



**UK Research  
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## **Response to PandemicPGRs**

Dear Ellie,

Thank you for emailing us a copy of PandemicPGR's report on behalf of the group, on 8 February 2021.

It is very helpful to have these views brought together and so clearly set out. There is, of course, a diversity of opinions about how to prioritise public funding both inside and outside the research and innovation system. There are also diverse views, both inside and outside the post graduate research community, on optimal policies for doctoral research training. It is important that there are channels for all these views to be expressed and heard by all relevant stakeholders. Your report makes an invaluable contribution to that endeavour, particularly for UKRI, since we have a central role to play in convening and catalysing these dialogues, and in developing and enacting policies to support the best outcomes, given current constraints.

In the attached document, we have set out our responses to the report's recommendations. Many of these are already published, including why we do not think your central request of giving all students a six-month extension is the best option under current circumstances. In this context, we are grateful to all those making the case for increased resources for the research and innovation system, which are compelling.

On 22 February we issued an update, noting that we were considering further flexibility for grant holders, expanding eligibility for extensions and allocating £11 million in block grants from Research England. You emailed a number of questions about this announcement on 24 February and we have sought to respond to these points also.

As I believe you are aware, we issued a further update on 24 March confirming a number of changes, and today we have published our analysis of support from phase one.



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Thank you again for your work to support and advocate for PGRs. That we have not adopted all the solutions you propose does not mean that we are not listening or do not care. The opposite is true. I am focused on fostering a research and innovation system to which everyone has the opportunity to contribute and from which everyone can benefit. This requires that the diverse contributions of everyone in the system are recognised and valued. Post graduate researchers are no exception. You are a crucial part of the system now and for the future.

Best wishes,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ottoline Leyser', written in a cursive style.

**Professor Dame Ottoline Leyser**

**Chief Executive, UK Research and Innovation**

## 1. Response to recommendations from PandemicPGR report

**Immediately provide blanket six-month funded extensions for all PGRs, with additional time available for disabled, chronically ill and neurodivergent researchers, those with caring responsibilities and others facing additional hardship.**

The pandemic continues to have a profound impact on the UK economy, and the subsequent effect on public sector finances was evident in the Chancellor's Budget on 3 March.

Last November the Spending Review outlined the budget of the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS), the government department that sets UKRI's budget. We continue to discuss with BEIS the detail of the UKRI settlement for 2021/22, and where possible, for 22/22 and 23/24.

We are preparing for a difficult financial year ahead. We are starting the year with unusually high levels of committed funding due to delays to projects caused by the pandemic and new projects aimed at addressing the pandemic. We will work to sustain as much capability and capacity as we can across the research and innovation system and to champion its extraordinary potential to fuel the post-pandemic recovery, building a greener and more inclusive knowledge economy.

The cost of blanket extensions for all UKRI students would be around £200 million. For the reasons set out above we are likely to have relatively little flexibility in our budget and so we have had to make decisions being careful to balance the needs of all people and parts of the research and innovation system. UKRI Chief Executive Professor Dame Ottoline Leyser recently wrote an open letter in which she set out why UKRI's position is that support for doctoral research students must go to those who need it most. The open letter is available on UKRI's website:

[www.ukri.org/news/support-for-doctoral-research-students-must-go-to-those-who-need-it-most](http://www.ukri.org/news/support-for-doctoral-research-students-must-go-to-those-who-need-it-most)

**End requirements for case-by-case applications for COVID-19 support, which create additional barriers for PhD students in terms of additional workload and which, for registered disabled students or those with a past-history of medical leave for long-term or chronic conditions, duplicates past certification requirements.**

As we cannot provide blanket extensions it is necessary to have some process to ensure that the funding gets to those who need it most. These processes are also necessary for UKRI to meet the obligations on us when spending public money.

We have therefore asked the research organisations to which we award funding for doctoral student training to put in place processes to identify the students most in need. We have not dictated the detail of these processes, given the diversity of research organisations and doctoral training programmes that we fund. We have, however, learned from the experience of phase one, and the concerns of the PGR community, in devising phase two.

After phase one, a sample of grant holders from across the UKRI councils provided us with details of their processes for recording and reviewing extension requests. The responses received indicated

that grant holders had devised and enacted simple and administratively light processes in line with the expectations of the policy.

For phase two, research organisations were asked to return a governance plan to UKRI before they could receive their funding allocation. The guidance template<sup>1</sup> asked research organisations to confirm that ‘the application process will have due regard to the need to account for public money without creating undue stress or pressure on the students who are applying for the funding.’

Even with these measures in place, we accept that many students will have found having to complete any process induced additional stress. We have sought to minimise this.

