

# Part-Time PhD Students

*Problems faced by part-time PhD students at UCL, and  
recommendations for improvement*

*A report by the UCLU Postgraduate Association  
May 2012*

**UCLU**  
University College London Union



## **Introduction**

UCLU and the Postgraduate Association (PGA) are committed to campaigning for the right to freely access all levels of education, and against financial hardship and other injustices that compromise the ability of some to exercise this right or otherwise to benefit fully from their programmes. Part-time PhD students are a significant group within UCL (22% of all doctoral students<sup>1</sup>) that faces particular problems. In 2011, a number of these students began to organise and lobby for improvements. They brought their concerns to UCLU in the form of a motion that was voted through<sup>2</sup>, establishing a Union campaign to improve conditions for part-time PhD students.

In Spring 2012, the Postgraduate Association administered a survey of part-time PhD students in order to establish more clearly the situation across UCL. This report will use that survey, UCLU's existing policies, and other claims, reports and requests that we have received, as the basis of a number of recommendations addressed to both UCLU and UCL.

*For more information about any part of this report, or the campaign around part-time PhD students' conditions, please contact the Postgraduate Association President via [uclu-pga.officer@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:uclu-pga.officer@ucl.ac.uk).*

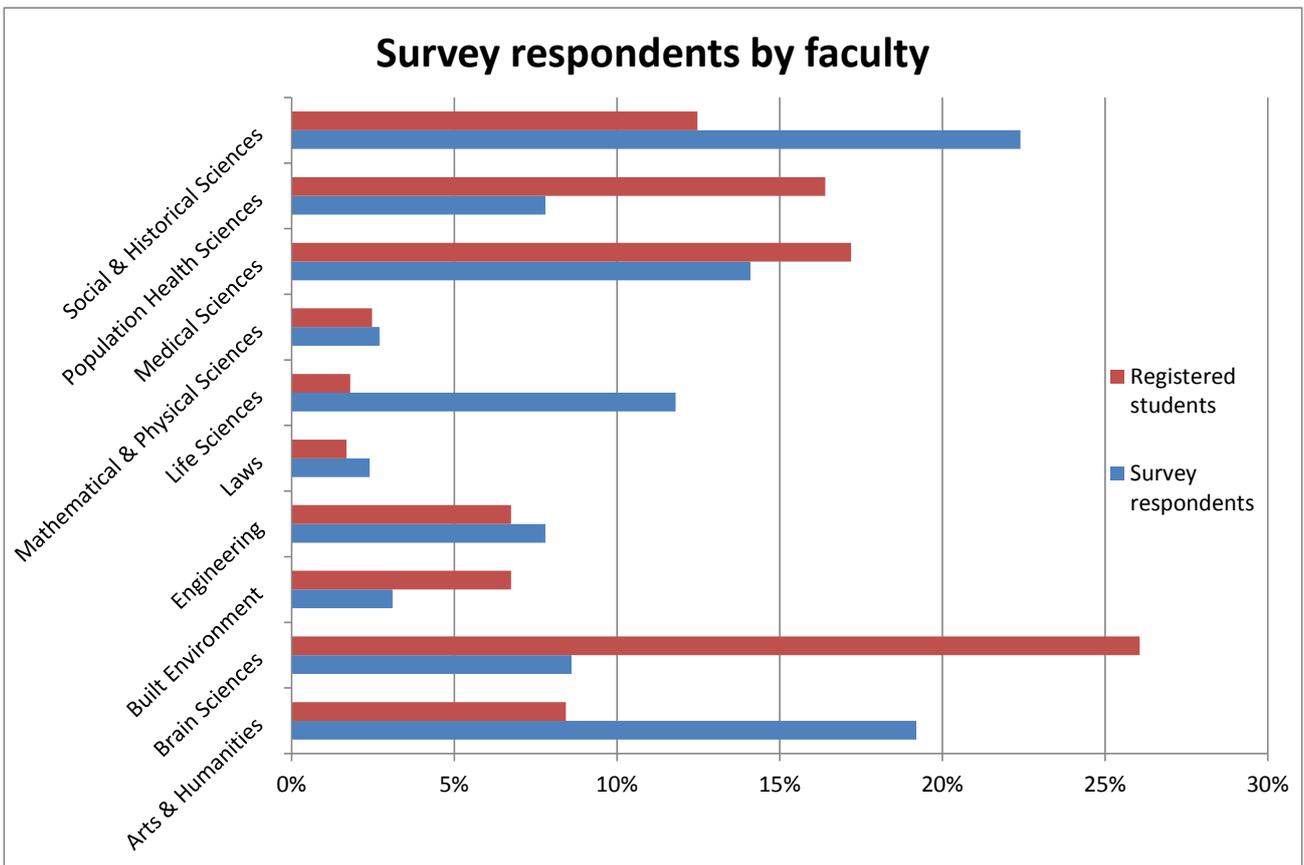
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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/ras/statistics/current/L1>

