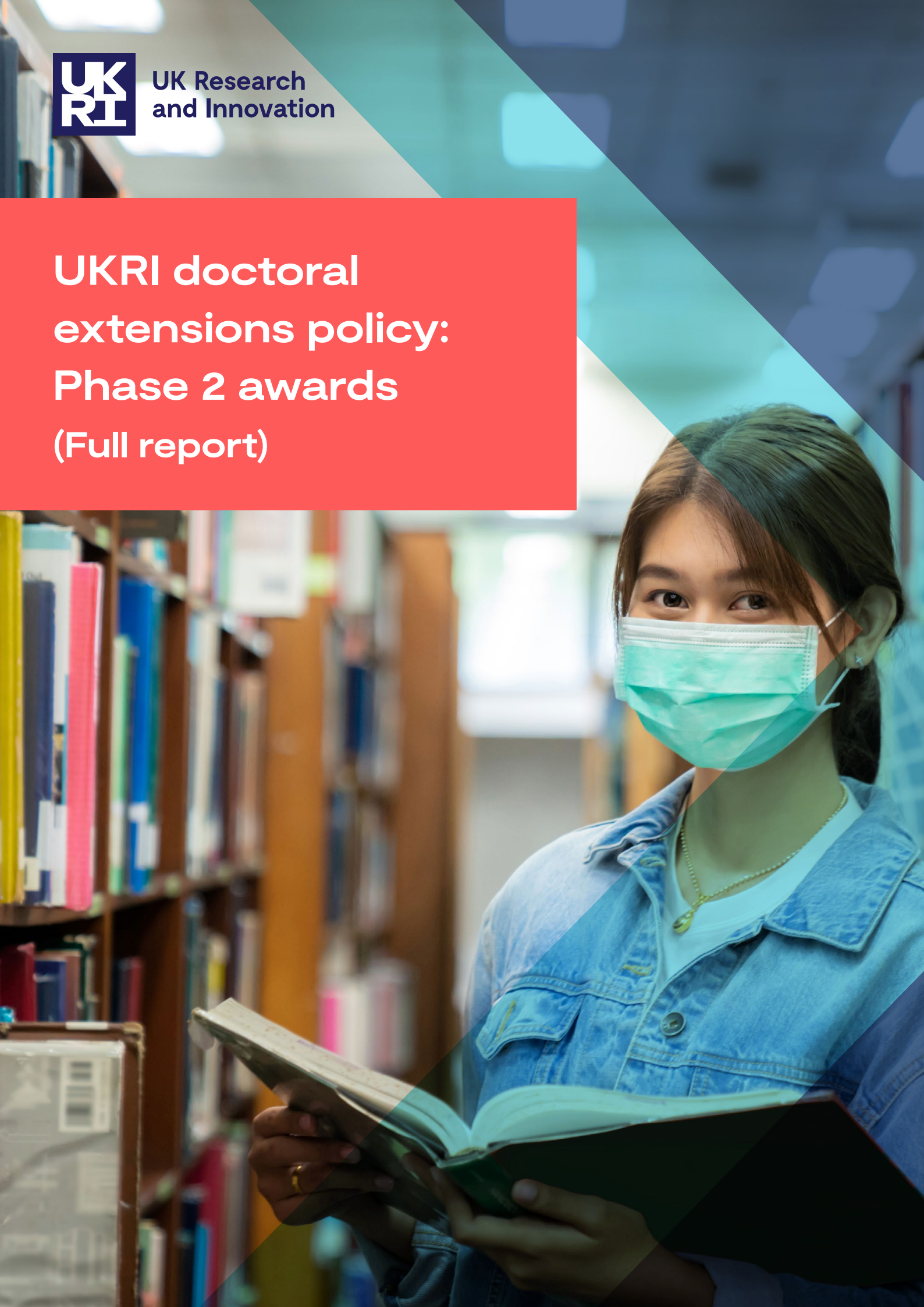
UK Research and Innovation

UKRI doctoral extensions policy: Phase 2 awards

(Full report)



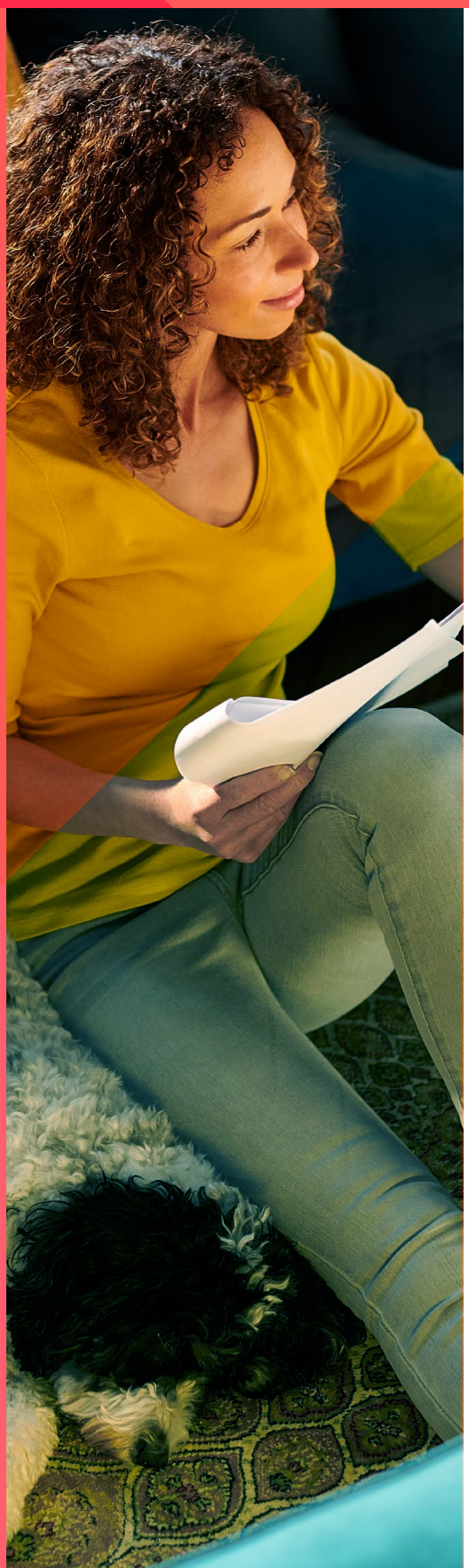
Accessibility

To request copies of this report in large print or in a different format, please contact the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion team at UKRI:

01793 444000
equality@ukri.org

UK Research and Innovation
Polaris House
Swindon SN2 1FL

BACKGROUND



The COVID-19 pandemic has created enormous challenges for everyone engaged in research and innovation, including doctoral students and their supervisory and support teams.

