

Manifesto – Seathrún (Jeffrey) Sardina for Vice President for Postgraduate Affairs



What is the issue?

1. Postgraduate Research Crisis

There is a deep need for large-scale reforms in the Postgraduate (PG) Research system. Currently, even those on the highest stipends from SFI or IRC make 22% under minimum wage – and those are among the best-funded PG programmes. Moreover, Postgraduate researchers (PGRs) do not have worker's rights, protected leave (such as maternity leave), or dedicated trade unions. Non-EU PGRs must pay €1000 more every year between Irish Residency Permit (€300) and insurance costs (€600-700).

And that's not even half the problem. Among the very many other issues they face are:

- Inequality and discrimination against non-EU PGs with regards to Visas, residency, fees, taxes, etc.
- Lack of access to dedicated workspaces in their colleges, in some cases
- Lack of pay for teaching / demonstrating, and / or lack of pay for time spent in preparation
- Lack of protections against workplace discriminations such as racism, sexism, or any other form of discrimination
- Lack of access to mediation procedures if conflicts arise with their supervisors
- Etc.

This has caused a worsening crisis for PGRs and the Irish research economy. PGs are being forced to abandon their degrees, and recently have sent a painfully clear message: [do not do PG research in Ireland](#). If the government continues with its current policies, it will harm all research in Ireland.

The only resolution to this crisis is to ensure that every single PG has full workers' rights, with living wages and protection of their rights in the law.

2. Third-level education crisis

This is not only a research crisis, but a crisis for the third-level education system. PGs are the demonstrators, tutors, and teachers in colleges. Our living conditions are students' learning conditions. College education quality is currently worsening because of the research crisis, principally due to the following:

- PGs are rarely if ever paid for preparation of sessions for their courses
- PGs are sometimes not paid for any form of teaching they do
- PGs are often required to teach / demonstrate information they never learned, without help from professors
- PGs often must have a second (or third) job to pay for food and housing – which severely limits time they can spend teaching or preparing to teach

If these problems are not addressed soon, then the teachers, demonstrators, and tutors who prop up the third-level education system will no longer be able to live in Ireland – something that could cause a collapse of higher education as we know it.

What is the solution?

1. The Fair Researcher Agreement (FRA)

The answer to these problems in the [Fair Researcher Agreement \(FRA\)](#) created by the Postgraduate Workers' Organisation (PWO). The main points of the FRA are:

1. Workers' rights for all PGs enshrined in the law
2. Fair, liveable wages for all PGs
3. Proper working conditions – including a dedicated workspace and funding for research-related travels, conferences, and research equipment
4. Equity – that PG employers cover the costs of the Irish Residency Permit, visas, required health insurance, etc. for non-EU PGs
5. The right to travel, do field work, etc. that is part of their research efforts without restriction and without being disadvantaged as a result
6. The right to reside in Ireland, to have a family without discrimination. For non-EU PGs, the right for their spouses to work in Ireland
7. Full counting of time spent as a PG in Ireland towards the time required for obtaining permanent residence and citizenship.
8. The right for all PGs to have a full contract that clearly explains what they must do, what they are not required to do, and what relationship they have with their college

USI has the power to amplify our voices and our demands into government chambers. With a crisis this severe facing not only PGs, not only undergrads, but also the entire third level education system, we all must stand together to win and protect our rights.

2. The Postgraduate Workers' Organisation

The Postgraduate Workers' Organisation (PWO, or EOI by its Irish name) is the group that PGRs have created by and for themselves to promote their rights. The only way to address the challenges that PGs face is to listen directly to them. If I am elected, I will use USI's voice and strength to promote and stand with all PGs and with the PWO.

What plans do I have?

To bring the FRA into effect, I will

- Maintain contact with the TDs who have supported the PWO and work with them to advance PG rights
- Run FOI (Freedom of Information request) and parliamentary question campaigns to gather information and keep pressure on politicians and public bodies
- Run social media and information campaigns to increase support for our movement
- Support the PWO in all their campaigns, including planning for protests and local or national strikes if necessary
- Equip each SU Sabbatical Team and school-level representatives with the knowledge of the FRA, and especially those points which are most relevant to their role

We must be ready to negotiate and have open conversations with TDs and the government. However, the cost of living crisis is so severe on PGs, especially those not from the EU, that

many struggle to pay for food and housing. Costs for Visas and IRP permits only make that worse. We cannot afford to stay silent or not act. If necessary, I am entirely willing to plan and hold a protest with the PWO. But on top of that, I would stand with the PWO in any strike action, local or national that they decide to take, and I would offer full support in planning, preparing, and running said strike.

What experience do I have?

Leadership

- PhDs' Collective Action Union (now merged into the PWO)– Co-founder and first President
- Postgraduate Workers' Organisation (PWO / EOI) – Co-founder and committee member

Information campaigns

- Running FOI (Freedom of Information) campaigns to gather information about colleges, funding agencies, and government bodies
- Submitting parliamentary questions in the Dáil to pressure politicians for responses
- Growing contacts and connections between SUs and lobbying groups

Democratic experience

- Running elections and voting systems in the PCAU
- Drafting and editing union motions and constitutions
- Lobbying politicians and drafting parliamentary questions
- Planning and running protests

Communications and News Media

- Organizing meetings with public representatives and TDs and negotiating with them
- Writing and sending press releases for various actions and events
- Significant experience speaking on various radios about human rights

What else have I done? Here is a list of news about what the groups I have been involved in and I have done:

- The Fair Researcher Agreement: <https://bit.ly/3y2Axwp>
- Founding of the PWO: <https://trinitynews.ie/2023/01/postgraduate-worker-unions-pcau-and-pgwa-to-merge-under-new-name/>
- Submission of the FRA to Harris's PhD Review: <https://universitytimes.ie/2022/12/pcau-submits-fair-research-agreement-to-review-of-national-phd-supports/>
- PhD Rights Protest: <https://universitytimes.ie/2022/09/hundreds-gather-to-protest-phd-student-rights/> and <https://www.rte.ie/radio/rnag/clips/22145826/>
- Petition to Simon Harris: <https://universitytimes.ie/2022/07/usi-signs-open-letter-backing-increase-in-postgraduate-research-stipends/> and <https://my.uplift.ie/petitions/fair-pay-for-phd-researchers>
- News published in Nature: <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-022-03369-1>

- Work with Extinction Rebellion:
<https://www.buzz.ie/news/irish-news/clontarf-firm-fossil-fuel-protest-27593550> and
<https://www.rte.ie/radio/rnag/clips/22178246/> and
<https://www.dublinlive.ie/news/clontarf-woman-hits-out-dublin-24608578>