UK Research and Innovation

Review of Extensions for Students Impacted by COVID-19

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The COVID-19 pandemic has created unprecedented challenges for everyone involved in doctoral training. All of us have had to adapt and find new ways of working. UK Research and Innovation has a distinct role to play; through the research councils we make grants to universities and other hosts that fund one in four doctoral students in the UK.

As the pandemic gripped the UK in March, we acted quickly to ensure that students would continue to receive their stipend throughout the ensuing lockdown. In April we announced support that would give those UKRI students in most urgent need of help – namely those whose funding was about to run out – up to six months extra financial support.

When we announced we would be providing support, we also committed to review our guidance to ensure that any further impacts to doctoral training were taken into account. Through focus groups, meetings, surveys and correspondence, we have spoken to many in our community. The experiences of students, supervisors, grant holders and university managers have all helped inform this report.

In this document we evaluate the policy announced in April and its implementation. We also make recommendations for what further support is necessary. Alongside the report, we have published a policy statement which sets out our approach for students not in their final year.

Implementation of support for final year students

The initial policy aimed to ensure those students whose funded period ended between 1 March 2020 and 31 March 2021 could be funded to the end of their degree. Grant holders report that 92 percent of these final year students requested an extension of, on average, 4.6 months. As of August 2020, UKRI had released over £5 million as an initial payment for final year students with final payments to be made in January.

We recognise that some students were concerned about the process involved in receiving an extension. Though there was no need for individual students to apply to UKRI, we did ask that students provide their grant holder with a half-page description of why an extension was needed. This was to give us the assurance we require when spending public money.

Individual grant holders and institutions put in place processes to ensure fairness across their student cohorts. In response to the feedback from some students, we have reviewed a sample of grant holders' processes for recording and reviewing extension requests. The responses we received indicate that grant holders have devised and enacted simple and administratively light processes in line with the expectations of the policy.

Non-final year students

While all students felt the immediate effects of the national lockdown, it was unclear what the medium- or long-term impact was going to be on them. In the midst of lockdown, we surveyed grant holders about the likely need of extensions for students in the earlier stages of their studies. Some students asked that we universally extend all their funding by six months.

Over the summer the situation has continued to evolve. Many of the facilities used by post-graduate researchers started to reopen, albeit operating with significant restrictions to make them COVID-secure and despite the recent tightening of restrictions across the UK universities remain open. Students have started to have conversations with their supervisors about how they can adjust their work to better reflect the reality of working through a pandemic.

We conclude that all students should be encouraged to talk to their supervisors, take stock, and revise their project and training plan in order to ensure that they can complete it within their funded period.

We also recognise that, even having adjusted their project, some students will not be able to achieve doctoral-level outcomes within their current funded period. For this reason, we are committing to providing additional funding for students in their penultimate year, and for those with ongoing support-needs. More information on this additional support is in our policy statement.

Ongoing support needs

UKRI is committed to expanding participation and to greater equality, diversity and inclusion in the research and innovation system. We have heard from disabled students, those with longer term illness, who are neurodivergent, or who have caring responsibilities, some of whom contacted us directly. Some were positive, while others found the experience distressing.

We are recommending that the additional funding also be used, on a needs-priority basis and once project adaptation and mitigation has been fully explored, to support those students who find it most difficult to adjust their projects. We expect, however, that many students in these categories will still be able to adapt their projects.
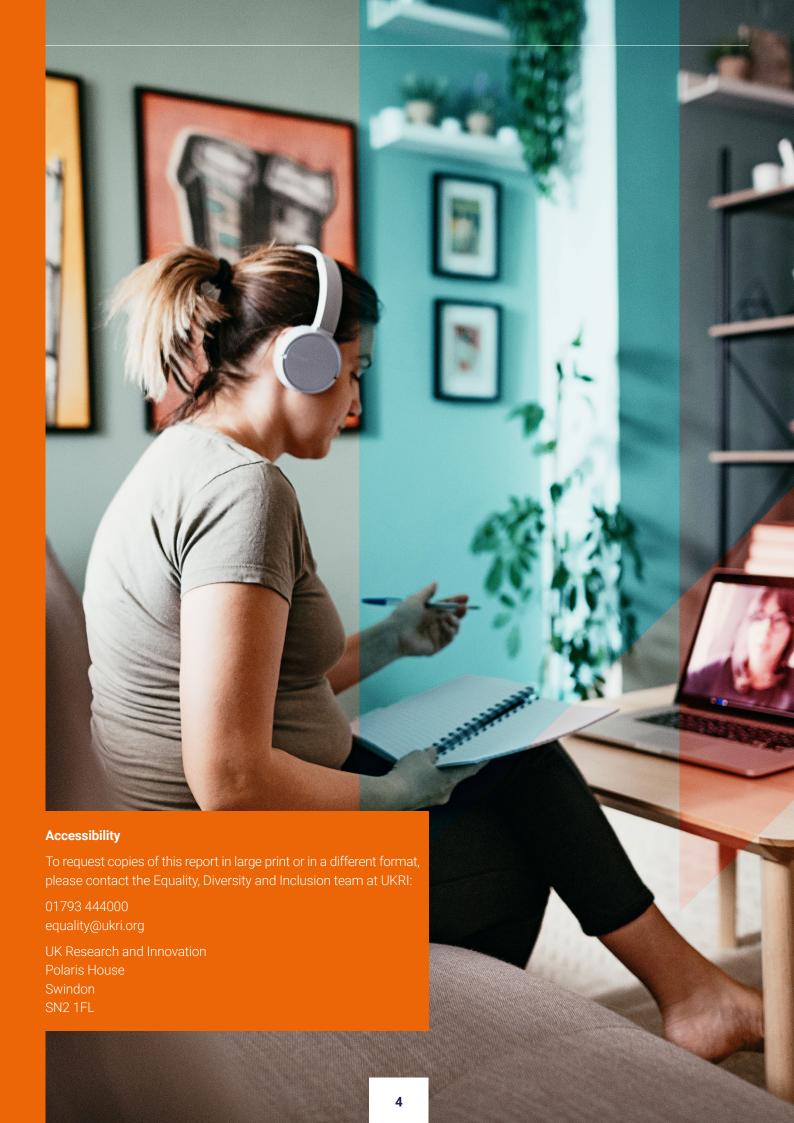
Access to the Disabled Student Allowance and mental health and wellbeing support services are crucial for high-quality, inclusive doctoral training. Particularly, during extended periods of tighter social distancing rules as these can create additional mental health and wellbeing issues. At the outset of the pandemic there were reports that access to new and updated needs assessments, to enable students to claim additional Disabled Student Allowance, were often delayed. As research organisations adapt to provide these assessments on-line, we understand that this pressure is easing, but we will continue to monitor the situation.