On 9 April 2020, UKRI announced Phase 1 of a support package for postgraduate research students[1]. The Phase 1 policy provided additional stipend and fee support for students with a funding end-date between 1 March 2020 and 31 March 2021. In November 2020 UKRI announced Phase 2 of its support package. The Phase 2 policy broadened the students eligible for extensions and provided additional funding.

The objective of both the Phase 1 and 2 policy was, and is, to enable UKRI-funded students to achieve doctoral training outcomes and to be paid to do so. It is too early to assess whether the purpose of the funding was achieved, as this can only be determined by looking at submission rates that are not available yet. We continue to monitor this and will update our communities in due course.

Research Organisations (ROs) were asked to provide information on extensions requested under the Phase 1 and Phase 2 policy. This report analyses requests made under the Phase 2 policy. While the vast majority of ROs had allocated all their Phase 2 funding by June 2021, some had two stage processes and provided information on additional students[2] awarded extensions as part of their end of grant report in early summer 2022 which is included in this updated report. This additional data did not lead to changes in the majority of key findings from the analysis of the phase 2 policy, though one key aspect that did change was an increase in the number of students that applied through Phase 2 than through Phase 1. The analysis of Phase 1 requests can be found here.

1 Our evolving policy for COVID-19 doctoral extension funding – UKRI

2 The interim phase 2 awards report covered a total number of 4,670 students. This final report covers an additional 1,617 students bringing the total number of students covered to 6,287.

A process and early impact evaluation of our support for doctoral students was undertaken as part of the UKRI and BEIS stabilisation interventions to mitigate against the negative impacts of COVID-19 on the research sector.

The UKRI Phase 2 Doctoral Extensions policy (announced Nov 2020) included all UKRI-funded doctoral students who:

- had a funding end date from 1 April 2021 onwards
- started their funding period before 1 March 2020
- had not at that point submitted their doctoral thesis
- had not already received a UKRI-funded extension under the initial, Phase 1, UKRI policy (this included students not in their final year who had already had an extension funded through grant underspend).

£19M of UKRI funding was provided to support extensions for students who were unable to mitigate the delays and impact of COVID-19 or adjust their research project. Information available at the time the policy was created indicated that students in this group included both those in their final year (funding end date before or on 30 September 2021) and those in other stages of their doctoral training. For some of those in the latter group, adaptation or mitigation may not have been possible: for example, disabled students, those with long-term illness, neurodivergent students, or those who had caring responsibilities.

ROs had the flexibility to use their Phase 2 funding allocation to support their students who were in other stages of their doctorate but who were also in need of an extension. They were required to offer the opportunity to apply to all eligible students. Students whose training grant holder had already confirmed a UKRI-supported extension due to the pandemic were not eligible for Phase 2 support.

ROs created and managed their own processes for assessing requests for extension funding, within a broader framework provided and overseen by UKRI.

The majority of extension requests were expected to be for up to three months of UKRI support for stipends and fees. Where exceptional circumstances applied, extensions of longer than three months were possible. Non-UKRI contributions, for example co-funder contributions, could not be recovered from Phase 2 funding. If co-funders were unable to contribute towards the cost of an extension, Phase 2 funding could only be used to fully support a shorter extension.

In March 2021 UKRI updated the policy to enable all UKRI funded students who are in need to apply for support from their RO or grant holder. Training grant holders were provided with additional flexibility to use some of their training and cohort development funding to support extensions. ROs were also allowed to reduce investment in recruitment by up to 10% of the 2021-22 commitment to new studentships to support extensions. Extensions awarded through use of these flexibilities is not captured in this analysis but will be reported to UKRI through training grant holders' annual reporting.

KEY FINDINGS

- 6287 requests for an extension were made, which is higher than Phase 1 where 5,315 requests for an extension were made.
- The mean average extension requested was 3.6 months and the average extension awarded was 2.9 months.
- 97% of students asking for an extension were granted one and 72% of students received an extension at least as long as that requested.
- Partial rejection of a student's case for support was the most common reason for a student not receiving an extension as requested. This is followed by other reasons, insufficient funding, and full rejection of the student's case for support.
- Slightly more than half of students seeking an extension (51%) were in their final year. The average cost of a granted extension was £4,460.
- Extensions requested under the Phase 2 policy were on average nearly two months shorter than those which were requested under the Phase 1 policy. There was little variation in requested extension lengths across UKRI councils.
- There was little difference in the length of extension requests across binary disability and gender categories. Although students reporting a White ethnicity tended to request a shorter extension the difference of 11 days is unlikely to affect outcomes.
- 94% of all extension requests related to a student under the age of 50. The mean average length requested was shorter for those aged less than 30 (15 weeks), than those aged 30-39 (16 weeks) or 40-49 (17 weeks) but these are relatively small differences that are unlikely to affect outcomes.
- 43% of all UKRI studentships recorded in Phase 2 data indicated additional support from at least one co-funder. HEI co-funders are by far the most common type, and they are also more likely to be able to provide contributions to extensions than are co-funders of other types.
- For 18% of students with co-funding, the co-funder is not expected to be able to provide a contribution to the extension.
- The most common reason given for requesting an extension, found in association with the majority (81%) of all extension requests across UKRI, was 'lack of access to research resources and facilities'. There is little difference in comparison to the figure seen in Phase 1. The next most common extension reason 'interruption of data collection and/or fieldwork', indicated in 64% of requests, is 15 percentage points higher than seen in Phase 1. References to health and wellbeing issues have also increased in prominence since Phase 1.

PURPOSE OF THIS ANALYSIS

In summer 2021, UKRI asked ROs to provide the details of each UKRI funded student who requested an extension under Phase 2. This analysis summarises some of the key findings from these returns.

This report is an update to an interim analysis of the phase 2 policy originally published in February 2022 and incorporates data on 1,617 additional requests for extensions as part of their end of grant report in early summer 2022.

Where informative, for example in indicating trends, the results are compared to those from the Phase 1 analysis. Where it is useful to understand the pattern of extension requests, variation at individual Research Council level is also described.

Annex 1 explains some of the features of and limitations in the student-related data that we hold.

Annex 2 summarises how the reasons recorded for making extension requests varied with EDI characteristics across UKRI research council training grants.

EXTENSIONS REQUESTED, AWARDED, REDUCED AND REJECTED

Figure 1 shows the number of extensions requested[3], disaggregated by UKRI Research Council[4]. The total number of extension requests returned in Phase 2 was 6,287, higher than the Phase 1 total of 5,315.