<sup>2</sup> UCLU Union Policy UP1107 "Motion to establish a campaign against the injustices facing part-time Ph.D. students"  
<http://uclu.org/sites/uclu.org/files/migration/student-union/union-policy/up1107.pdf>

## The survey

The question set for the survey (Appendix 1) was developed jointly by part-time students who had already been lobbying on the problems they faced, the PGA, and the Graduate School. The survey was open for one month in January and February 2012, and was promoted by emails from the PGA, the Graduate School and interested students, and via Facebook. It received 255 responses – over one quarter of all part-time research students, a strong sample.



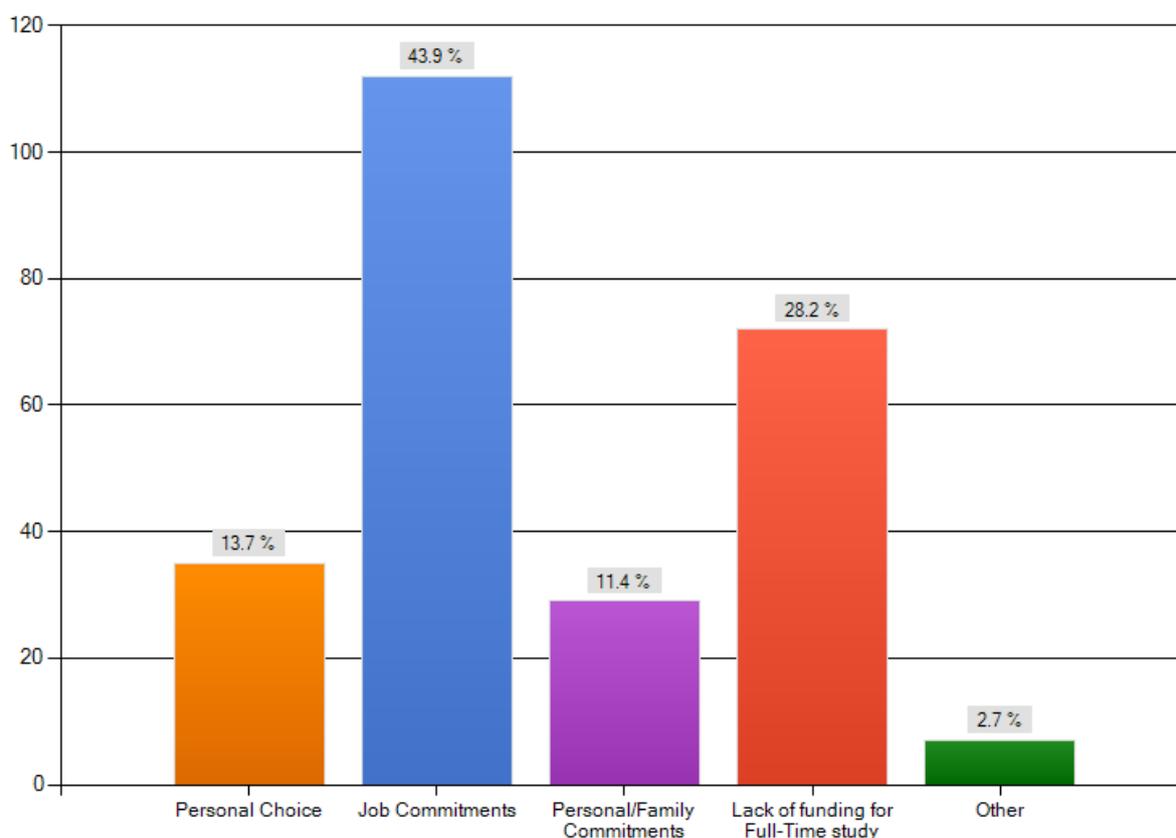
There was a fair and proportionate number of respondents from most faculties, at least given the small numbers actually registered in some. There was a surprisingly large number of Life Sciences respondents, and small number from Brain Sciences, however this is probably because some students are unaware of the new faculty structure and believed themselves to be in Life Sciences when they are actually now registered in the new Brain Sciences faculty. Further details of the respondent demographics can be found in Appendix 2.