Next steps

UKRI's policy statement, published in parallel with this report, sets out the measures we will take to support UKRI funded students.

We will also publish terms and conditions for the additional support and the associated Equality Impact Assessment. An analysis of the impact of COVID-19 on different demographic groups of final year students will be published before the end of the year.

This review's recommendations are set out in full in Chapter 5. UKRI is committed to taking forward each of the recommendations made in this report.

Accessibility

To request copies of this report in large print or in a different format, please contact the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion team at UKRI:

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Introduction

UKRI is the largest funder of doctoral training in the UK. Through our seven research councils we fund or co-fund around one in four doctoral candidates, primarily through our Doctoral Training Partnerships (DTPs), Centres for Doctoral Training (CDTs) and collaborative awards with non-academic organisations, such as Industrial CASE (iCASE) awards and Collaborative Doctoral Awards (CDAs). We also fund some students via standard grants. Major training grants are typically multi-year awards, with individual or groups of universities leading the management and delivery of the doctoral programme with partners from academia and beyond. As a result of these investments UKRI has a keen interest in the sustainability of the academic and other sectors with which we collaborate and the wellbeing of the students who benefit from our funding.

The COVID-19 pandemic has created unprecedented challenges for doctoral students and the delivery of doctoral programmes. The onset of national lockdown measures in March 2020 interrupted projects and wider student development plans, whilst affecting wellbeing. This created an immediate risk that doctoral candidates would not be able to complete their doctoral degrees on time and putting the expected academic, economic and societal benefits from investment in doctoral training[1] at risk of not being delivered.

In response to the pandemic and the risks it posed, we agreed a policy to support the students we fund through the lockdown period and beyond. It had overarching goals to:

- **ensure UKRI students complete their doctoral training and are paid to do so**

- **protect student health and wellbeing**

- **protect UKRI's investment in doctoral training**

- **ensure the responsible investment of public funds.**

The policy was announced on 9 April 2020 in a joint communication from the government and UKRI. It included additional funding to cover extensions of up to six months for UKRI funded doctoral students in the final year[2] of their programme whose training was disrupted by COVID-19. It contained a support package covering the UKRI contribution to stipends and fees for the duration of the extension. For those students in the early or mid-phase of their training (non-final years[3]), flexibility was given to grant holders to assess their needs on a case-by-case basis and use underspend in the grant to meet the cost.

In the announcement we committed to conducting a review of the policy after four months. The aim of the review was to understand the cost and assess early adoption and implementation of the policy's goals. Specific objectives were to:

- gauge the extent to which the policy has been implemented consistently and in line with UKRI guidelines across grants, disciplines and Research Organisations (ROs)

- refine our understanding of the costs of the extensions for final year students and obtain initial estimates of costs for those not in their final year

- review the initial equality impact assessment and develop our understanding of how COVID-19 has impacted particular groups and the extent to which our policy has supported the needs of these groups

- gain an early indication of the response of co-funders to supporting extensions and the extent to which they can continue to honour existing commitments.

In addition to the above core objectives, the review sought early intelligence on the pandemic's wider impacts on students and doctoral programmes.

This report brings together evidence and analysis from quantitative and qualitative surveys and structured discussions with key stakeholders and presents the key findings of the review. Several students also proactively contacted us about the support, through open letters, email and social media. We have met with some of the students who contacted us and are grateful for their input.

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1 See the 2014 report 'The impact of doctoral careers'
2 Students with a funding end date between 1 March 2020 and 31 March 2021.
3 Students with a funding end date from 1 April 2021 onwards.

Review approach

A range of quantitative and qualitative evidence was gathered from key stakeholders including students, grant holders and university leaders and managers.

