

Publish and Perish: When the FPU Grant Does Not Meet the Cost of Living

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Abstract

This paper explores the persistent economic precarity experienced by first year’s PhD students in Spain, despite government efforts to improve their working conditions. Using the FPU (Formación de Personal Universitario) grant as a case study, we analyze the evolution of PhD students salaries in relation to the cost of living, measured by the Consumer Price Index (CPI), and compare them to the Average salary and the Minimum Professional Wage (SMI). Our results reveal that, although PhD students are now legally classified as employees rather than grant holders, their financial situation remains precarious, with salaries more closely aligned to the minimum wage than the national average. We argue that without significant salary improvements, Spain risks losing talented students to other professions, undermining its academic and research potential.

1 Introduction

Debates surrounding low salaries are common in society, as individuals often feel they are underpaid relative to their worth. This sentiment is particularly prevalent among PhD students, many of whom believe their quality of life has deteriorated over the years. In this study, we aim to address the recurring question: “Are PhD students better off financially compared to their predecessors?” To explore this, we conducted a comparative analysis of wage evolution and cost of living, using the salary of the Spanish FPU scholarship as a reference point. This analysis incorporates changes over time in the Spanish Consumer Price Index, the Averaged Salary, and the Minimum Professional Wage to evaluate shifts in the cost of living.

2 Background

There are four key concepts essential to understanding this paper: FPU grants, the Consumer Price Index, the Averaged Salary, and the Minimum Professional Wage.

FPU (Formación de Personal Universitario) grants are awarded by the Spanish government to students for a period of four years to conduct research and pursue a PhD. The eligibility criteria for these grants are highly competitive, with only the top students based on academic performance qualifying for them.

Until 2014, the FPU was classified as a scholarship; however, it is now considered an employment contract, with all the legal implications that this change entails, such as social security contributions. This shift was the result of pressure from many research

organizations, which led to the Spanish government improving the working conditions of PhD students [7].

The *Consumer Price Index* (CPI), as defined by the Spanish National Statistics Institute (INE) [25], measures the average change over time in the prices paid by consumers for a basket of goods and services. It serves as a key indicator of inflation, reflecting the variation in the cost of living for households. The CPI tracks changes in categories like food, energy, transportation, and housing, and is crucial for economists in adjusting economic policies in line with inflation trends.

Other key indicator employed in the paper is the *Averaged Salary* in Spain, this indicator is calculated with the Annual Wage Structure Survey [21] which provides detailed insights into the distribution of wages, analyzing factors such as gender, occupation, industry, and region. Conducted by the INE, this survey helps in understanding wage inequalities and labor market trends, giving a comprehensive picture of how wages evolve across different sectors of the economy.

Both the CPI and the Annual Wage Structure Survey are essential tools for evaluating Spain’s economic health, and guiding fiscal policies.

The last concept needed is the Spanish *Minimum Professional Wage*, known as Salario Mínimo Interprofesional (SMI) [22], is the legally mandated minimum amount that workers in Spain must be paid for their labor, regardless of the industry or type of employment. The SMI is set annually by the Spanish government and serves as a tool to protect workers, ensuring they receive a minimum income that is considered necessary for basic living standards.

3 Methodology

The CPI data were sourced from the Spanish (INE) [24], along with the average salary for individuals aged 25 to 34 [23]. This age range was chosen as it is the most representative of FPU-funded PhD students based on the available data. According to FPU eligibility criteria [19], only students who graduated within the previous three years are eligible. Considering national statistics of graduates [26], enrolled students [27], and the age group classifications available in the average salary data [23], from our perspective, the 25 to 34 age range is the most suitable for this analysis.

As it will be shown in Section 4, we have calculated the salary evolution in accordance with the CPI using the following recursive formula, where the subscript t represents the year index:

$$salary_{t+1} = salary_t \cdot \left(1 + \frac{cpi_{t+1} - cpi_t}{cpi_t} \right) \quad (1)$$

Note that the fraction in the formula, when multiplied by 100, represents the percentage change in the CPI. Therefore, it applies the same percentage variation in the CPI to the salary.

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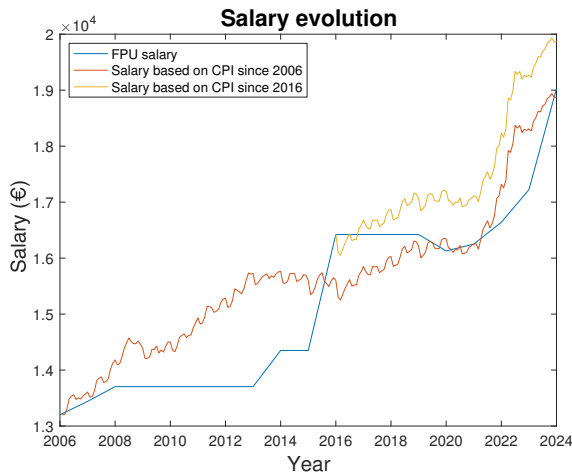


Figure 1: Annual FPU salary and the hypothetical FPU salary based on CPI (in euros).