**Recognise the detriments of “time lost” to PhD’s research projects and professional development, and include this as a justification for an extension, if required.**

We need to prioritise the limited funding available for extensions to those students most in need, and for those who are either unable to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 by redesigning their project or where further mitigation is necessary.

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<sup>2</sup>. The QAA specifies that while doctoral qualifications are awarded based on a systematic acquisition and understanding of a substantial body of knowledge, quality, rather than quantity, of output is the key factor. The QAA note that the Dublin descriptors stress the importance of flexibility in expecting students to ‘conceive, design, implement and adapt a substantial process of research with scholarly integrity’ and that students who have had to plan their work again or rethink their projects to work around obstacles created by the pandemic are likely to have displayed these wider abilities.

We understand that students may not have had access to the same professional development opportunities as were planned, even with some training being moved online. We have asked training grant holders to work with their student cohorts to agree priorities for training before redeploying these budgets to support extensions.

**Allow those who received an extension in Phase 1, including disabled researchers, parents and carers, people who have experienced bereavement and those who have faced additional challenges, to apply again for further support in Phase 2**

On 22 February 2021 we released a statement<sup>3</sup> that outlined amongst other changes, that we were considering extending eligibility for extensions. We confirmed this position on 24 March.

This change means any student funded by UKRI can apply for an extension, including those already in receipt of extension funding. These applications will be evaluated by training grant holders against the previously stated criteria.

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<sup>1</sup> [www.ukri.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/UKRI-240321-Governance-plan-template-phase-2.pdf](http://www.ukri.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/UKRI-240321-Governance-plan-template-phase-2.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> [www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/guidance/advice-on-doctoral-standards-for-research-students-and-supervisors.pdf](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/guidance/advice-on-doctoral-standards-for-research-students-and-supervisors.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> [www.ukri.org/news/further-action-to-support-doctoral-students-affected-by-covid-19](http://www.ukri.org/news/further-action-to-support-doctoral-students-affected-by-covid-19)

**Create robust and clear guidelines and support package for all researchers who experience bereavement, especially for immediate family or close relatives, while emergency measures for COVID-19 are in place**

Our guidance for training grants states the following under annual leave: 'Research Organisations are expected to have a policy in place to support students requiring short-term time off for emergencies and/or compassionate leave, giving due consideration of requests in such circumstances. This can be either paid or unpaid leave, dependent on the individual circumstances.'

This guidance applies to UKRI training grants. UKRI does not set the policy for the majority of students who are not funded by UKRI, and research organisations have considerable flexibility about their offer.

**Review the entire UKRI communications strategy, prioritising fast, effective, and accessible communication directly to PGRs and ROs**

We regularly review our communications approach seeking continuous improvement and reflecting on feedback from our stakeholders. In response to some feedback on our April 2020 announcement we decided to email directly all 22,000 UKRI funded students the next time we had an update. Nevertheless, we know that whatever approach we or our partners take, it is extremely difficult to reach everyone. For instance, analysis indicates that only around half of students opened the emails we sent to them.

On the whole, as UKRI largely funds postgraduate research through block grants to research organisations we normally expect grant holders to cascade relevant information to their students as appropriate.

**Remove all requirements for sick notes, which, among other problems, disproportionately impact researchers who have used, or need to use, funded sick leave at alternative times. As such, provide additional leave for COVID-19 related health issues, remove sick leave time caps for researchers on Tier 4 visas and send a clear communication to universities that they should not be reporting those on Tier 4 visas for COVID-19 related leaves of absence**

As a public body, for assurance purposes on the use of public money, we need sick leave to be certificated in line with government policy on Statutory Sick Pay. However, we have recognised the challenges of this during the pandemic. Since the outset of the pandemic we have relaxed our normal requirements in relation to sick leave (usually up to 13 weeks within 12 months). For cases relating to COVID-19, sick leave can be claimed for up to 28 weeks within a 12-month period. We recognise that there may be some students who are currently near to reaching this limit. In these instances, our guidance states that the training grant holder should review the situation on a case by case basis and as an exception, may provide an extra one-month extension to support the students' transition back to study.

In relation to sick notes we have recognised the unique situation created by the pandemic and provided some flexibility on this. In our guidance research organisations 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.

Our Frequently Asked Question document<sup>4</sup> (updated February 2021) provides further detail: 'In the early stages of the pandemic, it was difficult to obtain fit notes due to the pressures on the NHS. The government has provided guidance in relation to SSP [Statutory Sick Pay] and the evidence required and UKRI want to ensure that the same flexibility is given to students. Evidence may include:

- an isolation note from NHS111
- notification from the NHS or Public Health Authorities that they need to self-isolate
- shielding note from their doctor or Public Health Authority advising them to shield
- a letter from their doctor or healthcare professional confirming the date of their procedure if they've been advised to self-isolate before going into hospital for surgery
- a fit note from their doctor or a hospital (sometimes called a sick note) - if they have any other illness.