## **The situation facing part-time PhD students**

Please note that not all the survey data are considered here – we have focussed on those questions that shed light on issues about which we believe we can make useful recommendations. Please contact the Postgraduate Association President via [ucl-pga.officer@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:ucl-pga.officer@ucl.ac.uk) if you would like any other information about these or the rest of the survey results.

Students undertake doctoral programmes part-time for a variety of reasons. The majority (55%) cite job, personal or family commitments, while a further 14% cite personal choice. However, a substantial 28% are forced to do so by the lack of funding for full-time study. 39% of students said they would shift to full-time status if the funding was available (and 28% were unsure).

**Why did you choose to enrol on a part-time research course?**

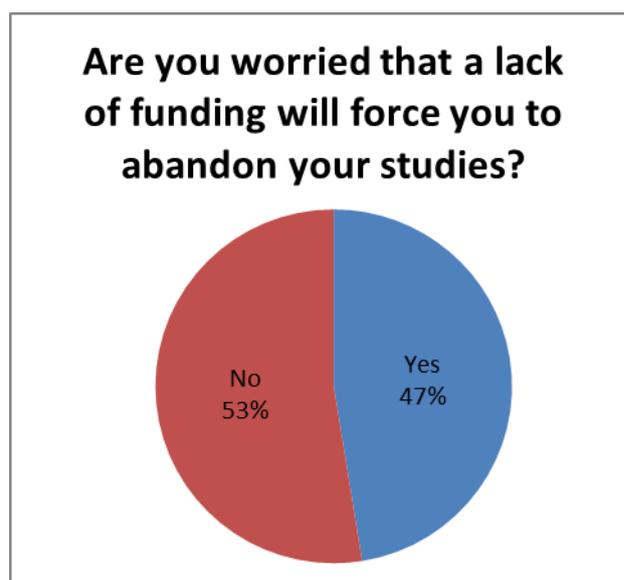


In effect, they are forced into part-time status by a lack of studentships which would allow them to support full-time studies. This should be seen in the context of a national situation in which provision of studentships does not meet the demand from qualified prospective students, and in which cuts are worsening the situation (with, for instance, the EPSRC reducing the number of studentships offered by one third<sup>3</sup>). There is a striking injustice in students deemed qualified to enter doctoral study, working to produce research which is associated with UCL and benefits the institution, but being required not only to support themselves, but to pay fees for the privilege. It should be noted that these fees sometimes rise unpredictably year-on-year above inflation, destabilising students who do not know whether they will be able to continue their work next year.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?storycode=417022>

This is borne out by the funding sources reported by students. Only 22% received any funding from a governmental, charitable or commercial sponsor, with the rest dependent on a mixture of personal sources. Only 8% had personal loans (presumably it is difficult to persuade a bank to fund a loan for lengthy doctoral studies). So 67% of respondents needed to work outside their studies, and 47% relied on savings or family support. This final statistic is particularly concerning. Both UCL and UCLU profess a commitment to making education open to all on the basis of merit, not wealth – yet nearly half of these students are reliant on private wealth to make it through our programmes. The implication is obvious – many capable potential students from poorer backgrounds or whose families will not or cannot support them will never have made it to UCL, or are at risk of having to drop out. Additionally, with the job market in its current state, even supporting yourself through work is likely becoming an increasingly difficult prospect. It is therefore perhaps unsurprising that 89% of respondents agreed that UCL should offer dedicated funding opportunities to part-time students.

The funding situation is having a serious impact on many students. Over a fifth report that they “Struggle” to finance their living expenses and fees, and 32% have considered leaving their degrees – of which 63% cite personal and/or project funding as a reason. In free text comments, others cited the difficulty of juggling their studies with the substantial work commitments necessary to fund their fees and living expenses. Almost half of all respondents (47%) were at least *worried* that funding problems could force them to stop studying, and this – along with the difficulty of juggling work and study – likely contributed to the reports from 49% that they suffered more than a little stress (moderate or extreme levels).

