

Open letter to UKRI students – Update on extensions for doctoral students impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic

17/08/2020

When we first announced the support package for UKRI-funded doctoral students we committed to reviewing our policy and guidance to ensure that we took any further impacts to doctoral training into account. In this letter I want to give students, training grant holders and the wider community an update on that ongoing work.

COVID-19 has had a dramatic impact on all of us. Doctoral students have felt this keenly with sudden changes to their projects in a complex funding landscape, with a significant number facing disruption because of the effects on their health and wellbeing. Over the last few months many students have contacted us directly by email, on social media and through open letters to explain the pressures that they are facing and suggest actions that might improve the situation. I am hugely grateful for their doing so and, while we have not been able to meet all of their requests, we continue to listen, consider and act on those concerns where we can.

We have also been working with our partners in universities to understand how they are implementing the guidance. As a first step we asked them to provide us with details, by 9th June, of how many UKRI final year students require an extension at that stage. This exercise – which indicates decisions likely to be taken rather than final decisions – suggests that the majority (92%, 6362 students) require an extension. Of these, most (58%) need at least an extra three months to complete their studies. Recognising students could be impacted by multiple issues, the three leading reasons for an extension were:

- 'Lack of access to research resources and facilities' with 76% of the students affected.
- 'Interruption of data collection and/or fieldwork' affecting 41% of students.
- 'Affected health and wellbeing' for 34% of students.

This final year survey showed that in many cases we are students' sole funder and so they will receive full support from us. However, around two-in-five (2887) UKRI final year students are co-funded, meaning that their financial support comes from their university, businesses or other sources, as well as from UKRI. Individual students can be co-funded by multiple organizations and the survey indicated that HEIs contribute to 72% of UKRI co-funded students while non-HEIs such as private businesses and charities support 32%.

At the time of the survey, universities indicated the ability to support the extensions of the majority of their UKRI co-funded students with 55% expected to receive full support and 3% partial support.

The survey also indicates that:

- universities are not able to offer any support to around 220 students (11% of those they co-fund)
- 30% of students were still awaiting a decision.

For students co-funded by other organisations:

- 55% were still awaiting a decision
- 13% can expect full support
- and 7% partial support.

Support could not be offered to support around 170 students (19% of those they co-fund).

In April, we announced that we would provide additional funding to our partners to support final year students. As an immediate response to this survey UKRI has released over £5 million to universities as an initial payment towards supporting students who are already in their extension period. A further release of funds will be made in the autumn once universities have confirmed the details of all extensions awarded to final year students.

Our training grant holders face an incredibly difficult job. We encourage them to make full use of the support we have made available and to continue prioritising support for existing students over future recruitment.

We are now taking further steps, including analysing the returns from a second survey that closed on 30th June, focused on students who are at an earlier stage in their studies. Through workshops with students, university leaders and training grant holders we are seeking to understand their experience in more detail. We are particularly keen to hear more from disabled, chronically ill and neurodivergent students and will be considering what revisions are required to our policy and equalities impact assessment in the light of how particular groups have been impacted by COVID - 19.

The aim of this work is to develop our understanding of whether the policy is working, and its cost. This understanding will inform ongoing implementation of this policy and future policy development. We will gauge the extent to which the policy has been implemented consistently and in line with our guidelines across grants, disciplines and research organisations. We will publish our full findings in the autumn.

Undoubtedly, many students are still under pressure. We are seeing encouraging signs that many now have support in place, but we also accept there is more to do. In the meantime, we remain committed to doing everything we can to ensure the students we support are able to complete their training and to be funded to do so.

Yours faithfully,



Professor Rory Duncan
UKRI Director of Talent and Skills