**Make specific provision for disabled, chronically ill or neurodivergent PhD students who are also international students and subject to Tier 4 visa rules, with clear national guidance on whether taking medical leave or will result in cancellation of visas, plus guarantees that complaints against failures of disabled access arrangements will not be met with retaliatory reporting to the Home Office by Universities**

Policy on visas is the responsibility of the Home Office, therefore this is not something we can directly comment upon.

**Make immediate and automatic provision of aids, adaptations and adjustments for those who now have to work from home without existing DSA provision, preferably through the provision of small grants enabling self-purchasing supported by guidelines reflecting existing DSA best practices**

The assessment of need and provision of funds of Disabled Students Allowance (DSA) is the responsibility of individual research organisations. This process continues during current restrictions, with research organisations operating online processes. Students should continue to seek DSA support, where required, as determined by their institution.

**Ensure all material published or commissioned by UKRI reflects UK conventions of the social model of disability by using identity-first language when referring to disabled people and researchers**

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<sup>4</sup> Available from: [www.ukri.org/our-work/tackling-the-impact-of-covid-19/guidance-for-applicants-and-awardholders-impacted-by-the-pandemic](http://www.ukri.org/our-work/tackling-the-impact-of-covid-19/guidance-for-applicants-and-awardholders-impacted-by-the-pandemic)

We are currently working on guidance for inclusive communication materials of all forms. We are looking at best practice from other organisations and will look to adopt the terms and practices preferred by the people they are referring to, including the social model of disability.

**Review and plan to improve data collected and published on PhD studentships and awardees, including but not limited to full disaggregation by ethnicity groups by research council, more inclusive gender classifications, data on LGBTQI+ awardees and those with caring responsibilities, and data on completion rates disaggregated by protected characteristics**

We continually review how we collect data on our investments (grants, fellowships and studentships), including demographics data of principal investigators, co-investigators, fellows and students. We are working with other stakeholders in the sector to standardise reporting requirements, and extending the classifications we use, based on the Office for National Statistics' good practice.

On 20 April we published data regarding uptake of phase one of our extensions for doctoral students. This includes data on disability, ethnicity, gender and age. Data on the reasons students required an extension – including those citing an increase in caring responsibilities – are also published in this document.

As mentioned above, most of our funding for doctoral research students is in the form of block grants to research organisations who are responsible for student recruitment and progression. We are working with research organisations to ensure equality, diversity and inclusion are fully embedded in all our activities.

**Make a meaningful commitment, and develop an action plan, to involve PhD researchers in developing all policy that affects them**

We recognise that many doctoral students feel as though their voices have not been heard over the last year. While we have actively spoken to a cross-section of students, grant holders and research organisations, we recognise that the pace of developing our doctoral extension policy last year meant that engagement was sometimes more limited than we would have liked.

We are committed to listening to our research and innovation communities. Many of our research councils already regularly speak to groups of students about the issues that are impacting them. We have taken time to reflect upon how we engage and consult with the postgraduate research population, not just about the impacts of COVID-19, but on other issues that matter to them, too.

Last year, the government committed to a 'new deal' for funding postgraduate research. We have agreed with BEIS that UKRI should take a leading role in developing this work. While we are still in the initial stages, we will engage with postgraduate researchers (both current and recent) on what a new deal might look like. We want to ensure that there is a robust representation of post-graduate researchers (PGRs) in relevant UKRI-funded decision making and we will be engaging with PGRs, including those who do not receive UKRI funding, later in 2021.

### **Ensure robust representation of PGRs in all relevant UKRI-funded decision making.**

We recognise the need to consult students more widely, particularly on issues that affect them. The diverse nature of PGR funding and supervision also means they lack sector-wide representation and oversight, falling between gaps in the focus of the sector on staff and undergraduate students.

As above, we are considering the most appropriate mechanisms to involve a wide range of postgraduate research students across the disciplines supported by UKRI, and ensure that they are consulted on issues that directly affect them.

**Adopt best practice in stakeholder involvement, including ensuring stakeholders such as PGRs are fully informed about the purpose and realistic likely outcomes of a consultation exercise, that records are produced and shared quickly, that scheduled follow up meetings and/or communications take place, and that meetings are held in a way that is accessible by default as far as possible, and additional needs are asked about and catered for.**

We constantly review and seek to learn lessons from our stakeholder engagement. As a steward of the system, UKRI has an opportunity to build stronger relationships with the doctoral student body to inform them about policy and for them to inform us as an important stakeholder community.