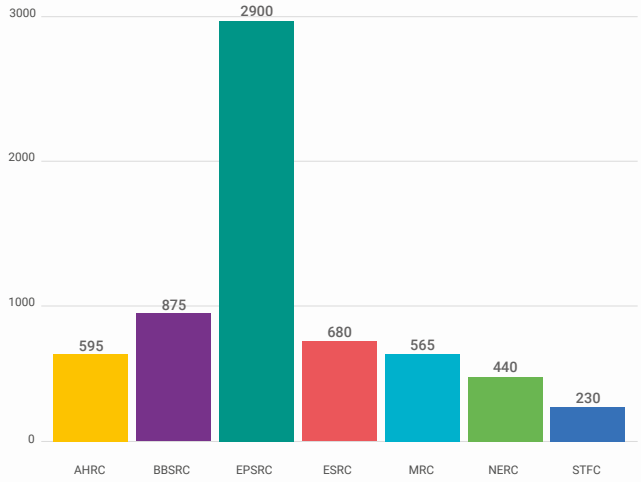


Figure 1: Number of extension requests by UKRI Council
Counts rounded to nearest 5

Nearly half of all requests (46%) related to students funded by EPSRC, this reflects that c.45% of all UKRI students are funded by EPSRC. This has implications when interpreting the data. BBSRC students are the second most common requestors of extensions (14%,) in contrast to Phase 1 (in which AHRC students were second).

Across UKRI just under half related to a student who was within one year of their projected funding end date on 1st April 2021. As **Figure 2** shows, there was little variation in this figure across councils.

Mean extension request lengths in Phase 2 were lower than those seen in Phase 1[5], for all councils and UKRI as a whole[6] (see Table 1; note that these numbers include all requests, including those which were for longer than six months and which could not be funded in full by UKRI under its Phase 1 policy.)

On average extension requests were 3.6 months in Phase 2 but 5.3 months in Phase 1. Reductions in lengths requested across phases varied little across councils.

3 The analysis is of extension requests rather than of those granted, unless specifically indicated. A small number of valid extension requests returned (less than 1% of the total) could not be matched to a known UKRI student record and so were excluded and are shown here as 0 months. This is explained further in Annex 2.

4 Where 'UKRI' data is indicated in other charts, it refers to the combined data of all seven Research Councils. The UKRI Research Coucils are: the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council (BBSRC), the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC), the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), the Medical Research Council (MRC), the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC) and the Science and Technology Facilities Council (STFC).

5 From https://www.ukri.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/UKRI-090421-Report-UKRIDoctoralExtensionPolicyPhase1Awards.pdf, Table 1

6 This reflects the Phase 2 policy guidance which indicated that the majority of extension requests should be for up to three months. Where exceptional circumstances applied, longer extensions could be awarded if funds were available; https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20240105201616/https://www.ukri.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/UKRI-11112020-COVID-19DoctoralExtensionsPolicyPhase2TermsAndConditions.pdf

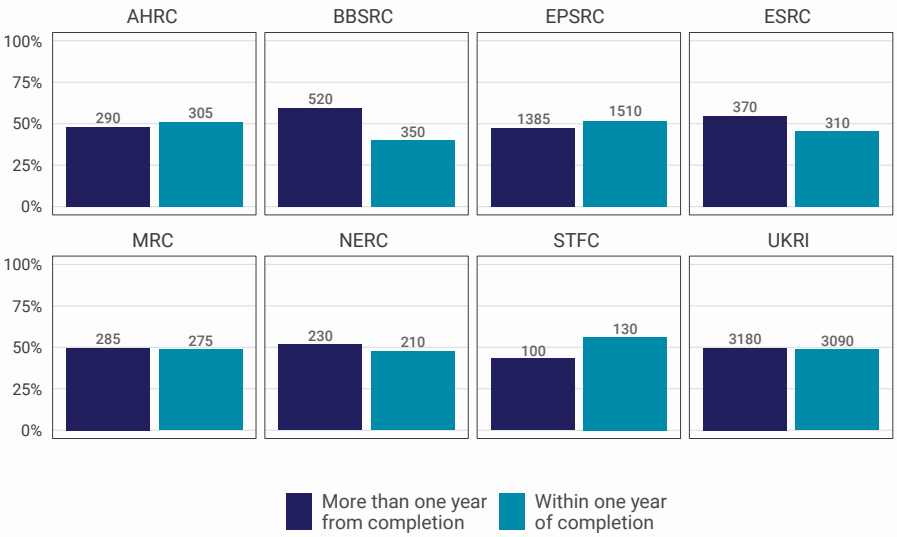


Figure 2: Percentage of requests arising from students within one year of completion
Counts rounded to nearest 5

UKRI Council	Phase 1 extension requested (mean, months)[5]	Phase 2 extension requested (mean, months)	Phase 2 extension granted (mean, months)
AHRC	5.5	4.0	3.1
BBSRC	5.4	3.5	3.0
EPSRC	5.3	3.6	2.9
ESRC	5.1	3.7	2.9
MRC	5.5	3.5	3.1
NERC	5.2	3.4	2.7
STFC	4.6	3.3	2.8
UKRI	5.3	3.6	2.9

Table 1: Mean extension request length (months) for Phase 1 and Phase 2, and Phase 2 extension length granted, by UKRI Council

Figure 3: Length of extension requested
Counts rounded to nearest 5

In contrast to Phase 1 (where there was a cap on extension length, resulting in fewer than 100 students indicating a need for an extension of greater than six months) nearly 400 (6%) of the students requesting Phase 2 extensions indicated a need for an extension greater than six months (**Figure 3**, bottom-right panel). There was little difference in the distribution of extension length requests across councils, although on average AHRC students were most likely to have requested longer extensions.

Two thirds of extension requests were in the range >1 to 3 months. The single most common outcome was 'asked for three months, received three months', experienced by 59% of students.

72% of records indicate that the student received an extension at least as long as that requested. On average, granted extensions were 86% of the length of the extension requested (**Figure 4**).

Excluding cases where no extension was granted, the mean average per-student funding provided across UKRI was £4,462 (**Figure 5**).

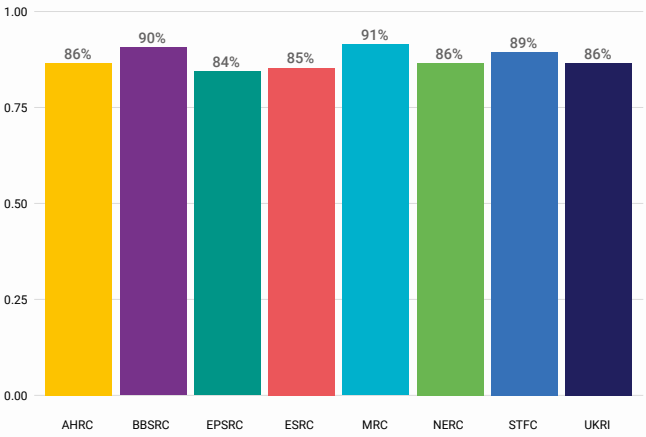


Figure 4: Ratio of extension length granted to extension length requested, by UKRI Council
Excluding cases where no extension was granted