The Principal Investigators (PI) of all UKRI grants with funds for studentships (the grant holders[4]) were contacted to complete three surveys:

- *survey 1: aggregate data on costed extensions for final year[2] UKRI students*

- *survey 2: aggregate data on costed extensions for all other UKRI students[3]*

- *survey 3: individual-level data for all final year UKRI students granted a costed extension.*

The purpose was to use the aggregated data as estimates to inform financial planning for payments to final year students and to provide initial payments to those in urgent need[5] (survey 1), to help anticipate potential costs amongst all other UKRI students (survey 2) and to gather individual-level data for the actual cost of extensions for final year students in order to make payments (survey 3). Survey 1 and 2 data were received in June 2020. Survey 3 data were received in October 2020 but fell outside the timeframe of this review and so is not included in this report. We will publish the survey 3 analysis separately once completed. This will be by the end of the year.

Stakeholder engagement

Students:

- UKRI commissioned NatCen Social Research (NatCen)[6] to consult representative focus groups of UKRI students for their feedback on the policy. Each UKRI council filtered its student records on demographic and institutional grounds to ensure a diverse range of students could be contacted for the study. In total, 46 UKRI students participated in nine focus groups and four interviews conducted in July and August 2020.

- a report of their findings was submitted to UKRI in September 2020.

- a meeting was held with 10 doctoral student authors of an open letter to UKRI in August 2020 to discuss the policy and its impact on students.

- two students with chronic illnesses had meetings with Professor Rory Duncan (UKRI Director of Talent and Skills) to discuss the impact on students with disabilities

Training grant holders:

- we approached 108 DTP or CDT training grant holders from across UKRI in a separate exercise to surveys 1, 2 and 3 above, in order to gather more detail on the implementation of the policy. We received 27 responses to this new survey and held four focus group meetings with 10 training grant holders (including directors and managers of DTPs/CDTs, PIs of training grants, and those involved with implementing the policy locally e.g. departmental administrators) in July and August 2020

University management and leadership:

- three focus groups of university leaders and managers were convened over July and August 2020 following an invitation sent out via various UK networks; these included, for example, the UK Council for Graduate Education (UKCGE) Deans and Directors of Graduate Schools network, the Association of Research Managers and Administrators (ARMA) and Universities UK. The groups comprised 16 participants, representing 14 ROs (9:5 Russell Group to non-Russell Group).

- meetings were held with several university leaders, including vice-chancellors (VC), pro-vice-chancellors (PVCs) and directors of research, from a range of ROs to reflect on policy development and UKRI's response.
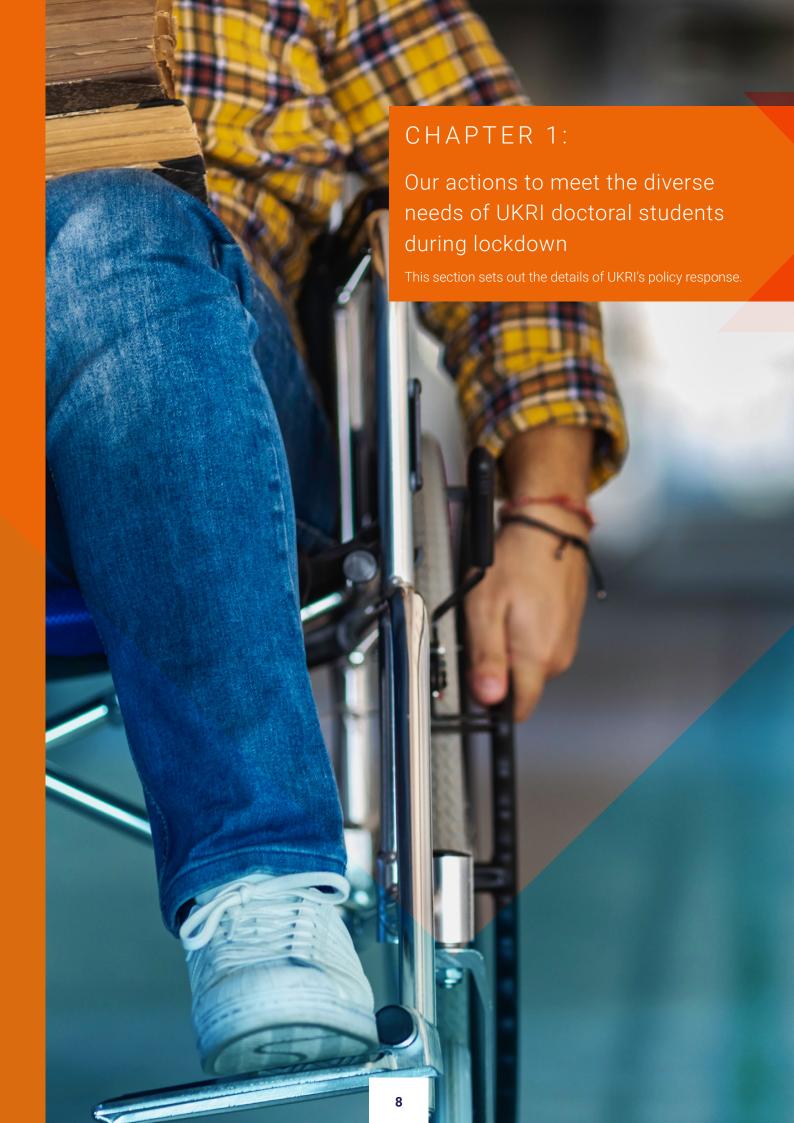
Other bodies:

- UKRI discussed the policy and its implications for the sector in meetings with the UKCGE[7] and the Academic Registrars Council[8] Postgraduate Practitioner Group. Internally, we also consulted with the UK Research Office (UKRO)[9] for an international perspective.

