



Mark Pendleton et al.

4 December 2020

**Re: Open letter on treatment of UKRI funded PhD students**

Dear Colleagues,

Thank you for the support you have expressed for UKRI-funded students through signing an open letter, reported in the Guardian on 17 November and published on the UCU website.

The COVID19 pandemic has had, and continues to have, a profound effect on everyone in the research and innovation system. Where possible UKRI has tried to redeploy resources both to address the research and innovation priorities needed to tackle the pandemic, and to support the sector and the people within it through this crisis. There are finite funds available for these endeavours and the decisions we make involve commitments into future years. This means our decisions now not only impact current R&D budgets, but they constrain our ability to fund new projects and support the PhD students and research teams of the future.

With all these considerations in mind, we have tried to balance a range of factors in developing our policy to support current PhD students. These include the shorter- and longer-term needs of current UKRI-funded PhD students, providing opportunity for future PhD students, the needs of post-doctoral researchers, technicians, and the wider research and innovation system. Across UKRI we have therefore developed a portfolio of interventions including over £60m additional funding for doctoral students, £180m in costed extensions for research grants, £334m support for innovative businesses, and wider stabilisation measures for the system so that we can support careers and prospects as best we can.

Given these circumstances, we have to make difficult decisions about the support we can provide to students. We know that students have not all been impacted to the same extent and that many will be able to complete a successful PhD without additional funding. It is deeply regrettable that this will involve students and their teams compromising on the work they had planned to do. I very much regret the extra stress students and their supervisors will experience from having to change project plans to allow completion close to the original schedule. However, our ability to fund future students and to support the projects that many current students will pursue as post-docs or in innovative businesses



after they graduate must be tensioned against the support we provide now. These considerations led to our allocating a further £19m, in addition to the £44m provided earlier in the year, to allow universities to fund extensions for students with a start date before March this year. We have asked universities to target this support to the students who will find it most difficult to complete their PhD successfully within their current funding envelope. This includes, but is not limited to, students at later stages in their research and students with challenging personal circumstances.

The decisions we have had to make are not easy, given the profound impact of the pandemic and UKRI's responsibility as a steward of the research and innovation system. At this tremendously difficult time for students, it is important that we explain the wider context for our decision. We sought to do this in our reports and policy statements. As soon as we published them, we actively emailed the 22,000 UKRI funded students setting out our approach. Universities were also given a week's notice of the policy statement so that they could provide support to students and supervisory teams. However, some students were unhappy with the way in which the policy was communicated. We are keen to learn from this experience and to understand how we can better communicate with this important part of our community.

Thank you again for your commitment and support for PhD students, which I share, and thank you for working with UKRI. I am attaching a longer document that addresses the specific points in your letter.

We will publish a copy of this response on our website.

Yours faithfully,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Rory Duncan', written over a light blue rectangular background.

**Professor Rory Duncan**  
**UKRI Director of Talent and Skills**

Enc. Response to specific points raised



## **Response to specific points raised**

### **Survey data**

During the first national lockdown we issued a survey to our training grant holders, asking them to estimate how many students not in their final year they thought would need an extension. Some training grant holders' used their experience to complete the survey, while others asked students directly. As you note, the survey estimated around 77% of students may have required a funded extension. As our report states, this estimate was made in June and so reflects views during the early part of lockdown, before facilities had started to adapt to the changed circumstances. Our subsequent consultations demonstrated that many universities and supervisors were supporting their students to find creative ways to re-plan their work.

### **How did we work with the sector to develop this policy?**

In developing our case for additional funding, we gathered quantitative and qualitative evidence from students, grant holders and university management across all the areas UKRI funds.

You reference the focus groups we commissioned in which 58 students participated. These were in the context of the overall engagement work, which includes the surveys that cover the UKRI student population. We also considered data from the UKRI-funded SMARTEN survey<sup>1</sup> of nearly 5000 respondents. Focus groups supplemented this with more in depth qualitative insights with participants carefully selected to give us a representative sample of students. The focus groups were conducted by NatCen Social Research which provided us with a report that provided recommendations based on the students' feedback, now published on our website.

We recognised that the focus groups may not necessarily represent the students who felt most strongly about the case for extensions and so sought to meet these groups separately. A meeting took place in August with a group who published an open letter requesting blanket extensions and consideration of those particularly affected by illness or disabilities, for example. Some students declined to meet with us, feeling that they had made their points clear through correspondence. Although we have not adopted the specific policy proposals that the students put forward, we took and continue to take their concerns seriously. Notably some of the students felt that the processes universities had put in place might dissuade students from applying for an extension. As a result, we sampled the processes in ten institutions.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.smarten.org.uk/covid-19-study.html>



We consulted extensively with university senior leaders, held focus groups with training grant holders and spoke with sector representative bodies, including the UK Council for Graduate Education, the Academic Registrars Council and the National Association of Disability Practitioners.

We heard that some groups may be less able to adjust work and would be most in need of further support – those just entering their final year of funding and those with ongoing support needs, including for example, disabled students, or those with caring responsibilities. We have reflected this in our policy by asking universities to prioritise these groups with the additional £19 million funding, but any student with a start date before March 2020 can be considered for additional financial support, and any student may be provided a time extension.

### **A balanced solution to the sustained disruption caused by the pandemic**

You suggest that we have not provided a solution and that students will not be able to produce significant and original contributions to knowledge in the time available. Students, grant holders and university management have told us that many students are finding ways to produce work to a doctoral level in the time available, although, regrettably, they have had to alter their projects in order to do so. We fully acknowledge that this is difficult and requires people to change work that they are passionate about and to which they are deeply committed.

We also acknowledge that not all students will be able to complete in their time, which is why we have made £19 million available to extend their studies. However, we have limited resources and students are asked to adjust their project as best they can in order to make sure this funding is used where it is most needed.

### **Workload**

We have designed our policy, and asked universities to implement processes, to keep the additional workload on students to a minimum. Adjusting workplans is also likely to incur additional work and we would encourage students to factor this in and to be realistic about what they can achieve in the time remaining.

We also acknowledge that the pandemic has increased the workload of everyone who works in the teams to support doctoral students, including supervisors, and we thank universities and supervisory teams for their continued dedication.