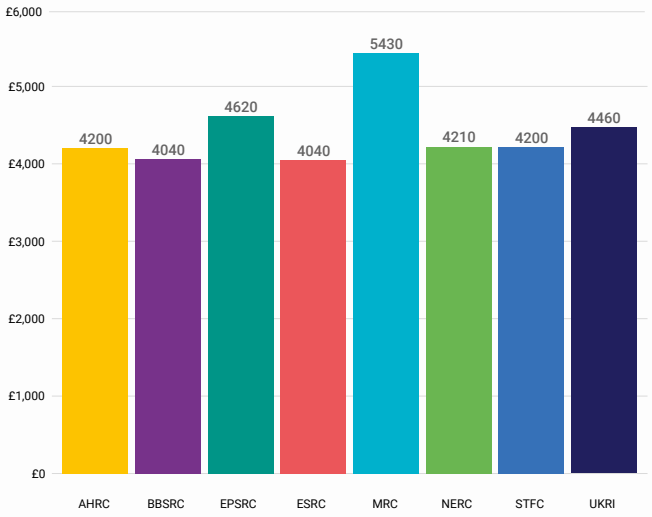


Figure 5: Mean sum allocated, by UKRI Council
Excluding cases where no extension was granted

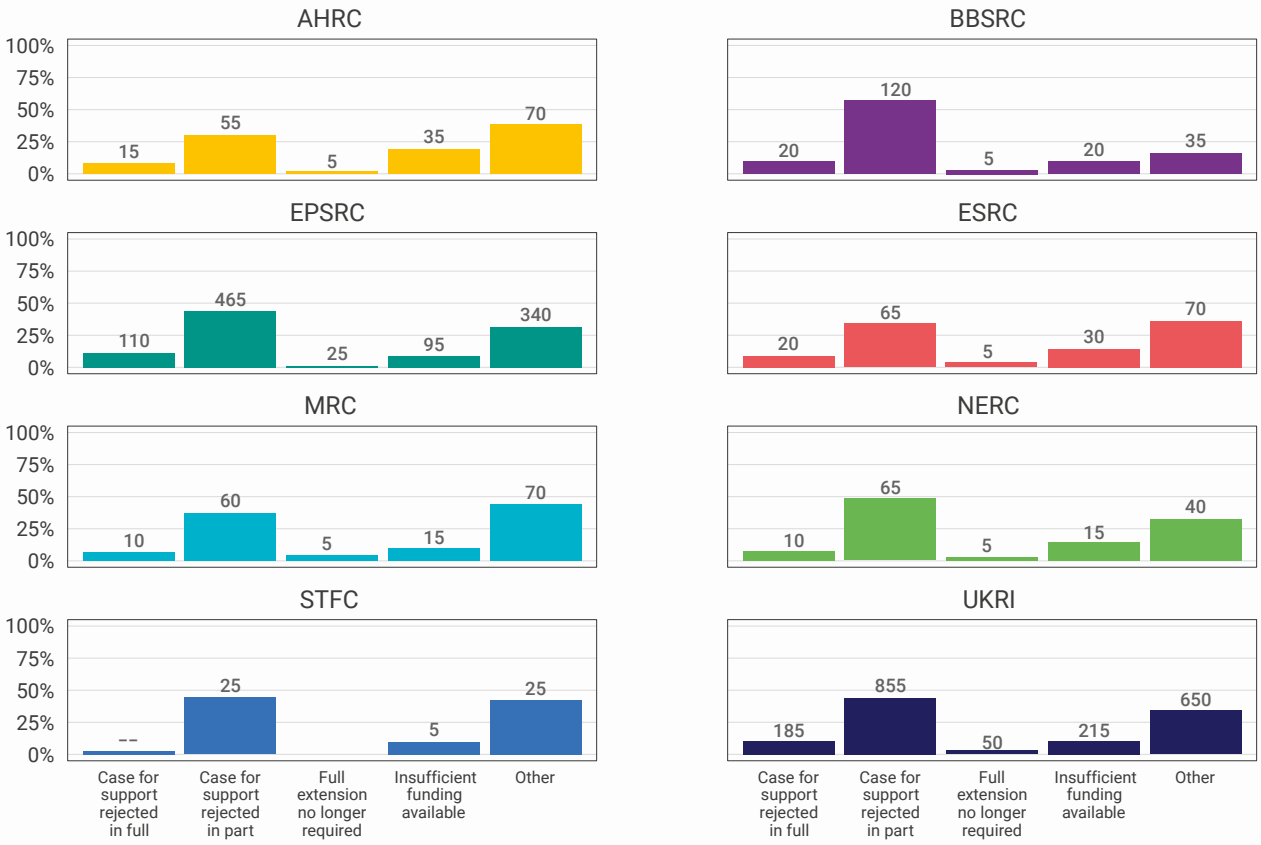


Figure 6: Extension rejection/reduction reasons by Council
Counts rounded to nearest 5

ROs were asked to indicate one or more reasons for not funding an extension from the following five options:

- case for support rejected in full
- case for support rejected in part
- full extension no longer required
- insufficient funding available
- other.

Of the 6,287 records, 5% indicated that an extension of more than 0 months had been requested but no extension had been given.

Figure 6 shows, for each Council and for UKRI as a whole, the number and percentage of all reasons given that fell into each category. Full rejection or a lack of funding was a reason for rejection or reduction of extension in 20% of reasons given. Only rarely (~3% of reasons) did a student turn out not to need the full extension requested despite having submitted an application. Partial rejection and other reasons[7] between them made up more than two thirds of the total.

7 The survey did not request details of 'other' reasons.

EXTENSION LENGTHS REQUESTED AND EDI CHARACTERISTICS

Across UKRI the mean length of extension requested in Phase 2 varied with disability status, ethnicity and gender **(Figure 7)**. This figure uses data only from those students whose Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) characteristic in each category is known. For student ethnicity, non-disclosure is 29% which limits the certainty with which we can make comparisons.

The directions of these differences are the same as those seen in the analysis of Phase 1 extensions. There are differences between the two phases but as they are measurable in terms of days rather than weeks they are unlikely to have large impacts on outcomes. On average:

- Females requested slightly longer extensions than Males (15.9 weeks compared to 15.4 weeks)
- Individuals reporting disabilities requested slightly longer extensions then those not reporting disabilities (16.5 weeks compared to 15.5 weeks).
- Individuals grouped under 'Minority ethnic' requested slightly longer extensions compared to those grouped as 'White' (16.6 weeks compared to 15.2 weeks).

Figure 8 shows the differences in extension length requests between age groups. When looking only at the three most common age categories (<30, 30-39 and 40-49), into which more than 93% of all requests with known age fall, there is a slight increase in mean extension length with age. 94% of all requests for extensions were from individuals under the age of 50.