- UKRI discussed the operation of the Disabled Students' Allowances (DSA) scheme and the experiences of disabled students with the National Association of Disability Practitioners (NADP).

Governance

The review was overseen by a Steering Group chaired by Professor Rory Duncan, UKRI Director of Talent and Skills, and was delivered by a review team drawn from across UKRI's constituent councils, and central strategy, analysis and communications teams.

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4 Grant holder: the person to whom the grant is assigned and who has responsibility for the intellectual leadership of the project and for the overall management of the research. The grant holder is either the Principal Investigator (for a research or training grant) or a research fellow (for a fellowship grant).

5 Students with a funding end date between 1 March 2020 and 31 May 2020.

6 https://natcen.ac.uk/

7 http://www.ukcge.ac.uk/

8 https://arc.ac.uk/practitioner-groups

9 https://www.ukro.ac.uk/

CHAPTER 1:

Our actions to meet the diverse needs of UKRI doctoral students during lockdown

This section sets out the details of UKRI's policy response.

Responding to lockdown measures to meet the diverse support needs of UKRI's doctoral cohort

UKRI aims to support high-quality and inclusive doctoral training to equip students with the knowledge and skills they need to develop careers in all sectors of the economy. In 2018/19 we invested more than £400 million in UK doctoral programmes to support 28,056 students across 118 organisations, accounting for ~25% of the total doctoral population[10].

The cohort of doctoral students supported by UKRI is very diverse. It varies in demographic characteristics[11], covers the full spectrum of research disciplines, is geographically distributed across UK universities and research institutes and within businesses, public and third sector organisations, and differs in stage of doctoral study and funding models amongst students. The intersection of these population variables creates an assorted landscape of individual student circumstances and support needs.

The onset of lockdown created a clear imperative for UKRI action to protect the health and wellbeing of UKRI-funded students. Had we not acted there was a risk that both our and the students' investment in their training would be lost. Decisions on how to respond were made at pace in a rapidly unfolding and uncertain climate, with only limited data available on the scale and characteristics of the challenges caused by COVID-19 and the closure of ROs. To guide our response through this and recognising the diversity of our student cohort and its support needs, we established two policy goals. These are to ensure all UKRI doctoral students are:

- supported in completing their research projects to a doctoral level and are funded to do so

- treated fairly, using flexible, generous and inclusive processes that are sympathetic to the disruption caused to academic programmes and that recognise the impact of the pandemic on students' individual personal circumstances.

The pressing nature of the situation prompted our decision to direct our support to those at most immediate risk of not being able to complete their doctoral degrees. This group included those in their final year, or who faced challenges such as caring responsibilities or personal health conditions exacerbated by working from home. We enabled these students to have extensions to their submission dates and for doctoral projects to be repurposed so they may be completed. Our support for these different groups is summarised below.

Support for final year students: As of 1 April 2020, 31% of UKRI students had funding end dates between 1 March 2020 and 31 March 2021 and were classed as final year. A support package with funds for costed extensions of up to six months for final year UKRI-funded doctoral students whose research had been impacted by COVID-19 was agreed, based on the expectation at the time that lockdown would last for up to six months.

Support for non-final year students: Students outside their final year were not eligible for these costed extensions. Instead, the policy made allowances for grant holders to support extensions for these students using grant underspend on a case-by-case basis. For this group we encouraged students and supervisors to reconsider and redesign their projects and training plans to mitigate any interruptions caused by the pandemic.

Disproportionately affected groups: We undertook an equality impact assessment and identified several groups of students at risk of being disproportionately affected by the pandemic[12]. To ensure fairness, the policy states that grant holders should provide support to those students whose personal health or circumstances place them at a disadvantage from the impact of COVID-19. For such students in their final year, grant holders could use the costed extension fund. For non-final year students, grant holders were encouraged to act generously and sympathetically and use training grant underspends where appropriate.

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10 HESA 2018/19 student record.
11 See the UKRI report 'Diversity results for UKRI funding data'.
12 See the UKRI website for full details.

The policy encouraged students whose existing disabilities and long term illnesses were exacerbated by COVID-19 to seek additional support through instruments such as the DSA and other services offered by the host institution. For any students infected with COVID-19 or for whom COVID-19 exacerbated an existing condition (such as mental illness), we waived the requirement for medical certificates to qualify for sick leave and allowed this sick leave to be additional to the normal cap.

As a general principle for all students, grant holders were advised to be generous in their support and access grant funds such as the Research Training Support Grant (RTSG) to pay for reasonable adaptations and equipment for their home-working.

Co-funded students: Many UKRI studentships are financed by shared co-investment between UKRI and a co-funding partner, typically an RO, business or public or third sector organisation. For these students, the policy pledges to cover UKRI's contribution to stipends and fees, with co-funding partners encouraged to pay their share of the cost of the extension where possible.

Implementing the policy

Delivery of the support package was the responsibility of the grant holder and their host RO. Our view was that they, and supervisors, were best placed to judge the amount of additional time students needed to complete their doctoral projects. All were required to put in place a process to record and review all requests for costed extensions, creating an audit trail to demonstrate the responsible use of this public money. Equally, we wanted to ensure that the process for making decisions on extension requests was not overly burdensome on students, supervisors and grant holders and managers.