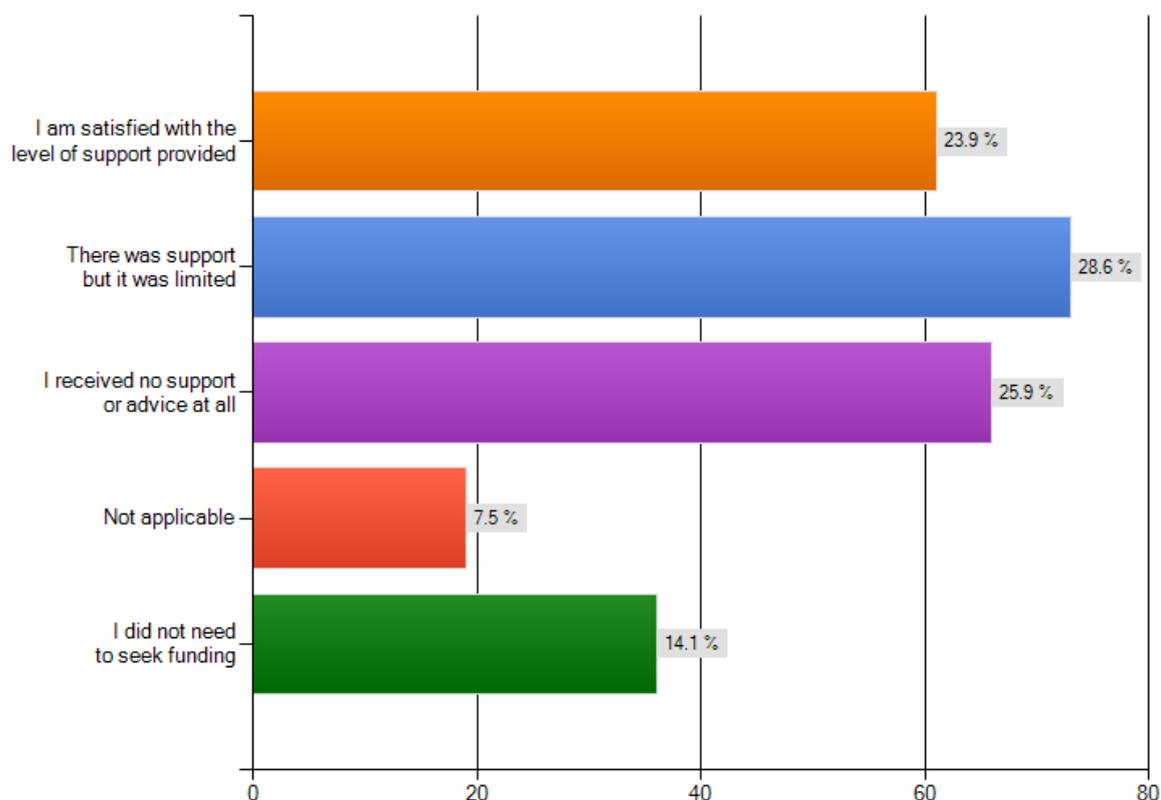


In their comments, students recognised the lack of funding opportunities available, and the extreme levels of competition around the funding that does exist. Nevertheless, there is clearly demand for more information, advice and guidance about seeking funding. 78% of respondents were able to rate the support and advice offered by their department to help them obtain funding (the rest reported not needing to seek funding, or this not applying in some other way). Of these, 33% received no support or advice whatsoever, and a further 37% reported only limited support (see graph below). Revealing comments included:

- “Information on departmental websites was misleading/wrong, notable [sp] with respect to deadlines.”
- “No one in the department could answer whether I could apply for certain scholarships. Emails were not answered”

- “I had to personally dig for information on the Staff Assistance Scheme, as no one in the department was able to give clear guidance that I was eligible for it”

**How do you rate the support and advice offered by your Department to help you obtain funding for your fees and living expenses? Please give details.**



A number of other issues were raised by respondents, many in open comments. Many of these chimed with reports and complaints that UCLU and the PGA have received separately from students.