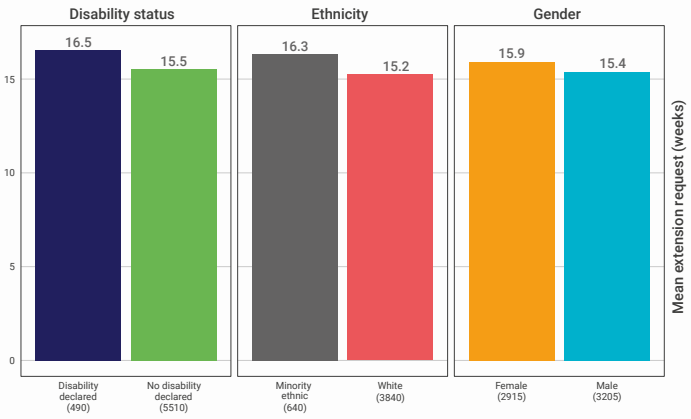


Figure 7: Mean extension length requests by disability status, ethnicity and gender
Excluding unmatched and 'Not disclosed/unknown' data

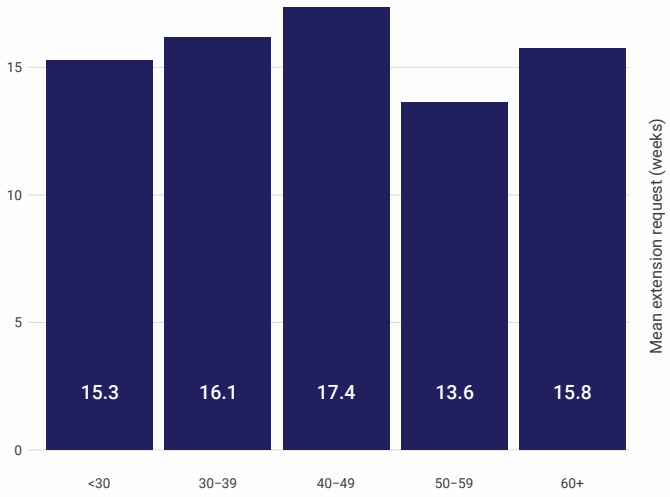


Figure 8: Mean extension request length by age category
Missing data omitted

STUDENT CO-FUNDING, AND STATUS OF CO-FUNDER CONTRIBUTIONS

Just under 40% of all UKRI studentships included in our Phase 2 data indicated additional support provided from at least one co-funder type (HEI or non-HEI, see **Table 2**).

The general trends in co-funding seen in Phase 2 reflect those in Phase 1[8]: STFC students are least likely to have a co-funder of any kind. AHRC and ESRC students are most likely to have a co-funder – for both councils this reflects the fact that HEI co-funding is relatively common for their students.

EPSRC students are least likely to have only an HEI co-funder and, if they have only one co-funder type, most likely to have a non-HEI co-funder. Both BBSRC and MRC studentships in Phase 2 are less likely to be associated with any form of co-funding than was the case in Phase 1 (48%, down from 61%, and 45%, down from 58%, respectively[9].)

As in Phase 1, the most recent survey asked ROs to provide the following information for students whose studentship was co-funded:

- how many organisations contributed to the co-funding of the student
- the sector of the co-funder: private, public, voluntary or higher education institution (HEI)
- whether the co-funder was able to contribute to the extension costs
  - able to provide all of the contribution
  - able to provide some of the contribution
  - not able to provide the contribution.

Confirmed council	HEI and non-HEI co-funder (%)	HEI co-funder only (%)	Non-HEI co-funder(s) only (%)	Any co-funders (%)	No co-funders (%)
AHRC	1	53	3	57	43
BBSRC	3	39	6	48	52
EPSRC	4	20	12	36	64
ESRC	1	46	4	52	48
MRC	3	35	8	45	55
NERC	1	35	6	42	58
STFC	1	28	4	34	66
UKRI	3	32	8	43	57

Table 2: Prevalence of studentship co-funding by binary co-funder type

8 See https://www.ukri.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/UKRI-090421-Report-UKRIDoctoralExtensionPolicyPhase1Awards.pdf, Table 2

9 Note that this does not imply that students funded by these councils are in general now less likely to have received co-funding.