Implementing the policy comprised three main elements:

- communicate the policy goals and guidelines to ROs, grant holders and students to ensure it is understood

- ROs operationalise the policy to deliver the extensions to students in compliance with the rules

- UKRI and ROs monitor policy implementation and validate the achievement of its goals.

Communicating the policy: On 9 April 2020, Amanda Solloway MP, Minister for Science, Research and Innovation, announced the extensions policy for final year students in a joint statement with UKRI.

We followed this by publishing detailed guidelines on implementing the policy for students[13] and grant holders on the UKRI website and contacted grant holders[14] directly via email, webinars and other meetings.

The guidance sent to grant holders summarised the process they should follow and included the following steps:

- in discussion with students and supervisors, the grant holders should determine which students are eligible for the extension, whether they require it and for how long

- for co-funded projects, the grant holder should contact partners to explore the possibility of co-funding for students

- prepare with the student and their supervisor(s) a short description of the case for their extension (up to half a page), including how the student and research programme are affected by the pandemic and the time needed to complete doctoral work.

We published an open letter to students from Professor Rory Duncan, UKRI Director of Talent and Skills, and asked grant holders to cascade this to their students. In August a second open letter was published on UKRI's website, providing an update.

The main UKRI communications are summarised in Figure 1.

Operationalising the policy: Grant holders were asked to develop a process that:

- ensured students discussed their needs with their supervisor or a programme director; details of alternative professional staff were requested in case students do not wish to disclose sensitive personal issues to grant holders and/or supervisors

- did not place an onerous burden of proof on students to justify their extension request

- was informed by clear guidance from UKRI

- recognises the impact of the pandemic on individual personal circumstances and ensures students from underrepresented groups and those highlighted in the equality impact assessment are not disadvantaged.

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13 Guidelines on 'Students and training grants'.
14 See 'Implementation guidance for training grant holders'.

Grant holders were asked to provide UKRI with estimates of the demand for and cost of extensions for final and non-final year students. We asked training grant holders to submit three surveys:

- *survey 1: aggregate data on costed extensions for final year students (received 9 June)*

- *survey 2: aggregate data on costed extensions for non-final year students (received 30 June)*

- *survey 3: individual-level student data on costed extensions granted for final year students (received 8 October).*

The surveys enabled us to estimate the cost of extensions for final year students and make an initial payment to support students due to finish their doctorates by 31 May 2020 (survey 1). We have also used the process to understand the potential scale of the impact on non-final years (survey 2). Survey 3 was received in October during the writing of this report and will be analysed to calculate the actual cost of payments to all final year UKRI students needing an extension.

Monitoring policy implementation: This review is the first monitoring exercise for this policy. Moving forward we will embed monitoring as part of our business-as-usual training grant monitoring.

9 APRIL
Announcement of additional funding issued by UKRI and the government

24 APRIL
Open letter to students, from Rory Duncan

Publication of guidelines for policy implementation for grant holders

28 MAY
Equality Impact Assessment published

15 MAY
correspondence with training grant holders, notifying them of the requirements and deadlines for the three costed extensions surveys

9 JUNE
Deadline for Survey 1

JULY
first payment for studentships ending between 1-31 March 2020

30 JUNE
Deadline for Survey 2

17 AUGUST
Second open letter to students, from Rory Duncan

8 OCTOBER
Deadline for Survey 3

CHAPTER 2:

How the policy works in practice

This review sought to understand how effectively and consistently the implementation steps have been followed four months into the policy life cycle and to consider its cost and its impact on different groups of students. Evidence was gathered through surveys, focus groups and other meetings with key stakeholders. Participants in these surveys and focus groups were drawn from across different subject disciplines and UKRI grant holders with the aim of providing a broad picture across different fields and institutions.

We note that the environment and circumstances at the time of writing this report have changed since the start of lockdown, and the data forming the basis of this review reflects the situation at the time of its collection. For instance, surveys 1 and 2 were undertaken in May and June when national lockdown restrictions were at their peak and ROs were closed, albeit with plans to phase the reopening of research labs and workspaces.

Since the national lockdown measures were relaxed in June, research facilities, labs and archives have been able to re-open and despite the recent tightening of restrictions across the UK universities remain open. They have been adapting to new and more restrictive ways of working, including socially distanced lab and office spaces and moving training and cohort-building activities online. Many doctoral candidates are rightly redesigning their projects and training plans to enable them to complete within the funded period.

In this section we look at early feedback on the impact of the policy.

Support for final year students: The policy offered up to six months' support for those students whose funded period ended between 1 March 2020 and 31 March 2021 (that is, in their final year) and whose research had been impacted by COVID-19. Survey 1 data estimated that 92% of final year doctoral students requested an extension of an average duration of 4.6 months. At the basic UKRI stipend and fee level, this equated to £44 million. Of this, UKRI released over £5 million to universities as an initial payment to support students who were already in their extension period[5] (see Table 1).

Grant holders cited a variety of reasons for requesting extensions, the most common being lack of access to facilities and resources, followed by disruption to data collection or fieldwork, impact on health and wellbeing and then caring responsibilities (see Table 1).

For final year students, news of the availability of up to six months of costed extensions was broadly welcomed and relieved some of the anxiety and stress about their ability to complete their doctorates on time. Some students would have liked a blanket approach to extensions, giving all students a six-month extension.