- Council Tax and Transport for London (TfL) discounts. To be eligible for these, students must be full-time. However, the definition of “full-time” is at least 21 hours of study per week for 24 weeks per year for Council Tax<sup>4</sup> and “studying or writing up for 15 or more hours a week” for TfL discounts<sup>5</sup>. Given that part-time PhD students would ordinarily significantly exceed such a workload, and that so many of them are forced to self-fund both living expenses and fees (in contrast to many full-time students on stipends), it seems unfair to classify them officially as part-time and to deny them this discount. Criticisms of the situation in survey comments ranged from “problematic” to “outrageous”.
- The Study Assistance Scheme. It was reported that the discount offered to staff did not keep pace with fee changes, so that when fees rose, the same proportion was not covered.
- Isolation. A number of respondents complained that it was difficult to integrate with the rest of the student body and the academic community.
- The Research Student Log. Respondents reported that the Log did not recognise part-time students properly. Problems included:

<sup>4</sup>[http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/EducationAndLearning/UniversityAndHigherEducation/LifeAtUniversityOrCollege/DG\\_071488](http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/EducationAndLearning/UniversityAndHigherEducation/LifeAtUniversityOrCollege/DG_071488)

<sup>5</sup><http://www.tfl.gov.uk/tickets/14312.aspx>

- The Log failing to recognise non-standard routes and timelines
- The Log getting out of sync if the student took a break from studies
- Starting part-way through the year, the lack of an immediate induction session meant that some students did not know how to use the Log.
- Work space. Students found it difficult to work, or to feel part of their department, when not given a desk or physical work facilities.
- General information, advice and guidance. Not being on campus full-time made it difficult for students to quickly obtain information about IT and Library services when they arrived at UCL
- Skills Training. Respondents reported that opportunities offered by the Graduate School were often difficult to access for those working outside UCL during standard office hours, or caring for dependents outside of school/daycare hours.

A selection of responses to free text questions may be found in Appendix 3.

## **The policy position of UCLU and the PGA**

UCLU and the Postgraduate Association have a number of relevant policy positions established via our democratic processes, notably our commitment to campaign against fees and for free, publicly-funded education, accessible to all<sup>6</sup>. Our particular policy on part-time PhD students<sup>7</sup> directs us to campaign in particular around the following principles:

- 1. The lack of financial support and the rising fee levels are major blocks to the accessibility of postgraduate education and in the context of cuts and high unemployment the situation is worsening.*
- 2. At the national level, all postgraduate fees should be frozen, capped and regulated as a minimum precursor to their abolition. It is particularly unacceptable for fees to rise unpredictably in the middle of a course of study.*
- 3. Part-time students should receive student discounts on public transport and council tax as they fulfil the definition of student. We will seek to campaign on this in cooperation with other student unions, and call on UCL to support us.*
- 4. To expect research students to support themselves and pay fees while working tens of hours per week actively contributing to UCL's research output is unreasonable and unfair. UCL should seek to secure decent financial support for all its PhD students, part- and full-time, appropriate to the proportion of their time spent studying. UCL should pursue this goal by providing funding itself and by joining a call for government and other funders to create more studentships.*
- 5. In general UCL should keep itself better apprised of its own students' funding situations in order to understand and be able to act on the problems they face.*
- 6. Increases to UCL fees after course entry should not exceed inflation, and fee levels for the whole course should be clear and explicit upon application.*
- 7. UCL should offer (where not developed yet) structured, decently paid teaching opportunities to all interested research students.*
- 8. The graduate Skills Development provision should be more easily accessible to part-time students, e.g. including more weekend and evening classes and courses.*

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<sup>6</sup> Most recently re-confirmed by UP1108 <http://uclu.org/sites/uclu.org/files/migration/student-union/union-policy/up1108-amended-151111.pdf> and UP1019 <http://uclu.org/sites/uclu.org/files/migration/student-union/union-policy/up1019.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> UP1107 <http://uclu.org/sites/uclu.org/files/migration/student-union/union-policy/up1107.pdf>

## **Recommendations**

Based on the survey and UCLU policy, therefore, the Postgraduate Association has a number of recommendations at this time – for itself, for the Union, and for UCL.

### *Recommendations to the PGA/UCLU*

UCLU and the Postgraduate Association have a duty to provide for all sectors of our membership. These recommendations would help us to ensure we are doing our job with respect to part-time PhD students.