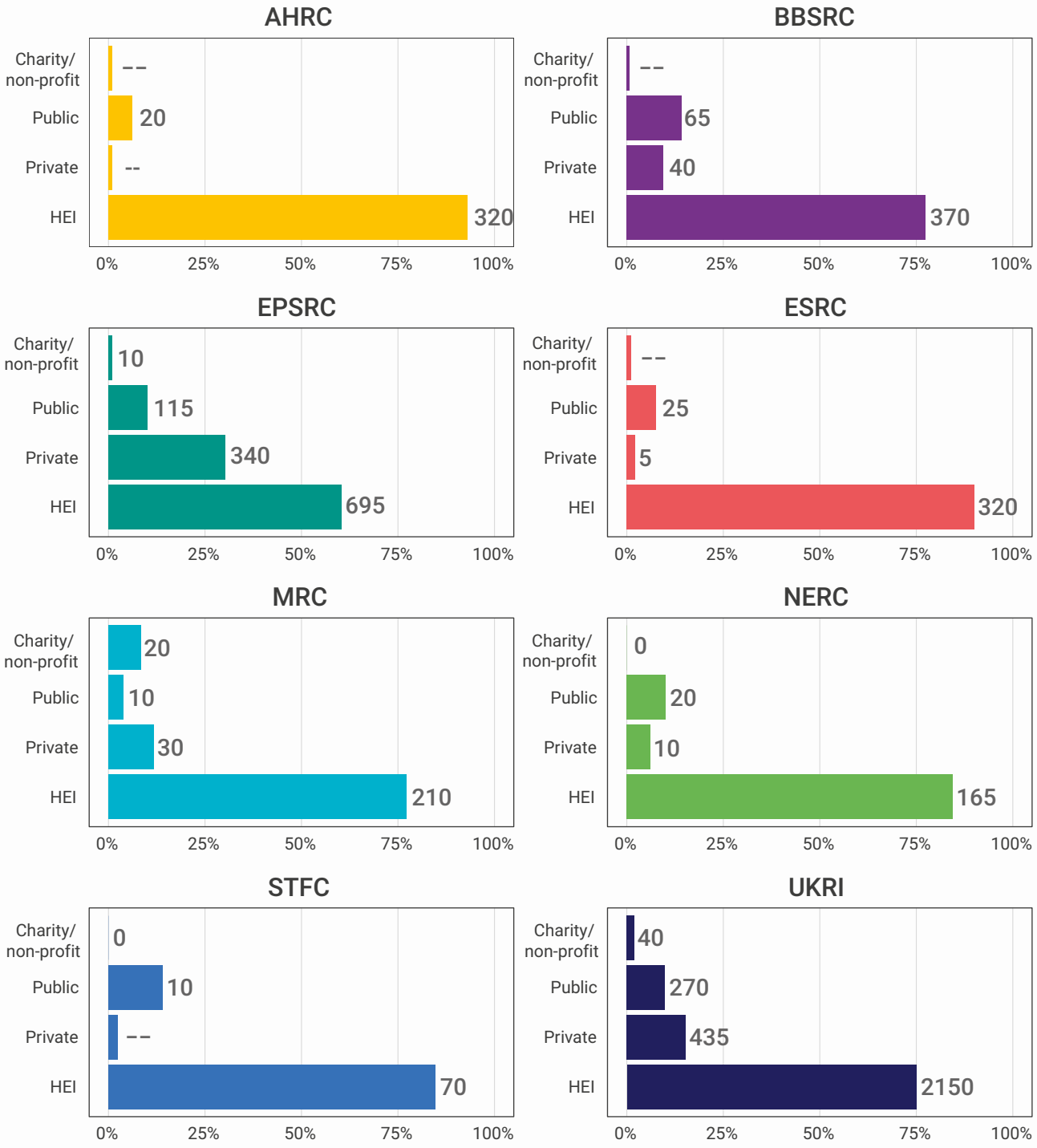


Figure 9: Percentage of instances of co–funding which relate to each sector
Counts rounded to nearest 5
Note: Counts of 1-4 are recorded as -- while zero counts are reported as 0

Some students have multiple co-funders while others are funded by UKRI alone. For requests involving a co-funder, **Figure 9** shows counts and percentages of the sectors of these funders, for each council and for UKRI overall (note that these are not the percentages of students reporting each co-funder type.)

Across UKRI (bottom-right panel), HEIs accounted for almost three quarters of all instances of co-funding reported in association with Phase 2 extension requests, while 15% of instances reflected private sector support for a student. A smaller proportion represented contributions from the public (9%) and charity/non-profit (1%) sectors. These figures differ little from those seen in Phase 1.

The distribution of co-funding sectors varies across councils. For example, 93% of AHRC co-funding instances relate to HEIs, while for EPSRC the figure is 60%; MRC studentships have the highest proportion

of charity/non-profit sector co-funders. Again, there is little difference between these figures and those seen in Phase 1. Neither Phase 1 data nor earlier surveys asked about the amount of support, or the proportion of support for each studentship, that co-funders actually provide. This means that we are unable to say what fraction of the cost of these studentships is being met by organisations other than UKRI.

If a studentship's co-funders are unable to provide additional funding in support of an extension request made in Phase 2, affected students may experience shortfalls. Figure 10 summarises the overall co-funding status of student extension requests in Phase 2, including studentships with multiple co-funders[10].

As in Phase 1, the majority of students who have at least one co-funder expect that their partner(s) will still be able to provide all their contribution to an extension. The Phase 2 situation overall appears slightly improved, with nearly two thirds of all students with a co-funder expecting that their co-funder(s) will be able to provide all the contribution. STFC students (44% but very small numbers) are least likely to fall into this category.

The highest proportion of students with co-funders not able to provide a contribution to an extension are EPSRC students. 28% of EPSRC students fall into this category, with the next highest proportion supported by AHRC (21%.) For all other councils less than 14% of students are not expecting a contribution to their extension from their co-funder(s).

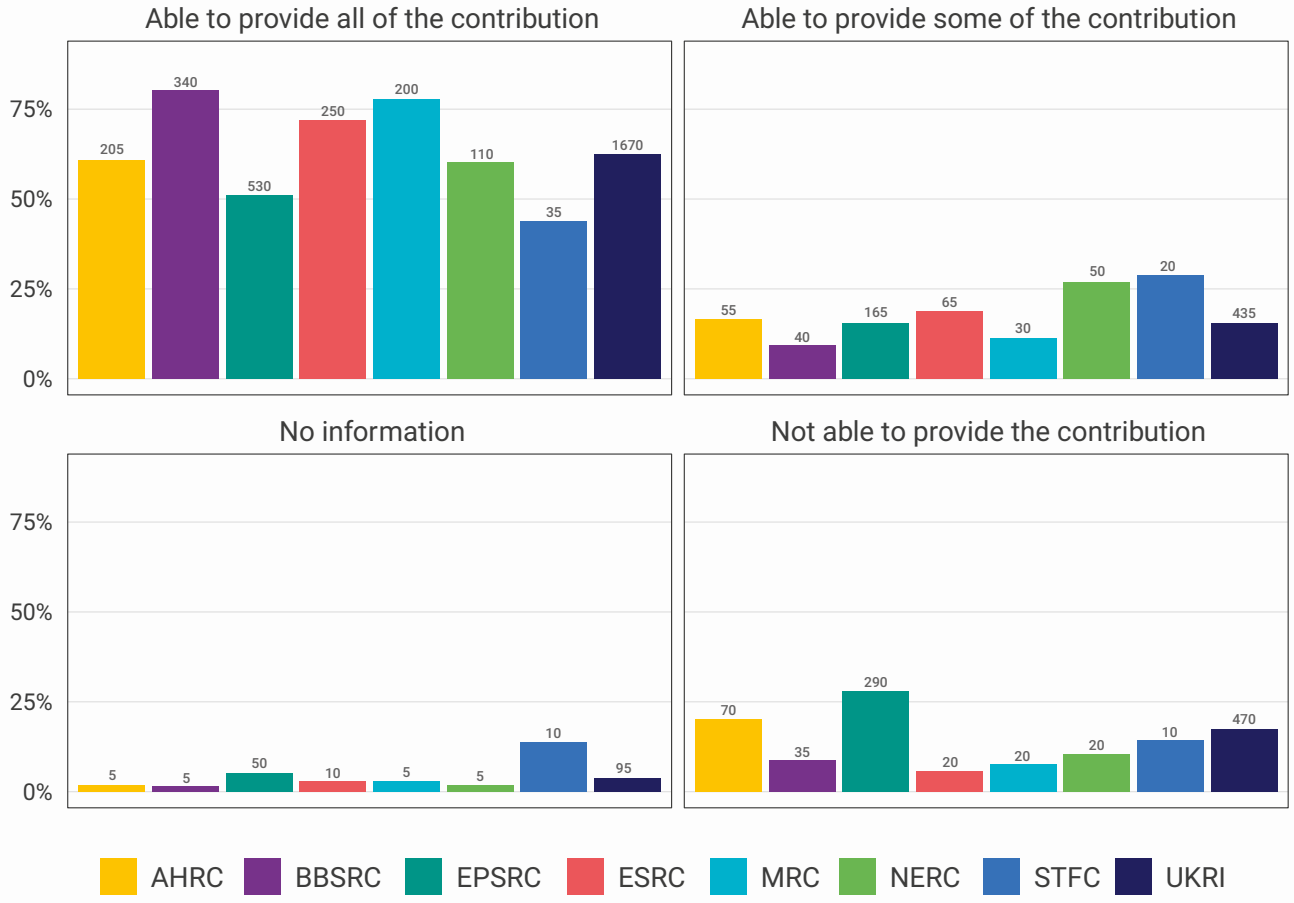


Figure 10: Percentage of co–funded studentships by their co–funders' contribution status
Counts rounded to nearest 5

10 For example, for a studentship reporting two co-funders, if one co-funder is able to provide all of their contribution and another is not, this studentship's co-funders are 'able to provide some of the contribution'.

