Re: Open letter to UKRI and other bodies on behalf of UK PGRs regarding Covid-19 support

Thank you for your letter, dated 23 May and received 4 June, in which you set out concerns about the impact of Covid-19 on post-graduate research students (PGRs). I am replying on behalf of UKRI, including our councils.

As you may know, through our research councils’ training grants, we fund around one-in-five PhDs in the UK. There are also many PGRs who are funded through different means, whether through other funders, charities, industry, self-funding or indeed by universities from their own budgets. Many funders, including those you wrote to at the Leverhulme Trust, Royal Society and Wellcome Trust, have put in place support for their own students. My response focusses on the actions we are taking to support research council funded programmes (“training grant holders”) and their students (“UKRI students”). I respond to all of the points you raised in turn, below.

1. Six-month extension for all PGRs

You first call for a blanket funded extension of six months for all PhD students. While we expect that Covid-19 will mean many students need an extension to complete their degree, others will be able to finish on time, even if this means adapting their planned project. As our funding comes from the public purse, we have to ensure that it is used for its intended purpose. Funding students who do not require financial support to finish their degree would be inappropriate and may diminish our ability to fund other things in the future, for example future PhD students.

However, we have asked all training grant holders to talk to their UKRI students about whether they need to adapt or extend their projects. As it became clear that the pandemic would have wide-reaching impacts on the sector, we acted quickly to ensure that all UKRI students would continue to be paid their stipends. Furthermore, all UKRI students whose funded period ends after 1 March 2020 who have been affected by Covid-19 can request a costed extension from their programme. We are supporting our training grant holders to deliver this in two ways. First, we announced new funding for students whose funded period ends between 1 March 2020 and 31 March 2021. For those students who are due to finish after 31 March 2021, their doctoral programme or grant holder can support
extensions from their existing grant, in the first instance from any underspend and feeding information to UKRI on the overall funding required.

2. UKRI extension principles

You quote our guidance for training grant holders on implementing extensions. Specifically, you note that we ‘ask that all students should be treated fairly, using flexible, generous and inclusive processes that are sympathetic to the disruption caused to academic programmes and recognise the impact of the pandemic on individual personal circumstances of student’. If UKRI students feel that they have not been treated in accordance with these principles, they may find it most helpful to discuss this with their training grant holder in the first instance. I hope they will find them receptive.

Students also have the right to make a formal complaint to their university or training grant holder. All training grant holders are required to ensure that students and supervisors have access to procedures for resolving problems, including complaints, arising from the administration and supervision of their studentship.

3. Equalities Impact Assessment

You ask that we publish the initial Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) conducted before we issued our guidance. We published the EIA on 28 May and it is accessible under ‘Students and Training Grants’ on the following webpage: www.ukri.org/research/coronavirus/guidance-for-the-research-and-innovation-communities1

4. Co-funded and internally funded students

You ask that we ensure match-funded and internally funded researchers are not treated differently from UKRI students. I regret that we cannot make this commitment. For co-funded students, we are unable to cover the full cost of extensions of studentships co-funded from non-UKRI sources, including institutional sponsors or the public, private or voluntary sectors. We hope that funding partners will be able to offer the remainder of the additional funding required but understand many organisations are also facing uncertainty and financial constraints. Where funding partners are under financial pressure, we encourage them to prioritise support for current students above the co-funding for future studentships. If a funding partner is not able to contribute to the costs of the extension, training grant holders can also consider flexible use of UKRI funding in the best interests
of the student such as reducing the length of the extension granted, so long as the stipend remains at the level the student normally receives.

5. Self-funded and students whose funded period ended after 1 March 2020

You ask that we provide funding to ensure that self-funded researchers and those outside of their funding period have the same level of support as funded researchers. As above, we do not provide support for students who receive funding from the charitable or private sector, universities directly, or who self-fund. As the precise nature of funding for non-UKRI students is organised within individual universities, it may be better to discuss these points with them directly.

As you note, a number of students who initially do receive funding from our councils, go on to submit their thesis after their funded period has ended. We continue to encourage the students we fund to write up within their funded period. We do provide students with the flexibility to submit outside of this funded period, but even in normal circumstances we do not offer a costed extension for this period. In the current situation, extensions to the submission period are allowed, but, consistent with our position on submission outside of the funded period, no funding is available for this.

6. University fees

You ask that universities suspend all fees for self-funded researchers and those outside their funded period. These fees are set within universities and UKRI has no authority over them, so this point may be better addressed by individual institutions.

7. Mental health

We are taking forward a number of steps to support student mental health, including funding eight mental health networks. One of these – the Student Mental Health Research Network (SMaRtEN) recently conducted the survey of students that you quote in your letter. The Office for Students (OFS) has also developed a series of briefing notes for universities and colleges on the steps they are taking to support students during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. This includes a note specifically on supporting student mental health, which considers support for those who have suffered a bereavement. A specific note on supporting disabled students is also being developed.
8. Fit notes

Our requirements on sick leave in normal circumstances are contained in the standard UKRI Training Grant Terms and Conditions. The pandemic represents extraordinary times and so we updated our guidance on 28 May to make clear that the sickness period of students who are ill with COVID-19 or a COVID-related condition (including, for example, increased mental health issues due to lockdown) should not be considered in the usual way. Instead, it should form part of a case for an extension. We have asked training grants holders to satisfy themselves that there is enough evidence that the student has had a period of sick leave without putting an undue burden of proof on the student as it may not be possible for the student to obtain a medical certificate at this time.

9. Visa policy

The UK benefits from international researchers choosing to study towards their research degree in the UK. Visa policy is the responsibility of the Home Office and I regret that UKRI is unable to give specific advice to individuals about their visas. I encourage students who are concerned about their immigration status to raise this with their university, who will be aware of the most recent Home Office guidance. Indeed, the Home Office has taken immediate steps in light of Covid-19 and there is advice on the current arrangements here: www.gov.uk/guidance/coronavirus-covid-19-advice-for-uk-visa-applicants-and-temporary-uk-residents

10. Payment for training.

Our Training Grant Terms and Conditions (see TGC 4.6) state that remuneration costs for demonstration, teaching, or other duties considered to constitute employment, must not be taken from the student’s stipend covered by the training grant. It must not be compulsory and must be paid for at the university’s usual rate and supported by appropriate training. Costs for demonstrating or teaching must not be taken from the Training Grant.

11. Involvement of PGRs in decision and 12. Ensure robust representation of post-graduate research students

My team has contacted the authors of this open letter and we are arranging a meeting to discuss these matters. We will consult representative groups of students with our review of guidance, alongside engaging other interested parties and reviewing data from our own and the SMaRtEN surveys.
I am copying this response to the other funders and university bodies you addressed your letter to. A copy will be made available to the ministers, shadow ministers and select committee chairs you included, and we will also publish this letter on our website.

I sincerely hope this response is helpful.

Yours faithfully,

[Signature]

Professor Rory Duncan
UKRI Director of Talent and Skills

cc. Jeremy Farrah, Director of the Wellcome Trust
    Professor Gordon Marshall, Director of the Leverhulme Trust
    Julie Maxton, Executive Director of the Royal Society
    Professor Julia Buckingham CBE, President of Universities UK (UUK)
    Alistair Jarvis, Chief Executive of Universities UK (UUK)
    Tim Bradshaw, Chief Executive of the Russell Group
    Trevor Cooper, Director, Higher Education Branch, Department for the Economy
      (Northern Ireland)