Support for non-final year students: Survey 2 estimated 77% of non-final year students required extensions of an average of 5.1 months, with stakeholder engagement indicating demand was greatest among penultimate year students. At UKRI basic stipend and fee levels, this would amount to £81 million.

This estimate was made in June and so reflects the views of students and supervisors on their needs during the early part of lockdown when facilities were closed, projects had not been modified and university degree standards and awarding processes had not been adapted to accommodate this disruption to projects. Since then, research labs and some workspaces have reopened with reduced capacity and working restrictions, although some buildings remain closed, especially in arts, humanities and social science subject areas. Many ROs have prioritised the return to work for doctoral students in most need of access to facilities. The ROs we spoke to believed that the progress made since June has decreased the volume and length of extensions required.

Our consultations highlighted several other adaptations: students and supervisors are finding creative ways to re-plan their projects to mitigate interruptions brought about by the pandemic, and ROs are adapting their guidelines for students, supervisors, doctoral transfer report assessors and thesis examiners to reflect the disruption to research degrees and ensure students are not disadvantaged.

Among non-final year students there was uncertainty and even anger at the perceived inequity in being excluded in the first wave of support, and for some this was a source of stress. ROs and grant holders noted that penultimate year students are most likely to experience major disruptions to their research and that at such an advanced stage it is harder to adapt and redesign their research. They urged that this group should be able to access support from UKRI to complete their doctorates where required.

Table 1: Summary statistics from surveys 1 and 2 covering the number and duration of extensions requested by final and non-final year UKRI students, and the reasons given for needing the extensions. (Note: more than one reason could be selected.)

	Survey 1 (final year)	Survey 2 (non-final year)
No. students	6,951	15,284
No. needing extension	6,362 (92%)	11,808 (77%)
Average extension	4.6 months	5.1 months

Reason	Final years	Non-final years
Lack of access to facilities and resources	76%	74%
Disruption to data collection / fieldwork	41%	54%
Health and wellbeing	34%	36%
Caring responsibilities	15%	13%
Other	16%	15%

Impact on research disciplines: Students told NatCen that all disciplines were impacted by a lack of access to labs and research facilities, restrictions on face-to-face fieldwork, travel constraints and difficulties accessing materials such as books, datasets and software. This included accessing facilities and resources based at collaborating partners. Consequently, students across all subjects and stages of degree were working from home during lockdown and were limited to activities they could perform from their computer and to accessible online resources, such as reading, writing literature reviews or thesis chapters, data analyses and undertaking online training and development activities.

"I was right in the middle of field research, and so it ground to a halt. Obviously considering the ethical care I needed to extend to the case studies and the people that I would encounter, it wasn't appropriate for me to switch to an online forum, because the people that I would need to be in contact with, they weren't in the position to."
(Second year non-STEM[15] student)

In some cases, students said they were already working in this way and reported no disruption to their research. Irrespective of research discipline, the move to homeworking had a demotivating effect on many students. Challenges in conducting research coupled to inappropriate working environments and a sense of isolation from supervisors and peers in their cohort all contributed to lower productivity. However, there were others who reported no impact or even increased productivity. Some students in this group mentioned that they had been able to maintain contact with their supervisors and other colleagues.

"As far as the PhD goes, it's actually useful because there's a focus to your day, if you know what I mean. Everything else might be unpredictable and uncertain, but you know the piece of work that you'll be doing and that you're continuing to work on, so it gives you a bit of structure. That's very helpful."
(First year non-STEM student)

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15 STEM: Science, technology, engineering and mathematics.

Disproportionately affected groups: At the time of writing this report we did not have the analysis of survey 3 data on individual final year students and so could not assess the impact of the policy on different demographic groups.

Evidence through the focus groups pointed to differential impacts on students according to the stage of their doctoral degree and the nature of their research. Across all year groups, students reported making temporary changes to their projects but, for non-final years, conversations with supervisors were focusing on longer-term changes in project scope and protocols. If they felt they were unable to make longer-term changes, they expressed concerns about completing on time.

"My supervisor, obviously he's mentioned things like extensions or delays, but because I'm at such an early stage, we're talking more so about the idea of rescoping my project, at least to maybe a little more theoretical one, because obviously, the laboratory access is restricted. At the moment, I'm working quite heavily on design, simulations, which I can do all day, so yes. Refocusing is definitely being talked about in my case, more than extending the whole workload."
(First year STEM student)

The data we have from surveys 1 and 2 indicates that 34% of final year students and 36% of non-final year students cite health and wellbeing as a reason for an extension request. These effects on health and wellbeing brought on by lockdown were mainly in the form of mental health issues. Social isolation from family and friends was commonly reported by students, especially international students unable to travel home, and led to cases of depression in some. Students also reported how the pandemic exacerbated pre-existing mental health problems and how anxieties grew through concerns over COVID-19 infection of themselves or family members and worries about completing their doctorate and longer-term employment prospects. There were also cases of physical ill health resulting from working at home with, for example, unsuitable desks and chairs and a lack of exercise.

Caring responsibilities were reported for 15% and 13% of student extension requests for final and non-final year students, respectively. For these students, a lack of access to paid care workers for family members and difficulties balancing home-schooling and childcare with their research all contributed to their need for additional time.

7% of UKRI's doctoral students have declared a disability[8]. Disabled, chronically ill and neurodivergent doctoral students have a wide range of specific assistance needs with regard to conducting their doctoral training. Our engagement highlighted how COVID-19 has exacerbated the existing challenges they face.