- Continue to campaign on a London-wide basis for the extension of Council Tax and TfL discounts to part-time PhD students, by cooperating with ULU, NUS, and other London student unions. This has already begun. We asked candidates in the May 2012 elections to pledge to do both of these things. Post-election, we will be following this up by reminding elected officials of their pledges, and by continuing to pursue the issue with those who did not sign.
- Increase the social provision for part-time students. We should expand our social programme to provide events at different times, such as weekends. For instance, Saturday brunch in the Print Room Café.
- Work with UCLU Rights & Advice Centre to publish improved guidance for part-time PhD students on issues such as work-life balance and accessing benefits.
- Draw up and submit proposals for a jointly organised PGA-Graduate School annual event to promote research collaboration for part-time students.
- Continue our public campaigns for free, fair and funded education and research and against government budget cuts, and increase the profile of PhD funding provision within them.

### *Recommendations for UCL, the Graduate School and departments*

UCL relies on the research work of PhD students and has a duty of care towards them. There are a number of ways in which it could better fulfil that duty, which would help UCL fulfil its mission by improving the experience of students, access and retention, and the quality of our academic community.

- The Graduate School should contact TfL and London councils to explain that part-time PhD students exceed the workloads that would qualify them for “full-time” discounts, and asking that they therefore extend the discounts to those students.
- Commit never to increase fees above inflation rate in the middle of a programme.
- The Study Assistance Scheme for UCL staff should always cover the same proportion of the fees throughout a programme.
- Improve information, advice and guidance for part-time PhD students seeking funding. Every department should be required to create an accessible guide explaining all the funding opportunities relevant to that field, with advice on how and when to apply, and with specific information for UK, EU, and overseas students. These guides should be kept rigorously up to date. The guide should provide information appropriate to both incoming and current students, and should be made accessible to prospective students as soon as they express an interest in applying.
- Adapt the Research Log to better take into account part-time students’ circumstances. If more information is required, it may be advisable to recruit a focus group of students who can highlight problems with the Log.
- Increase opening hours of facilities. We support the proposal for UCL’s library facilities to open 24 hours. Security provisions should also be made to ensure that other departments and study

facilities are also kept open, and that it is safe to work in them at unorthodox hours. Current opening hours of many facilities prevent part-time students studying at times appropriate to their work and caring schedules.

- Every department should be required to show how its part-time research students are adequately and fairly provided with workspace and facilities.
- Introduce more frequent small induction sessions throughout the year. One possibility could be to “activate” an induction session as soon as a certain number of additional PhD students are registered. A system along these lines is in place at, for example, Loughborough University.
- Use UCL’s prominent public position as an elite respected university to speak out against the funding situation facing PhD students. Ultimately, UCL cannot completely resolve a lack of public funding internally. However, it can significantly increase pressure on the government by using its platform to raise the profile of the issue in the public eye. UCL must join its staff and students by publicly and prominently opposing funding cuts to research, education and studentships, and explaining the case for the benefits to society of free, fair, fully funded public education and research, paid for by progressive taxation of relatively wealthier individuals and businesses. It should use its positions within UUK and the Russell Group to encourage other universities and those organisations to do the same.

## **Appendix 1 – The survey question set**

1. Why did you choose to enrol on a part-time research course?
  - Personal Choice
  - Job Commitments
  - Personal/Family Commitments
  - Lack of funding for Full-Time study
  - Other
2. How do you finance your studies? Tick all that apply.
  - Government funding body (e.g. Research Councils)
  - Charitable funding body
  - Commercial sponsor
  - Work
  - Personal loans
  - Savings/ Family Support
3. How do you manage in financing your living expenses and fees?
  - I manage well
  - I manage more or less
  - I struggle
4. Have you considered leaving your research degree? If so, why? Tick all that apply.
  - Personal reasons
  - Personal finance
  - Project finance
  - I have not considered leaving my degree
  - Other (please specify)
5. UCL Scholarships are currently open to both full-time and part-time applicants. Do you think that UCL should establish dedicated part-time scholarships?
  - Yes
  - No
6. Are you worried that a lack of funding will force you to abandon your studies?
  - Yes
  - No
7. Would you shift to fulltime status if funding was available?
  - Yes
  - No
  - Not sure
8. How do you rate the support and advice offered by your Department to help you obtain funding for your fees and living expenses? Please give details.
  - I am satisfied with the level of support provided
  - There was support but it was limited
  - I received no support or advice at all
  - Not applicable
  - I did not need to seek funding
  - Please give details [open text response]
9. If you are continuing to work during your research programme, do you feel that your part-time research provides tangible benefits to your job and/or vice versa?