There are around 100,000 postgraduate research students undertaking their doctoral studies at a UK university at any one time, around a quarter of them are funded by UKRI. Even though we regularly meet and speak to students, engaging and communicating with a large cohort is not without its challenges and working with representative groups is one way in which we can effectively engage with the PGR community.

We acknowledge the need to ensure timely record sharing and responding to, and catering for, additional needs raised by those groups and individuals with whom we engage. Engaging with PGRs on a new deal for postgraduate research funding will provide an opportunity for us to refine our stakeholder approach moving forward.



## **2. Response to PandemicPGR statement on 23 February 2021**

On 22 February UKRI published a statement about further action it is taking to support doctoral students affected by COVID-19<sup>5</sup>. PandemicPGR published a document online on 23 February which was emailed to UKRI the following day. Below we respond to the questions raised in that document.

### **What effort was made to ensure the distribution of funding was equitable according to need and the resources of each DTP and University?**

Funding for doctoral students is complex, with some grants having considerable scope for flexibility and others less so. We have been discussing with grant holders how best to provide equitable support across these different modes. On 24 March we published a policy statement that sets out how we will do this. The document confirms 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 £36 million to students. In February we said we would allocate the remaining £7 million 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 £7 million, so they can target it to help students on grants which have limited flexibility to fund extensions.

### **What proportion of applicants for phase 1 funding were accepted, and what level of allocated funds were actually distributed to PGRs?**

UKRI has now published its data on phase 1 support for students. Of those students who applied for an extension 98% were granted their request in full by their grant holder. The average length of extension granted was 5.1 months. Of 6,590 students eligible, 5,315 (around 80%) were granted an extension.

In total, grant holders did not allocate £7 million of phase 1 funding to students. As described above, we have reallocated this funding so that it can still be used for extensions for doctoral students.

### **Will those researchers who applied for an extension in Phase 1 but were either refused or given less than applied for now be granted the full extension they need?**

Following consultation with grant holders we updated our eligibility criteria on 24 March. Our policy statement notes 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

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.ukri.org/news/further-action-to-support-doctoral-students-affected-by-covid-19>

students who had an earlier request turned down or who have already received an extension under Phase 1 or Phase 2.

**Will researchers now be able to apply for the full six-month extension offered to (at the time) final year students, rather than being capped at three months?**

Our policy statement sets out how grant flexibility should be used for extensions. We have never stipulated a three-month cap. The majority of extension requests are expected to be for up to three months of UKRI support, but longer extensions can be considered where exceptional circumstances apply and funds are available.

The priority remains for students, where possible, to adapt and adjust research projects to mitigate the delays caused by COVID-19 allowing them to complete their research to a doctoral standard within their original funding period. New students should develop their projects from the outset with contingency for any future restrictions and limitations in mind.

**As part of our announcement on 22 February we said that Research England was allocating £11 million to English universities. PandemicPGR asked:**

- **That this funding will be explicitly ringfenced for use in supporting PhD researchers**
- **That the same offer will be available for researchers in devolved nations**
- **That institutions will be able to, and encouraged to, use this money to provide funded extensions and/or fee suspensions, particularly for self-funding and international PGRs, as well as other support**
- **And that this money will not act as a proxy for sufficient and sustainable funding for mental health, accessibility and other necessary services.**

It may be helpful to know that, unlike UKRI's research councils, Research England's role is to oversee England-only functions including grant funding to English universities, developing and implementing the Research Excellence Framework in partnership with the other UK higher education funding bodies, and overseeing the sustainability of the research case in England.

The higher education funding bodies in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland are devolved and each is responsible for funding allocations in their own nations. However, we are aware that during the pandemic all three other funding bodies have provided additional funding for research to higher education institutions in Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales.

Research England's additional allocation of £11 million Quality Related Research Degree Programme supervision funding is block grant funding to higher education providers in England. Providers have been advised<sup>6</sup> that this is 'a contribution to the work they are undertaking to support their postgraduate research (PGR) communities... intended to supplement support provided by universities to PGR students, and complements measures to support UKRI funded students'. The

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<sup>6</sup> See *Notification of funding: Additional Quality-related research (QR) research degree programme (RDP) supervision funding allocations* available from <https://re.ukri.org/sector-guidance/publications/cl-notification-of-funding-additional-gr-rdp-supervision-funding-allocations/>

funding is provided within the usual Research England terms and conditions and without further specific requirements as to how it should be deployed. It is intended for institutions to use at their discretion as a contribution to their wider support of their PGR communities.