

Petition: Stop the Cuts to Medical Leave for Part-Time Students

From the 2025/26 academic year, the University of Bristol has adopted the UKRI's 'Standard Terms and Conditions of Training Grant 2025' combined all protected characteristic and standard sick leave under one umbrella term, "medical leave" (See 'What the New Policy Introduces' section for details). This has effectively **reduced protected characteristic leave to zero** beyond the previous standard sick leave entitlement for **all students**.

In addition, this medical leave allowance has been further reduced for part-time students (University of Bristol, 2025), creating unequal treatment based solely on mode of study. This change directly adopts the policy shift from UKRI, even though the University of Bristol has refused to officially endorse the justifications given by UKRI for this change. For details on the new UKRI policy, refer to UKRI (2025a), and for an annotated version that highlights the changes, see UKRI (2025b).

While part-time status itself is not a protected characteristic, many students are part-time precisely because of a protected characteristic, such as disability. Furthermore, as noted above, medical leave is now defined as containing disability-related illness which is an entitlement of a protected characteristic. In practice, the part-time students who will be most impacted by this policy change are those with protected characteristics.

Part-time study has long been a vital pathway to broadening access to higher education. Yet this policy change penalises those who take this route, many of whom do so because of health, caring, or financial responsibilities. By stripping away essential medical leave for part-time students, this policy targets and disadvantages students who are already more vulnerable. It sends a harmful message: that those who need to study at a slower pace don't belong in academia.

Crucially, it is **medical leave** that had been cut, not an optional holiday, but time away from study that is only granted on the basis of verified medical need. Accessing this leave already requires medical evidence, meaning it can only ever be used by those who genuinely need it.

We call on the University of Bristol to separate protected characteristic leave from standard sick leave and **adopt an equitable medical leave policy that allows the same amount of medical leave for both full-time and part-time students**. Further, by rejecting the inequitable aspects of the UKRI's new policy, the University has the opportunity to set a precedent in support of fairness and inclusion, ensuring that all students, regardless of mode of study, receive equal baseline medical leave entitlements. As the Bristol Doctoral College (BDC) said themselves, "**Exactly as you said, it should be that you get the full entitlement**".

What the New Policy Introduces

As aforementioned, the University of Bristol has adopted the UKRI's 'Standard Terms and Conditions of Training Grant 2025' (UKRI, 2025a, 2025b, 2025c) which states '*We are replacing the provisions for sick leave with a broader provision for medical leave.*' (UKRI, 2025b, p. 28)

Medical leave now combines sick leave as well as other leave formerly classed as special category leave (University of Bristol, 2025):

- pregnancy-related illness
- antenatal appointments
- fertility treatment
- disability related illness (including chronic illness)
- disability-related appointments, for example: diagnosis, therapy or treatment
- gender reassignment (where medically advised).

As shown by UKRI (2025a), the previous leave entitlement was allocated per year pro rata, with no cap over the studentship. However, under the new rules, medical leave will be allocated unequally based on mode of study by use of a 'cap' (UKRI, 2025b, p. 35) where the medical leave has been cut in proportion with attendance, e.g.:

- Full-time students: **260 days** of medical leave over **4 years**.
- 50% part-time students: only **130 days** of medical leave over **8 years**.

This means part-time students are effectively **penalised for their mode of study. For example, for 50% FTE part-time students:**

- They receive **half the entitlement**, despite completing the same total workload as full-time students.
- Spread across double the length of time, this equates to, on average, **just a quarter of the entitlement per year**.

Furthermore, the decision is being applied **retrospectively**:

- Any **medical leave already taken** at the previous standard rate **will be deducted** from the new entitlement.
- For example: a 50% part-time student halfway through their degree who has legitimately used their standard maximum medical leave will now have **no entitlement at all for the remaining 4 years of study**.

Finally, the UKRI's new policy (UKRI 2025a) adopted by the University rests on the logic that the cut in paid medical leave for part-time students will be compensated by reasonable adjustments. Converting a benefit for full time study into an adjustment for part-time is unjust

and places an unfair burden on those who need additional medical leave to complete additional administrative tasks not required of full-time students. UKRI also states that providers need to have clear policy or procedure for accessing such adjustments (UKRI 2025b). To this end, the University of Bristol have not provided sufficiently clear guidance for how students should access additional medical leave on a case-by-case basis.

Note: we recognise that this policy enhances flexibility in the use of medical leave and stands to benefit both full-time and part-time students facing acute circumstances. We strongly support retaining this increased flexibility, while recommending the removal of the cap detailed below.

