

Policy Statement: Further Action to Support Doctoral Students Affected by COVID-19

Summary

Since April 2020 UKRI has committed over £60m to support students whose research has been impacted by COVID-19 through its Phase 1 and Phase 2 support packages. We have also allocated £11m to 'Quality Related Research Degree Programme Supervision in England' via Research England. In February 2021 we announced that we were consulting with training grant holders and research organisations on options to increase the flexibility training grant holders have to use their existing funding to support extensions, beyond the Phase 2 process, for those in greatest need.

Following our consultation, we can confirm that training grant holders will have the flexibility to:

- Use some of their training and cohort development funding to support extensions
- Reduce investment in recruitment by up to 10% of the 2021/22 commitment to new studentships to support extensions. This reduction can be implemented over 2021/22 and 22/23 starts.

Of the £43m we allocated to Phase 1, grant holders allocated £36m to students. In February we said we would allocate the remaining £7m to fund extensions for students earlier in their studies but that we were considering how best to do this. After discussion with grant holders, we've identified a number of areas where there is limited flexibility within grant budgets to provide extensions. We have therefore decided that the research councils will allocate the £7m, so they can target it to help students on grants which have limited flexibility to fund extensions.

Training grant holders will receive detailed guidance from their individual research council on implementing the flexibilities by 31 March. This will help them balance support for current students with maintaining the overall quality of the student training experience and opportunities for future students.

Our approach is intended to provide training grant holders with the ability to respond to the need for studentship extensions, beyond the UKRI Phase 1 and 2 policy, and consider studentship extension requests as part of their business as usual. The flexibilities will be used once Phase 2 funding has been used.

Eligibility

We have reviewed eligibility for extensions and updated our policy to ensure that students most in need can access our support. Training grant holders can now offer extensions to all UKRI funded students whose research has been impacted by COVID-19 and who are unable to mitigate the impact or adjust their projects to complete on time. While we anticipate that the majority of students earlier in their studies will be able to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 we recognise that in some cases this might not be possible, for example due to caring responsibilities following school closures. Training grant holders will also have the flexibility to consider in exceptional circumstances further requests from students who had an earlier request turned down or who have already received an extension under Phase 1 or Phase 2.

Use of Grant Flexibilities

Extensions funded through grant flexibilities should follow the same principles set out in UKRI Phase 2 policy (detailed in full at section 3 of the Phase 2 [Terms and Conditions](#)) except in relation to eligibility:

- The priority remains for students to adapt and adjust research projects to mitigate the delays caused by COVID-19, where possible, to complete their research to a doctoral

standard within their original funding period¹. New students should develop their projects from the outset with any future restrictions and limitations in mind.

- That the focus of supporting extensions is to provide the additional time an individual student requires to complete their revised doctoral research project.
- That all UKRI-funded students are treated fairly, using an inclusive process that recognises the impact of the pandemic on individual personal circumstances of students.
- The process for extension consideration must be open and transparent. It must not be an onerous or burdensome one for the students or those administering the funding and is sensitive to the additional pressures that students may be experiencing.
- Costs can only be provided by UKRI for stipend (or equivalent) and fees at the agreed UKRI contribution level – costs cannot be used to cover the extension of co-funding from non-UKRI sources, including institutional sponsors or the public, private or voluntary sectors.
- The majority of extension requests are expected to be for up to 3 months of UKRI support, but longer extensions can be considered where exceptional circumstances apply, and funds are available.
- This policy sits alongside UKRI's standard Terms and Conditions. Following your standard processes, extensions to studentships should continue to be granted for medical, parental or other leave purposes, where relevant.

Requests should normally be considered 6 months prior to the end of the student's current funded period where possible, when the success of mitigations and level of additional need by the individual can be best assessed.

In using the flexibilities, training grant holders will have to make difficult decisions about where and how funding presently allocated to research training and development and future recruitment can be reduced. We encourage them to consult with their advisory structures and student representatives as part of their decision-making process. In addition to extensions, our revised policy on sick leave is likely to have increased the funding required for student support, and these predicted additional costs should be factored into how they use the flexibilities.

¹ On 8 March 2021 the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) published a question and answer document on [standards for doctoral qualifications during the pandemic](#).