whether you carried out or intend to carry out any consultation exercises prior to equality screening?

Yes, the following were consulted in the development of this policy:

- All PGR students
- All PhD Supervisors
- UUSU and Doctoral College PhD Representatives
- Postgraduate Tutors
- Research Directors
- Doctoral College Leadership Team
- Doctoral College Executive
- Doctoral College Board

Part 2: Screening questions

Introduction

The answers to the following screening questions will assist the University in making a decision whether or not there is a need to carry out an equality impact assessment on the policy. The following information is provided to help you to identify and comment on the level of likely impact of the policy in question 1 to 4.

Select 'major' impact if:

a) The policy is significant in terms of its strategic importance;

b) Potential equality impacts are unknown, because, for example, there are insufficient data upon which to make an assessment or because they are complex, and it would be appropriate to conduct an equality impact assessment in order to better assess them;

c) Potential equality and/or good relations impacts are likely to be adverse or are likely to be experienced disproportionately by groups of people including those who are marginalised or disadvantaged;

d) Further assessment offers a valuable way to examine the evidence and develop recommendations in respect of a policy about which there are concerns amongst affected individuals and representative groups, for example in respect of multiple identities;

e) The policy is likely to be challenged by way of judicial review;

f) The policy is significant in terms of expenditure.

Select 'minor' impact if:

a) The policy is not unlawfully discriminatory and any residual potential impacts on people are judged to be negligible;

b) The policy, or certain proposals within it, are potentially unlawfully discriminatory, but this possibility can readily and easily be eliminated by making appropriate changes to the policy or by adopting appropriate mitigating measures;

c) Any asymmetrical equality impacts caused by the policy are intentional because they are specifically designed to promote equality of opportunities for particular groups of disadvantaged people;

d) By amending the policy there are better opportunities to better promote equality of opportunity and/or good relations;

e) Differential impact observed and opportunities exist to better promote equality of opportunity and/or good relations.

Select 'none' if:

a) The policy has no relevance to equality of opportunity or good relations;

b) The policy is purely technical in nature and will have no bearing in terms of its likely impact on equality of opportunity or good relations.

Taking into account the evidence presented in Part 1, please complete the screening questions (Question 1 to 4).

Screening questions

1. What is the likely impact on equality of opportunity for those affected by this policy, for each of the Section 75 categories?

   Details of the likely policy impacts on **Religious Belief**
   The policy is likely to impact on equality of opportunity for this group as it provides flexibility in relation to study arrangements and payment schedule to enable students to meet their religious observance requirements.

   What is the level of impact?
   Minor +

   Details of the likely policy impacts on **Political Opinion**
   The policy is unlikely to impact on equality of opportunity for this group as it bears no relevance to political opinion.

   Level of impact
   None

   Details of the likely policy impacts on **Racial Group**
   The policy is likely to impact on equality of opportunity for this group as it provides flexibility in relation to study arrangements, fee payment schedules and grace periods to enable students to meet religious observance requirements.

   Level of impact
   Minor +

   Details of the likely policy impacts on **Age**
   The policy is likely to impact on equality of opportunity for this group as it provides flexibility in relation to study arrangements, fee payment schedules and grace periods to enable students to balance their studies with caring responsibilities.

   Level of impact
   Minor +

   Details of the likely policy impacts on **Marital Status**

The policy is unlikely to impact on equality of opportunity for this group as it bears no relevance to marital status.

Level of impact
None

Details of the likely policy impacts on **Sexual Orientation**
The policy is unlikely to impact on equality of opportunity for this group as it bears no relevance to sexual orientation.

Level of impact
None

Details of the likely policy impacts on **Men and Women generally**
The policy is likely to impact on equality of opportunity for this group as it provides flexibility in relation to study arrangements, fee payment schedule and grace periods to enable students to balance their studies with caring responsibilities.

Level of impact
Minor +

Details of the likely policy impacts on **Disability**
The policy is likely to impact on equality of opportunity for this group as it provides flexibility in relation to study arrangements, fee payment schedule and grace periods to enable students to maximise reasonable adjustments and wellbeing.

Level of impact
Minor +

Details of the likely policy impacts on **Dependants**
The policy is likely to impact on equality of opportunity for this group as it provides flexibility in relation to study arrangements, fee payment schedule and grace periods to enable students to balance their studies with family and caring responsibilities.

Level of impact
Minor +

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2. Are there opportunities to better promote equality of opportunity for people within the Section 75 categories?

Religious Belief
No, the policy sets out to provide flexibility in relation to study arrangements, fee payment schedules and grace periods to enable students to meet religious observance requirements.

Political Opinion
No, the policy has no relevance to equality of opportunity for people within this category.

Racial Group
No, the policy sets out to provide flexibility in relation to study arrangements, fee payment schedules and grace periods to enable students to meet religious observance requirements.

Age
No, the policy sets out to provide flexibility in relation to study arrangements, fee payment schedule and grace periods to enable students to balance their studies with family and caring responsibilities and maximise reasonable adjustments and wellbeing.

Marital Status
No, the policy has no relevance to equality of opportunity for people within this category.

Sexual Orientation
No, the policy has no relevance to equality of opportunity for people within this category.

Men and Women generally
No, the policy sets out to provide flexibility in relation to study arrangements, fee payment schedule and grace periods to enable students to balance their studies with family and caring responsibilities.

Disability
No, the policy sets out to provide flexibility in relation to study arrangements, fee payment schedule and grace periods to enable students to maximise reasonable adjustments and wellbeing.