How Students Will Be Impacted

The impact on students will be multifaceted, stemming from:

1. The combination sick leave and protected characteristic leave into one umbrella “medical leave”.
2. The cap applying across other leave and extension types (see below).
3. This cap to combined leave being further cut for part time students.

The proposed policy change will have a disproportionate and negative impact on **both full-time and part-time students who require leave across various leave categories**:

- Under the new framework, all forms of *protected and special category leave* will be merged into a single, capped category called *medical leave*.
- In addition, **this cap is applied across different types of leave**, including the newly combined “*Medical Leave*”, “*Additional Leave (excluding baby loss)*” (which contains several categories), and funded extensions
- **Grouping these distinct forms of leave under a single capped allowance effectively reduced entitlements for all students**, regardless of their mode of study (University of Bristol, 2025).
- Further, this grouping effectively diminishes the available leave for individuals with protected characteristics, such as those with disabilities, pregnancy-related illness, or undergoing gender-affirming healthcare, as well as anyone requiring time away under the “*Additional Leave (excluding baby loss)*” categories, **leaving no entitlement beyond standard sick leave**.
- This policy change **disproportionately disadvantages students with multiple protected characteristics**, as it removes the entitlement to take appropriate leave for each individual need.
- As a result, the policy risks creating **inequitable barriers to participation, wellbeing, and academic success for those already facing structural disadvantages**.

The new policy affects all students who may need to change their mode of study:

- **Full-time students moving to part-time** will face a significant reduction in medical leave, potentially leaving them with **no entitlement for the remainder of their degree**.

- **Part-time students moving to full-time** may face restrictions or rejection because there is **no budget allocated** for the additional medical leave they would now be entitled to.
- This policy **removes flexibility** around mode of study, a crucial factor in making research degrees accessible and sustainable for all students.

Students are effectively forced to choose between:

1. Maintaining full medical leave entitlement by studying full-time, even if this is **unsustainable due to health or personal circumstances**.
2. Studying part-time and risking **running out of medical leave halfway through their degree**.

This policy will **disproportionately impact disabled students**, many of whom rely on part-time study and medical leave to manage their health while completing a research degree.

Why the University's Proposed Reasonable Adjustment Process Is Insufficient

Both the UKRI and the University of Bristol are legally required to offer reasonable adjustments in the case of disability, which could include additional medical leave. The University of Bristol has stated:

“If there were to be disability (or chronic illness) issues that form part of the circumstances that lead to a need for part-time study, consideration of any kinds of adjustments would be based on the impact of the impairment to then assure appropriate support.”

This approach is **insufficient** for multiple reasons:

1. **Extra administrative burden:** Part-time disabled students must navigate additional processes just to access the same medical leave entitlement automatically granted to non-disabled full-time peers. This unjust burden is further amplified by the reality that disabled students already navigate significant health and accessibility challenges that can make additional administrative barriers especially difficult.
2. **Lack of transparency:** The University does not outline the process, timelines, or decision-makers for such adjustments, which **fails even the UKRI's minimal standard**. While the UKRI's approach is itself unjust (replacing guaranteed paid leave with reliance on “reasonable adjustments”) it requires institutions to have explicit and transparent policies and procedures. The University of Bristol does not meet even this basic requirement. As such, its position is unjustified both procedurally and substantively: it fails to uphold both fairness and the already insufficient UKRI standard.

3. **No guaranteed entitlement:** There is no assurance that full medical leave will be granted, only that “appropriate support” will be considered. This reactive approach means that support is only explored once a student is already in crisis or out of options. As a result, students who require medical leave may face exclusion or be forced to withdraw during periods of ill health or need.
 4. **Not an adjustment and Misuse of the concept of “reasonable adjustments”:** Even if granted, this is not a reasonable adjustment but merely parity with non-disabled full-time students, not equity (for example, recognising that some disabled students may require *additional* leave). **Reasonable adjustments are intended to remove barriers to participation, not to replace basic entitlements such as paid or protected medical leave.** Reframing entitlement as an adjustment undermines the rights of disabled students and shifts responsibility from institutional provision to individual negotiation.
 5. **Exclusion of other protected characteristics:** The University’s reliance on “reasonable adjustments” offers no equivalent mechanism for students who require leave related to other protected characteristics, such as pregnancy, gender affirming healthcare, or fertility treatment. As a result, these students are left entirely without an avenue for equivalent support while their leave is cut.
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Problems with How This Decision Was Taken

The way this policy was introduced is deeply problematic:

1. Lack of informed consultation

The university stated that the University Postgraduate Research Committee (UPGRC) developed UoB’s implementation of the UKRI policy, alongside extensive analysis of the changes by the Bristol Doctoral College (BDC), and supported by the SUPG Student Officer, and two other PGR Representatives. While this indicates that multiple perspectives were included in the process, subsequent developments suggest there may have been gaps in communication and understanding about the policy’s implications.