A report from the NADP in May 2020 [16] stressed the challenges many students faced in transitioning to working at home, including access to the right equipment and the extent to which online training is inclusive of all students.

At the outset of the pandemic there were reports that access to new and updated needs assessments, to enable students to claim additional DSA support, were often delayed; but as more ROs provide these online, reports are that pressure is easing. It will be important for UKRI to keep access to needs assessment under review and for it to ensure its DSA guidance recognises the impact of the pandemic.

ROs are also intensively investing in the development of online training and, as the NADP report highlights, when done well this can provide positive gains regarding the multiplicity of modes of teaching and learning.

In discussion with UKRI, disabled students raised concerns that their ROs' processes were onerous and not transparent and discouraged them from seeking the maximum extension. For some students it was distressing to relive their experiences when providing the information to justify their extension request, partly because different parts of the host RO needed the information multiple times. They argued that a blanket extension would be fairer and would remove the disclosure requirement which was felt to be particularly difficult for those with undisclosed mental health problems.

Support from ROs, supervisors and grant managers: ROs, supervisors and grant managers are providing students with highly valuable support through the pandemic. Students reported positive experiences of their use of RO mental health and wellbeing support services such as counselling, and of how grant managers assisted them by signposting them to the appropriate services. There were, however, some reports of RO support services not being readily accessible to the students, with the perception that academic staff and undergraduates were being prioritised over doctoral candidates.

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16   Covid-19: Disabled Students in Higher Education:
     Student Concerns and Institutional Challenges

ROs and grant holders pointed out how they are receiving unprecedented demand for mental health and wellbeing support services during the pandemic. In response they are dedicating more resource to these services and are increasing flexibility to help students with health and wellbeing issues, caring responsibilities and other requests for assistance.
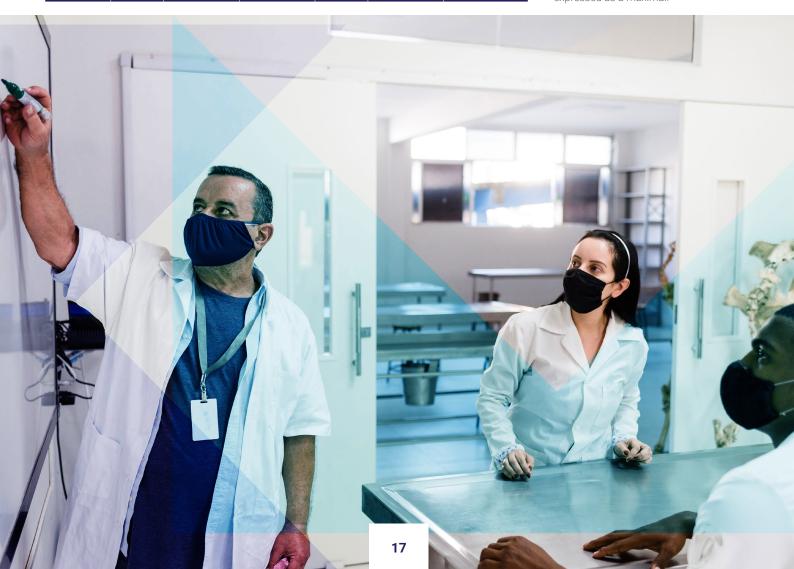
Supervisors are providing crucial pastoral care and mentorship during this period. Students told us how vital it was to have an empathetic and understanding supervisor during this time and highlighted the need for them to be flexible with deadlines and expectations of their work. There were instances of supervisors going above and beyond the norm of doctoral support to support their students by, for instance, delivering a care package to their student's home when they were unwell.

Co-funded students: Surveys 1 and 2 showed that up to half of UKRI students are co-funded, meaning that UKRI will only cover a proportion of the cost of any extension. The majority of these students are co-funded by a Higher Education Institution (HEI), with a smaller number co-funded by other organisations such as businesses (see Table 2a).

	UKRI student population			UKRI students needing extension		
	Total	HEI co-funded	Non-HEI co-funded	Total	HEI co-funded	Non-HEI co-funded
Final year	6,951	2,089	916	6,362	2,041	856
Non final year	15,284	5,361	2,699	11,808	5,313	2,566
Total	22,201 (100%)	7,450 (34%)	3,615 (16%)	18,170 (100%)	7,354 (40%)	3,422 (19%)

Table 2a: Summary statistics from surveys 1 and 2 covering co-funder information[17]

17 As individual students can be co-funded by multiple partners across the two funder types, the HEI and non-HEI statistics should not be combined unless expressed as a maximal.

	Co-funded students needing an extension	Decision outstanding	Full support	Partial support	No support	Total
HEI co-funded	Final year students	624 (31%)	1,141 (56%)	56 (3%)	220 (11%)	2,041 (100%)
	Non-final year students	3,692 (69%)	902 (17%)	80 (2%)	639 (12%)	5,313 (100%)
	Total	4,316 (59%)	2,043 (28%)	136 (2%)	859 (12%)	7,354 (100%)
Non-HEI co-funded	Final year students	505 (59%)	119 (14%)	60 (7%)	172 (20%)	856 (100%)
	Non-final year students	2,200 (86%)	73 (3%)	37 (1%)	256 (10%)	2,566 (100%)
	Total	2,705 (79%)	192 (6%)	97 (3%)	428 (13%)	3,422 (100%)

Table 2b: The status of co-funder decisions for each co-funder type, separated into final year (survey 1) and non-final year (survey 2) groupings. Where a decision has been made, the breakdown of the type of support agreed is given. Figures may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

As shown in Table 2b, in June the majority of students requesting extensions were still awaiting decisions from some or all of their co-funders on whether these collaborators could contribute towards extension costs. HEIs were more able to make decisions in June compared to non-HEIs, but the survey information suggests that all co-funding organisations were prioritising decisions for final year students. HEIs indicated they had made decisions for 69% of these students with over half due to receive full support. 59% of final year students with non-HEI co-funders were awaiting decisions.