For the Minimum Professional Wage, we referenced the data from the Ministry of Labour and Social Economy [28]. And finally, the salary of the FPU grant was obtained from the Spanish BOE of each year [1–6, 8–20]. In this paper, we focus exclusively on the salary awarded during the first year of the grant. The distribution of the total grant amount over the four years varies depending on the year of award. We have chosen to examine the first-year salary, as it is typically the lowest and the period in which students are most vulnerable to precarity. Additionally, students who are required to relocate to another city face significant economic burdens during this initial phase as they settle into their new environment.

4 Results

Figure 1 shows the evolution of the first year’s FPU salary from 2006 to 2024, along with its expected change based on the CPI. That is, how the FPU salary should have evolved according to the CPI (red curve) and how it actually has evolved (in blue). For future grantees to maintain the standard of living of their predecessors, the evolution of the salary should match that of the CPI. We see that in 2007, the increase in the grant is adjusted to the CPI. However, from 2008, with the arrival of the financial crisis, it is no longer equalized. This results in a loss of purchasing power for doctoral students.

In 2014, six years after the start of the series, we observe the first increase in the grant amount. This moment is significant due to a change in the FPU, as mentioned in Section 2, where grantees began to be treated as employees rather than scholarship holders [7]. This may be the reason for the larger salary increase in 2016, where the FPU salary curve exceeded that based on the CPI. That is, the salary that a contract employee earns is, at this point, higher than what a scholar should earn. In fact, the position of the contracted graduate student improves with respect to that of the scholar. Both labor rights and economic amount have improved.

However, we see that the red and blue curves meet in 2024. The evolution that the salary of a grant holder would have had to follow is on a par with the salary of a contract student. In other

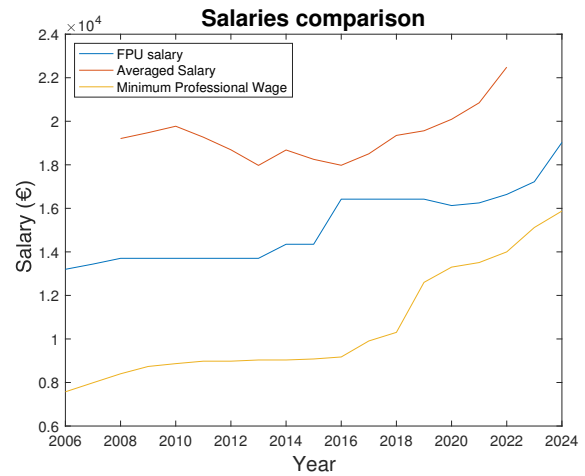


Figure 2: Evolution of annual salaries compared to general population average.

words, despite having the status of hired staff, economically they are still treated as scholarship holders. Therefore, there has been no significant salary difference between being a grant holder in 2006 and being a contract staff in 2024. Even if the labour rights changed from trainee to contractual worker, the economic standard of living is still that of a precarious trainee.

In 2016, we see that an FPU grantee (now legally hired staff) earns €16,422 per year. The yellow curve from Figure 1 shows how this amount should have changed according to the CPI, reflecting the evolution of the salary of an actual employee. That is to say, in 2016, as previously mentioned, the FPU salary curve surpassed the CPI based curve, indicating a genuine improvement in real wages, there was a real difference between scholarship and contract. Therefore, the yellow curve represents the trajectory the salary should have maintained to preserve this improvement over time. We conclude that the amount of an FPU has increased slightly less than expected, as it amounts to €19,026 in 2024 instead of the projected €19,866.

4.1 Evolution of Salaries

An alternative perspective for assessing the precarity of first year’s PhD students is to compare their salaries with those of the general population. Figure 2 presents the average salary in Spain for individuals aged 25 to 34, alongside the Minimum Professional Wage. As mentioned above, during the Spanish financial crisis from 2008 to 2014, PhD students maintained their incomes, in contrast to the rest of society, whose incomes fell. However, this also meant a loss of purchasing power due to the increase in the CPI, as shown in Figure 1.

In 2014, the salary of doctoral students came closer to the average general salary, as students moved from being grant holders to hired employees. However, in the following years, the salary appears to be moving away from the average and closer to the legally-allowed minimum wage. This suggests that there is a move towards cheaper labor, which is likely to lead to an exodus of students to other professions.

5 Conclusion

Despite the government's changes to improve the working conditions of PhD students, their economic precarity remains unchanged. Our analysis shows that there has been no significant salary improvement for FPU grant holders after the switch to employed staff in 2014. Moreover, the current salary for first year's PhD students seems to be closer to the Minimum Professional Wage than to the average national salary, highlighting the low remuneration of highly qualified individuals. Without a significant increase in salaries, Spain will face significant challenges in attracting and retaining talented students in academia, ultimately jeopardizing the country's academic and research competitiveness.

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