23 June 2020

Re: ‘Open letter regarding specific reasonable adjustments for disabled, chronically ill and neurodivergent PhD students due to Covid-19’

Thank you for your open letter, dated 14 May 2020. I appreciate you taking the time to put together your concerns about the impact of Covid-19 on PhD students who are disabled, chronically ill or neurodivergent. Your concerns relate to guidance we issued to training grant holders at universities and other research organisations which we fund to run doctoral training schemes. Some of the points in the letter may be better addressed by individual training grant holders but I would like to respond where I can.

First, I want to reassure you that we are committed to providing support for students who are disabled, chronically ill or neurodivergent. We believe that equality, diversity and inclusion are integral to excellence in research and innovation, and particularly during this pandemic, recognise that the people are the lifeblood to ensuring that the R&D system emerges from this current situation in the best possible health. This is why we are working closely with universities to gather intelligence to understand the impacts on different groups and individuals. We are also accelerating our work to establish a disability taskforce. We absolutely recognise that the personal circumstances of each student will be different, and the impacts they face from Covid-19 will be different for each student.

In your letter you call for us to take a number of specific steps. You first call for an immediate and automatic funded extension of six months for all PhD students, especially students who are registered with their university as disabled, chronically ill or neurodivergent. As UKRI Director of Talent and Skills, and as an academic and PhD supervisor, I completely agree with your point that many students are unable to work as they usually would. In our UKRI guidance we have asked that, wherever feasible, students do some work towards their research degree, but we fully accept that many students cannot continue their research in the way they would like to.

We anticipate that some of those students will have to reduce the number of hours they work in a day – with a number being unable to work at all. Students may also find that they cannot do as much work in the same time without the access to their usual facilities. We have asked all training grant holders to talk to their students about whether they need to adapt or extend their projects. Our key priority is ensuring that all our students feel supported to complete their project to a doctoral level. Wherever necessary, training grant
holders can decide to extend any UKRI studentship to ensure that the student is able to do this. We are asking that decisions on extensions be made by each doctoral programme and on a case-by-case basis because we know that they understand the individual needs of each student and project better than we do.

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, we have to ensure that it is used for its originally 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, including for example future PhD students.

I note the perception that extensions are only available to final year students or capped at a maximum of six months. This is not the case – any UKRI student whose funded period ends after 1 March 2020 who has been affected by Covid-19 can request a costed extension from their training grant holder. We are supporting our training grant holders to deliver this in two ways. First, we announced new funding for students who need it and 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.

You also call for us to end case-by-case applications for support. You will be aware that you do not need apply to URKI, although we recognise that some training grant holders may choose to put in place processes to ensure fairness. We do however require written descriptions of the case for these extensions because we are obliged to account for the public money being spent, and we want to monitor the effects of the pandemic on the research and innovation community. We have asked training grant holders to make these descriptions as minimal and light-touch as they possibly can be.

I am interested in your comments that sick leave, medical leave or other suspension of studies are non-discriminatory or ‘best-practice’. 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. Universities are asked 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.
You raise a number of concerns about the impact of Covid-19 on international students who may require an extension to their visa. 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](http://www.gov.uk/guidance/coronavirus-covid-19-advice-for-uk-visa-applicants-and-temporary-uk-residents)

You suggest there should be greater support for self-funded or unfunded PhD students, including those who are writing up their PhD. Through our training grants to research organisations, UKRI supports around one-in-five of the 100,000 PhD students in the UK. For those students, we have been able to put in place the package of support described above. However, we are not able to provide public money to support students’ 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 submit their thesis after their funded period has ended. We continue to encourage our students to write up within their funded period as far as possible. We do provide students with the flexibility to submit outside of this funded period, but even in normal circumstances we do not support costs 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.

You ask for the immediate and automatic provision of aids, adaptations and adjustments for those who have to work from home. Students with disabilities and chronic illness can continue to seek support through our existing support mechanisms, including the Disabled Student Allowance, as well as talking to supervisors and other university staff about the specific impact of Covid-19 on them and their research as part of discussions on extension requirements. More generally, while UKRI does not provide extra funding to training grant holders for office equipment for their students, the purchase of equipment to support students’ homeworking may be considered by the training grant holder and the costs drawn from the grant should they wish to allow such support. We have set this out in the guidance updated in April.
You suggest that we give a public commitment to remote, digital or other distance access to university resources. Measures to support remote working and supervision are, like fees and exam arrangements, not things that we regulate, though I hope that as a community we will be able to look to apply some of the lessons from this period once the crisis has ended. Similarly, I would welcome suggestions on the sort of other reasonable measures you suggest we might adopt.

You ask for clear guidelines and support for all disabled, chronically ill and neurodivergent PhD students, including those who experience bereavement. I think this is a good suggestion. The Office for Students has developed a series of briefing notes for universities and colleges on the steps they are taking to support their students during the pandemic. This includes a note 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.

I share your concerns about the financial security of university fixed-term contract staff. Almost everyone in research and innovation is facing major interruptions to their work and lives and this is why we acted quickly to ensure that studentships are not suspended but rather, stipends continue to be paid. The government is moving urgently to address an enormous range of issues as they arise, as part of a wider effort to support society and the economy. We are doing everything we can to help the sector emerge from the situation in the best possible health, working with the universities, research organisations, and businesses we support to identify and prioritise issues, and to help find solutions.

You called for the publication of Equalities Impact Assessments (EIA) the impact of Covid-19. We conducted an initial EIA before publishing our guidance for training grant holders and have now published this on our website. We will continue to review the EIA as part of the four-month review of doctoral student extensions. You can find this alongside the guidance for training programmes and students in relation to Covid-19: [www.ukri.org/research/coronavirus/guidance-for-the-research-and-innovation-communities](www.ukri.org/research/coronavirus/guidance-for-the-research-and-innovation-communities)

Finally, I would like to reiterate some points I made in my open letter to students published alongside our guidance. We aim to make sure that you are treated fairly, your personal circumstances are taken into account, and that decisions are made on a generous basis with as little paperwork as possible. We encourage all students to keep talking with their supervisors and programmes about the impact Covid-19 is having on them. We are committed to reviewing our policy and we have asked our training grant holders for specific information about the extensions provided, at the individual student level. We will publicise our review scope and then our findings and if the evidence from this review
demands changes to ensure these guiding principles are upheld, we will adapt our policies.

I am always happy to hear suggestions. In particular, I note that you intend to send a second letter in due course and we would be happy to receive this when it is ready. I will be publishing this letter on our website.

I sincerely hope this response is helpful.

Yours faithfully,

Professor Rory Duncan
UKRI Director of Talent and Skills