For example:

- **Questionable basis for “extensive analysis”:** At the time the policy was introduced, correspondence between the Bristol Doctoral College (BDC) and students indicates that some staff members may not have been fully aware of the details of the revised leave arrangements. This suggests that the “extensive analysis” referenced may have been based on incomplete information.
- **Lack of awareness within the Students’ Union:** When contacted about this change, the Students’ Union were not aware of the implications of this policy.
- **Lack of engagement with affected groups:** While two PGR representatives sit on the committee, it is unclear to what extent their input was sought or whether targeted consultation was undertaken with those most directly affected, i.e. part-time students and students with protected characteristics who may be disproportionately impacted by changes to medical leave

- **This lack of meaningful consultation undermines the legitimacy of the policy development process and raises concerns about procedural fairness, transparency, and representation.**

2. Misleading framing

- The University of Bristol presented the changes as “*significant improvements*” and “*enhanced entitlements*” “*following a review for Equity, Diversity and Inclusion*” (EDI).
 - This is misleading. Full-time students are receiving the **same overall entitlement** as before, simply with enhanced flexibility in how it is used. The emphasis on ‘enhanced entitlements’ omits that cuts are being made to overall leave for part time students.
 - By contrast, part-time students are experiencing a **substantial reduction** in entitlement, which cannot reasonably be described as an improvement.
 - This framing is not only inaccurate but also undermines the principles of Equity, Diversity and Inclusion. A reduction in entitlements for some of the most vulnerable students cannot credibly be presented as an “enhancement” in line with EDI.
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University Responses

Timeline

- **19/08/2025:** BDC email announces that “*enhanced entitlements will start from 1 October 2025*,” with a link to the policy that, for part-time students, shows substantial reductions.
- **20/08/2025:** First email sent to BDC expressing concern about the unequal entitlement.
- **20/08/2025:** Response from BDC reassures that “*part-time students will not be disadvantaged by these changes*” and offers a meeting to discuss concerns.
- **20/08/2025:** Meeting held with BDC; they were fully engaged in making the policy fair and equal and promised it would be changed.
- **20/08/2025 – 28/08/2025:** Multiple follow-up emails exchanged to refine the wording of the new fair policy. A fair and equitable version was agreed upon. The University was receptive to feedback from a member of the community most affected, part-time disabled students, and proceeded with the following change:

The policy was initially revised to a fairer model that ensured both full-time and part-time students received the same total entitlement: 260 full-time equivalent days:

- Full-time students: 260 full working days of medical leave (over 4 years).

- 50% part-time students: 520 part-time working (half) days of medical leave (over 8 years).

However, just one week later, 03/09/2025, another communication reinstated the unequal leave entitlements. This was accompanied by stating:

- *“It does not provide the same total amount of funding for medical leave for full and part-time students”*
- *“I have checked this wording with a legal colleague and they advise that **they do not believe** this to be a discriminatory position.”*

This exchange explicitly demonstrated that the potential discriminatory effects of the policy were not considered during review, and that the University **has failed in its legal duty to review the equality impact of the new policy.**

This timeline overall shows the University **explicitly acknowledged the inequity** of the policy, promised change, and even temporarily corrected it, only to reverse course a week later. This reversal is a clear contradiction between the University’s stated commitment to equality. However, the initial exchanges highlight that **the University has the capacity to do what is right** and not go ahead with this unequal policy.

Research Evidence Against the Policy

The proposed reduction in medical leave for part-time students is not only **unethical**, it **directly contradicts research on disabled postgraduate research (PGR) students.**

Findings from Disabled Students UK (Disabled Students UK & Pete Quinn Consulting Ltd., 2023):

- Many disabled students highlighted the importance of being allowed to **study part-time, take medical leave, or receive extensions without financial penalties.**
- The report recommends that funders allow **28 weeks of paid medical leave per year**, with minimal initial medical evidence requirements for disabled students.
- This equates to **up to 560 full days of paid medical leave per degree**, a figure directly informed by the disabled community.
- Yet the Policy the University of Bristol is introducing allocated just **23% of the recommended entitlement** for 50% FTE part-time disabled students.