The strong association between co-funder type (HEI or other) and likelihood of providing extension funding seen in Phase 1 is repeated in Phase 2 (**Figure 11**). In more than 74% of instances of HEI co-funding, the co-funder is able to provide all of the contribution. And in 55% of cases of other organisation types being co-funders, they are not expected to be able to make any contribution. Instances of HEI co-funders being unable to provide a contribution are much less common in Phase 2 than they were in Phase 1.

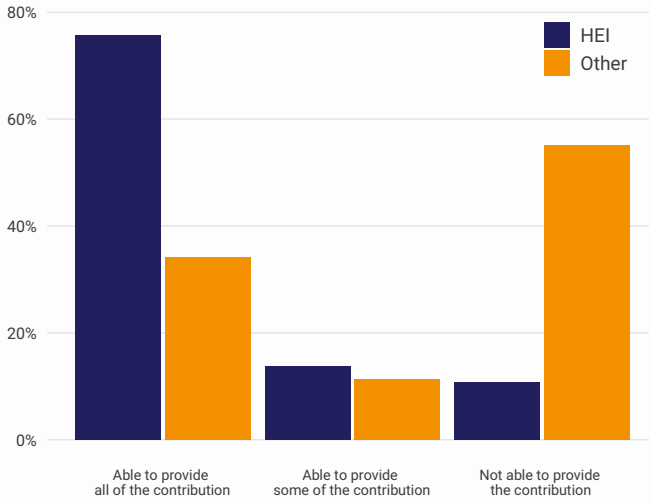


Figure 11: Status of co-funder contributions by co-funder type, for UKRI overall
Studentships with unknown co-funding status omitted

REASONS FOR EXTENSION REQUESTS

For Phase 1 and 2 extensions we asked ROs to indicate, from the following five categories, one or more reasons for each student's extension request:

- affected health and wellbeing
- increased caring responsibilities
- interruption of data collection and/or fieldwork
- lack of access to research resources and facilities
- other.

This information allows us to identify and understand, in a broad way, the reasons why extension requests were made, and whether those reasons differed across UKRI councils. The picture is variable, but extension requests recorded in relation to Phase 2 frequently reflected technical or practical research-related issues.

The most common reason given for requesting an extension, found in association with the majority (81%) of all extension requests across UKRI, was 'lack of access to research resources and facilities' (**Figure 12**, 'UKRI' series). There is little difference in comparison to the figure seen in Phase 1. The next most common extension reason 'interruption of data collection and/or fieldwork', indicated in 64% of requests, is 15 percentage points higher than seen in Phase 1.

There was a slight increase in the prevalence of health and wellbeing issues in Phase 2 relative to Phase 1, this reason being cited in association with 46% of requests for extensions (39% in Phase 1.) The increase might reasonably be expected, given Phase 2 was targeted at those students less able to adjust their research project and particularly highlighted disabled students, those with long-term illness, neurodivergent students, or those with caring responsibilities. Increased caring responsibilities were cited by 17% of those requesting extensions, practically unchanged from Phase 1.

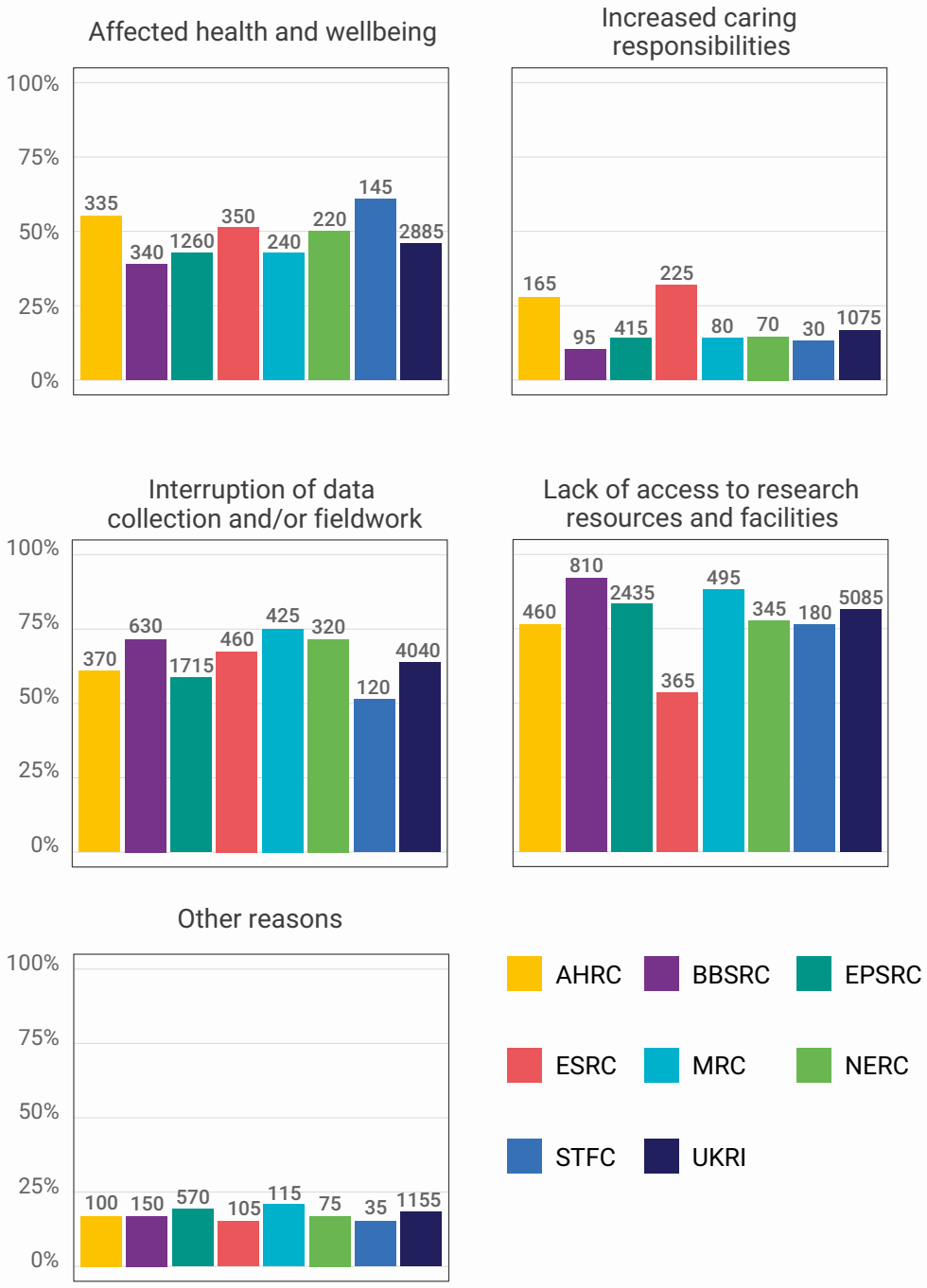


Figure 12: Percentage of extension requests citing each reason
Count of students citing reason rounded to nearest 5

ESRC students were more likely than other research council students to indicate increased caring responsibilities, and much less likely to indicate lack of access to research resources and facilities. BBSRC students were least likely to cite affected health and wellbeing as a reason or to indicate increased caring responsibilities; for them, data and resources issues were most common. A more detailed analysis of extension reasons by EDI categories across UKRI is provided in Annex 2.