- Yes
- No
- Please specify [open text response]

10. Do you consider yourself to be suffering from stress?

- No
- A little
- Moderately
- Extremely
- If yes, do you think this stress is a consequence of the study/work balance? [open text response]

11. Are there any other issues specific to part-time students that you feel should be raised.

- [open text response]

12. Year of registration?

13. What is your Fee Status?

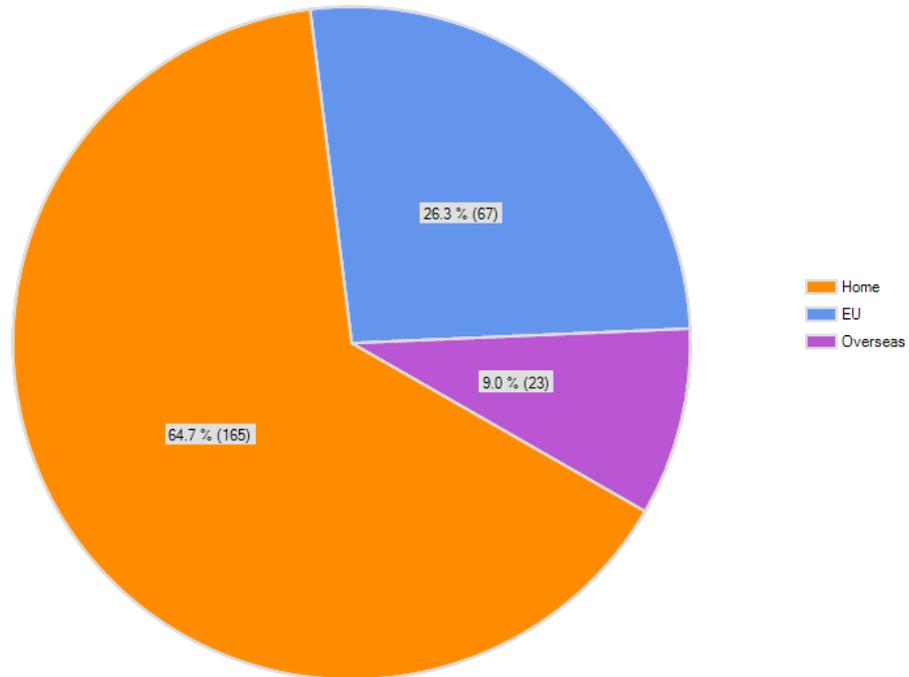
- Home
- EU
- Overseas

14. In which Faculty are you registered? (To view a list of Faculties and Departments please follow the link: <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/departments/faculties>)

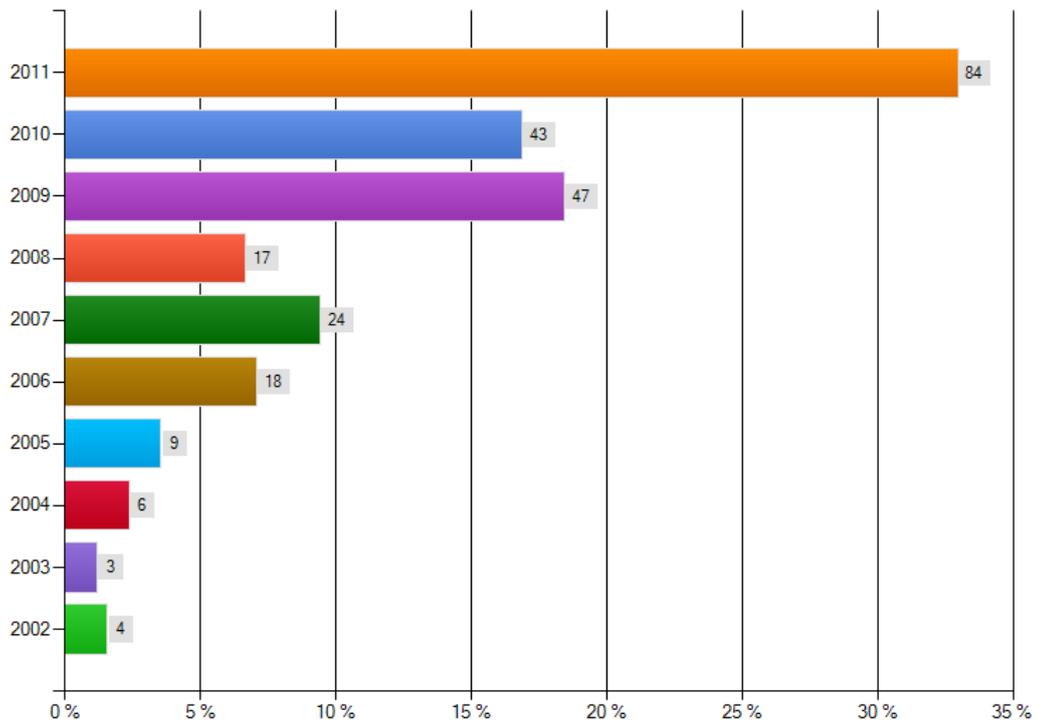
- Arts & Humanities
- Built Environment
- Brain Sciences
- Engineering
- Laws
- Life Sciences
- Mathematical and Physical Sciences
- Medical Sciences
- Population Health Sciences
- Social & Historical Sciences