Impact on wellbeing (Disabled Students UK & Pete Quinn Consulting Ltd., 2023):

- Disabled Students UK found that “Students who did not feel that their funder was flexible, accommodating, and valued their wellbeing were 1.5 times more likely to say that undertaking the PhD had negatively impacted on their physical health”

- Lack of flexibility and support increased stress, with students reporting fear of losing stipends “prevented [them] from taking a step back when needed”.

University of Bristol’s own research on accessibility (University of Bristol & Disability rights UK, 2018):

- Emphasises the importance of **flexibility in study modes** for disabled PhD students.
 - Stresses that inclusive practices should “**go beyond ‘ticking the box’ of legal obligations**”, providing proactive support and integrating disability into the norm.
 - Yet the new policy is being introduced because “*they do not believe this to be a discriminatory position*”, thereby showing a focus on what *may* be legally defensible over inclusive practice.
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Addressing the “Justifications” for Unequal Medical Leave

Claim 1: “a doctoral candidate must be able to demonstrate a novel contribution to research”, and additional time (due to illness) creates a “risk” that the research will be “overtaken”.

- If timing were truly an insurmountable issue, part-time study would not be offered at all, or the medical leave should be paid at the full-time rate regardless of the mode of study to prevent unequal funding.
- Any additional time granted through medical leave is minimal overall, and such leave is **only taken when medically necessary**.
- This reasoning ignores the fact that many doctoral candidates publish throughout their degree, regardless of pace.
- It also implies that research conducted at a slower pace holds less value, which is not only academically unsound but also **ableist**. It effectively filters out those who require medical leave, undermining inclusivity in research.

Claim 2: “where a student has already taken significant time away from study and this is likely to continue, continuation of the studentship is unlikely to be in the student’s interest.”

- It is not the institution’s role to make cost-benefit judgments on behalf of students about whether their degree is “worth it.”
- This justification is **patronising and exclusionary**. Such reasoning discourages disabled students from completing their PhDs and pursuing academic careers, disproportionately harming a protected group.

- This verbiage suggests that if students requiring significant medical leave are already in a doctoral program, then they should leave.

Claim 3: “Extending the time of study may reduce their lifetime earning potential”

- This argument fails to acknowledge that medical leave is only granted on the basis of proven medical need; it is not an optional holiday.
 - Denying sufficient medical leave risks forcing students to drop out altogether, which would have a far greater negative impact on their earning potential and career prospects.
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Conclusion

While we acknowledge the increased flexibility in how medical leave can be used, **all students face a reduction in leave because the new cap applies across multiple leave types.**

Furthermore, this improvement in flexibility, should not be paired with an overall reduction in cap entitlement for part-time students who complete the same academic work and achieve the same outcomes - simply over a longer timeframe. All students deserve equitable access to medical leave, regardless of the pace at which they progress through their studies.

Restricting medical leave for part-time students is **unjustifiable, discriminatory, and inconsistent** with both equality obligations and the institution's own ethical standards. This is particularly of concern, as the policy explicitly states the 'medical leave' being cut specifically includes disability-related illness and other protected characteristics entitlements. As such, it disproportionately impacts students with specific protected characteristics, individuals who already face systemic barriers in academia, especially given that disabled or chronically ill students are more likely to be part-time, as well as requiring their full medical leave entitlement.

By reducing medical leave for part-time students, the University of Bristol ignores both **evidence-based recommendations** and the lived experiences of disabled PGR students. The policy risks **harm to student health, wellbeing, and academic success**, while failing to uphold principles of inclusivity.

This policy effectively devalues and discourages research conducted at a different pace; it suggests that researchers themselves are not worth supporting if their studies take longer and that those who require medical leave do not belong in academia.

Call to Action

We call on the University of Bristol to take immediate action:

- **Revise the medical leave policy** to ensure it provides equal entitlement for all students.

- **Separate leave categories** so that leave related to protected characteristics **isn't limited or reduced by a shared cap**.
- **Clarify policy terminology** by explicitly defining what is meant by “days” and “weeks” within the context of the policy. For example, the current use of “days” ambiguously refers to both full and half days within the same sentence. Precise definitions are essential to ensure consistent interpretation and fair application of leave entitlements.
- **Offer their own justification, independent of UKRI, for adopting this policy**

We call on those listed as being involved in the policy acceptance:

- We urge you to offer your justification for the policy or apply pressure on the University to address these concerns and commit to equal entitlements.

References

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research in Disability Studies, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council between 2015-2018. It was led by a team at the University of Bristol, with Disability Rights UK, the National Development Team for Inclusion and partners in three other universities.