ANNEX 1: INFORMATION ON THE DATA AND METHODS USED

This analysis is based on data returned to UKRI by ROs which describes applications and decisions relating to extension requests made under Phase 2 of the UKRI policy.

Reported counts are rounded to the nearest five. Percentages are usually rounded to the nearest 1% for clarity. Where 'UKRI' appears in a chart or the text, it refers to the combined data of the seven UKRI Research Councils. UKRI's other constituent bodies, Research England and Innovate UK, were not part of the extension policy.

While the Phase 2 data return process did not ask for students' age, disability status, ethnicity or gender, we have been able to match almost completely the data received with student records in Je-S[11] in order to understand more fully the characteristics of students requesting an extension. Student Je-S records can have a high proportion of missing or not disclosed data, so the near-completeness of the matching process is not a guarantee of completeness of student data.

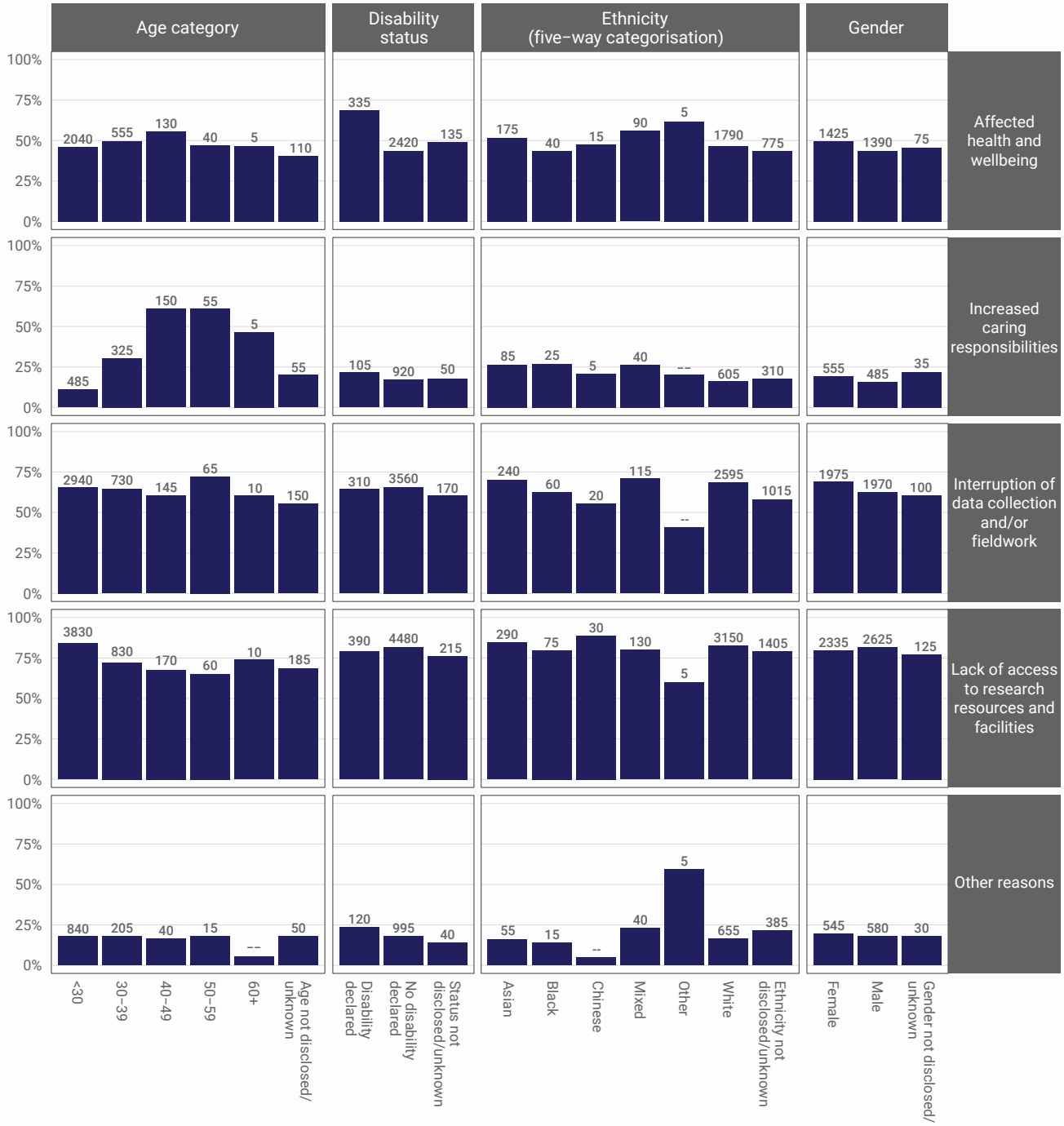
Disability status, ethnicity[12] and gender categories are treated as binary variables in the analysis: disability/no disability, Minority ethnic/White, female/male. The derived binary 'White' ethnicity categorisation combines all subcategories available in Je-S that stem from a White ethnicity, placing all remaining ethnicities in the 'Minority ethnic' category. The White ethnicity categories are 'White – British', 'White – Irish' and 'White – other'. If they are found in the data, White ethnic minorities will be reported in the 'White' category.

11 Je-S is the Joint electronic Submission system used to submit research proposals to the UKRI research councils.

12 In Annex 2 a five-way categorisation (Asian, Black, Mixed, Other, White) is shown in relation to all UKRI data.

ANNEX 2: EXTENSION REASONS BY EDI CATEGORIES ACROSS UKRI

The chart shows the percentage of all students returned in Phase 2 data citing each extension reason by age, gender, ethnicity and disability status category. The total number of students is 6,287.



Annex: Percentage of extension requests citing each reason

Count of students citing reason rounded to nearest 5 Note: Counts of 1-4 are recorded as -- while zero counts are reported as 0

UK Research and Innovation