Dependants
No, the policy sets out to provide flexibility in relation to study arrangements, fee payment schedule and grace periods to enable students to balance their studies with family and caring responsibilities.

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3. To what extent is the policy likely to impact on good relations between people of different religious belief, political opinion or racial group?

Religious Belief
Details of the likely policy impacts on **Religious Belief**
The policy is unlikely to impact on good relations for this group as it has no relevance to good relations.

Level of impact
None

Political Opinion
Details of the likely policy impacts on **Political Opinion**
The policy is unlikely to impact on good relations for this group as it has no relevance to good relations.

Level of impact
None

Racial Group
Details of the likely policy impacts on **Racial Group**

The policy is unlikely to impact on good relations for this group as it has no relevance to good relations.

Level of impact
None

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4. Are there opportunities to better promote good relations between people of different religious belief, political opinion or racial group?

Religious Belief
The policy is unlikely to better promote good relations for this group as it has no relevance to good relations.

Level of impact
None

Political Opinion
The policy is unlikely to better promote good relations for this group as it has no relevance to good relations.

Level of impact
None

Racial Group
The policy is unlikely to better promote good relations for this group as it has no relevance to good relations.

Level of impact
None

Additional considerations

Multiple identity

5. Generally speaking, people can fall into more than one Section 75 category. Taking this into consideration, are there any potential impacts of the policy or decision on people with multiple identities? (For example, disabled minority ethnic

people; disabled women; young Protestant men, and young lesbians, gay and bisexual people).

Yes

Please specify the relevant Section 75 categories concerned below.
Provide details of the policy impact and data which describes the policy impact.

Religious Belief, Racial Group, Age, Men and Women Generally, Disability and Dependants. All those impacted by this Policy comprise multiple identities, and it is envisaged that its focus on delivering flexibility in relation to study arrangements and fee payment schedules will have a minor positive impact on PGR experience.

Disability Duties

6. Does the policy provide an opportunity to encourage disabled people to participate in University life?

   Yes. The policy is likely to encourage disabled students to participate in University life as it provides flexibility in relation to study arrangements maximising reasonable adjustments and wellbeing.

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7. Does the policy provide an opportunity to promote positive attitudes towards disabled people?

   No, the policy sets out to provide guidance on how PGRs can obtain extensions of time to their thesis submission date.

Part 3: Screening decision

Based on the evidence considered and outlined in Part 1 and the responses to the screening questions (Part 2), please indicate the screening decision for this policy.

Note: The University should take particular care not to screen out policies that have a procurement aspect if there is potential to promote equality of opportunity through the procurement of services.

☐ **Screen in** the policy (that is, subject to an Equality Impact Assessment). The likely impact is **major** in respect of one, or more of the equality of opportunity or good relations categories.

☐ **Screen out** the policy without mitigation or an alternative policy proposed to be adopted (that is, **no** Equality Impact Assessment). The likely impact is **none** in respect of all of equality of opportunity or good relations categories.

☒ **Screen out** the policy and **mitigate the impacts on equality** by **amending or changing the policy**, or by **developing an alternative policy or action** (that is, **no** Equality Impact Assessment). The likely impact is **minor** in respect of one or more of the equality of opportunity or good relations categories.

If the decision is to subject the policy to an equality impact assessment (that is, 'screen in' the policy), please provide details of the reasons.

Not applicable.

If the decision is not to conduct an equality impact assessment (that is, 'screen out' the policy), please provide details for the reasons.

Not applicable.

If the decision is not to conduct an equality impact assessment (that is, 'screen out' the policy), and mitigate the impacts on equality of opportunity by amending or changing the policy, or by developing an alternative policy or action, please provide reasons to support your decision, together with the proposed changes, amendments or alternative policy.

The likely impact is **minor** in respect of one or more of the equality of opportunity or good relations categories, however this impact is likely to be positive.

The policy sets out to provide guidance on how PGRs can obtain extensions of time to their thesis submission date.

In line with University policy, the final approved policy will be reviewed 2 years post-implementation, and if necessary, amended.

Timetabling and prioritising

If the policy had been **'screened in'** for an equality impact assessment, then please answer the following questions to determine its priority for timetabling the equality impact assessment.

On a scale of 1 to 3, with 1 being the lowest priority and 3 being the highest, assess the policy in terms of its priority for equality impact assessment.

Priority rating for timetabling the equality impact assessment in terms of effect on equality of opportunity and good relations:

Not applicable.

Priority rating for timetabling the equality impact assessment in terms of social need

Not applicable.

Priority rating for timetabling the equality impact assessment in terms of effect on people's daily lives

Not applicable.

Priority rating for timetabling the equality impact assessment in terms of relevance to the University's functions

Not applicable.

Note: The Total Rating Score will be used to prioritise the policy in rank order with other policies screened in for equality impact assessment. This list of priorities will assist the University in timetabling. Details of the University's Equality Impact Assessment Timetable will be included in its quarterly Screening Reports.

Is the policy affected by timetables established by other relevant public authorities?
Not applicable.

Approval and authorisation

Screened by: 
Position or Job Title: Pro Vice-Chancellor Research
Date screened: 10 June 2026

Approved by: 
Position or Job Title: Chief People Officer
Date approved: 3 November 2026

Review

This policy is due for review (in terms of its impact on equality of opportunity and good relations) by the policy owner on 3 November 2028.