**Appendix 2 – Further respondent demographics**

**Survey Respondents by Fee Status**



**Survey Respondents by Year of Registration**



### **Appendix 3 – Selected anonymised free text responses**

Four main themes emerged from the many free text responses: Finance; Isolation; Information, Support & Guidance; and Timings.

#### **Finance:**

*Council tax benefit. I earn the same amount after tax as my full-time funded PhD student flatmate, yet I have to pay around £1000 council tax per year and she isn't required to pay any.*

*Although understandable to some degree, I find it problematic that I cannot get some helpful student discounts, e.g. travel discounts/student oyster, as that would be very helpful with managing the financial burden.*

*YES! Not only is it tough to balance both work and study we also DON'T get any discounts on the oyster card and HAVE to pay council taxes! I find that outrageous, as obviously the reason why most students are part-time is that because they can't afford to be full-time students .. why penalize them then?*

*There should be flexibility and help from UCL finance to allow you to pay fees out of your salary before tax, if your course is to the benefit of your career/job*

#### **Isolation:**

*One feels a bit isolated from colleagues and university as a whole not being able to attend seminars and various events often.*

*It's quite hard to feel part of the university and my department (though it's very friendly) -- there are few opportunities to meet other PhD students (except at the skills courses) or to find peers with whom to discuss one's research*

*It's quite difficult to integrate with the rest of the post-graduate student body*

*Isolation, especially for students away from Bloomsbury and in a small department*

#### **Information, Support & Guidance:**

*Provision of information regarding IT and library services at UCL was quite poor for people who don't spend all day on campus. The initial few weeks was difficult as I wasn't able to attend everyday and the departmental administrators were not very supportive or helpful as to what was essential or useful to attend. Sessions to help part-timers get onto online journals, student logs etc would have been helpful at a variety of times to suit people not in the department, or even in London everyday.*

*That stupid research log doesn't do part-time properly and if you take a break, something part-timers are liable to do, it throws the log completely out of sync - it sucks!*

*Difficult to manage eLog as doesn't take into account non-usual routes and timelines and Portico isn't always kept up to date especially after study leave and interruptions which makes it hard to follow fees and end dates.*

*There is no consideration for part-time students in the allocation of desks, which is essential for the capacity to concentrate.*

*I started halfway through the academic year and had no induction which was actually hard work as you are left to figure it all out for yourself (like using the study skills log). I would appreciate an improved "welcome service".*

**Timing:**

*The requirement to clock the same number of grad skills training points per year as a full-time student seems unfair and makes it harder for part-time students to balance work and study commitments.*

*Some of the Graduate School opportunities are not always convenient for part-time students/ carers and those working to support both their studies and dependants. Timings are often during work times and times when dependants are out of school/ nursery care.*

*Not being able to enter into continuing research status for five years will impact a lot on my finances as I return to work next year. I will no longer be based at ucl or using any UCL resources but will still have to pay part time fees as I write up my research in my own time.*

*The definition of "part time" is changeable. What I initially thought would be a part time study, 1-2 days /week, takes me almost every night and quite a lot of the week end.*