The challenges faced by co-funding partners were highlighted in the survey data as well as identified and reinforced by feedback from the focus groups with grant holders and university managers and leaders. The focus group discussions highlighted the financial pressures facing ROs and businesses as a result of responding to COVID-19 and the impact this could have on their ability to meet co-funding agreements. This was reflected in the survey data which indicated that co-funders would not be able to contribute towards extension costs for some students. For final year students, even with many decisions outstanding, HEIs indicated 220 students could not be provided with the additional support while non-HEIs could not do so for 172 students. These students should receive at least 50% support from UKRI for an extension, but nonetheless this presents a risk that these students will not receive the length of

extension they expected or the training opportunities that were originally hoped for.

Once again, it is important to remember that this information was received during the early phase of lockdown and the situation since then may have changed for co-funders. However, it does highlight how dependent many UKRI studentships are on co-funding partners and the risk this presents during times of crisis like this pandemic.

Communicating the policy: UKRI communications relating to the policy were directed at key stakeholders as general messages for the research and innovation community or as targeted information for students, grant holders and university leadership.

One of the recurring messages in the feedback from ROs and training grant holders is that the timing of the announcement a day before the Easter break, without detailed guidelines and without prior engagement with the sector, limited their ability to respond quickly and coherently to students. Students and ROs picked up the policy quickly through social media and their networks, creating a high volume of questions and queries from students, supervisors, grant holders and university management and leaders for UKRI and each other. This meant that grant holders had to make rapid decisions on the policy outside the normal university decision-making processes for degree extensions and finances, and ROs had to quickly find human resources to design, manage
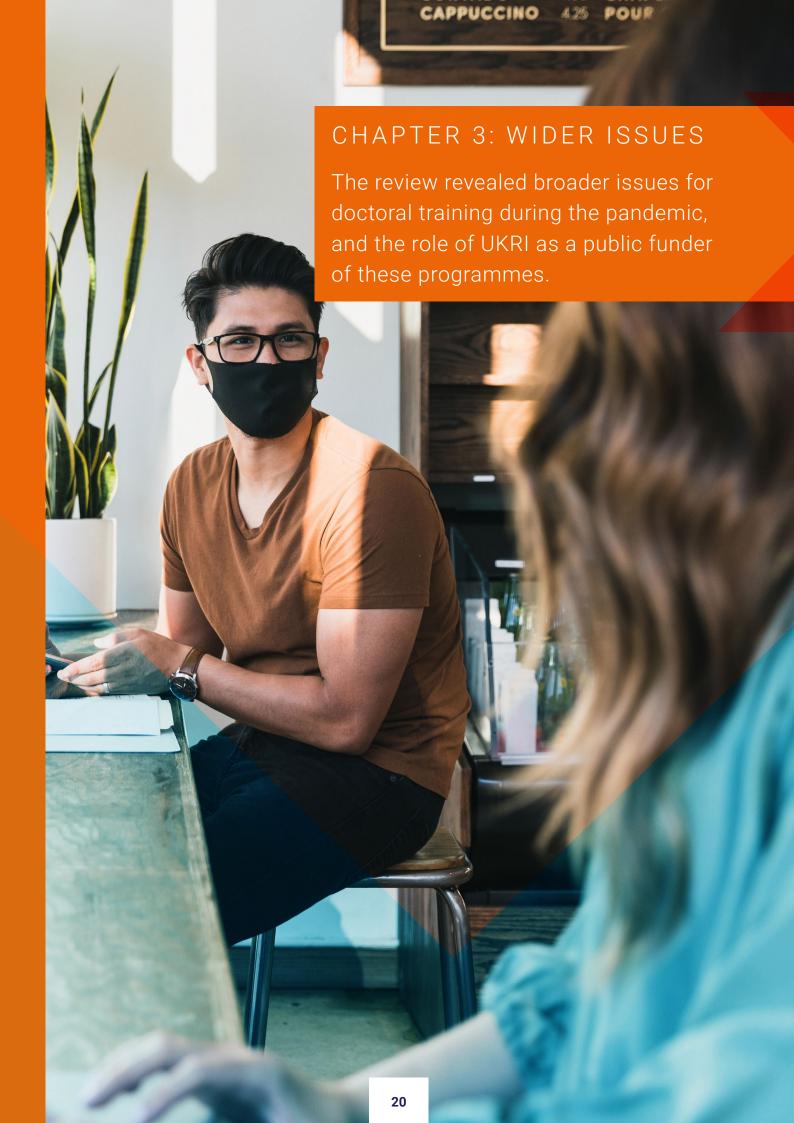
and embed the policy implementation process while not fully understanding the requirements. However, once they became familiar with the policy and a process was in place, ROs reported that extension requests could be administered effectively.

The focus groups of students, grant holders and RO senior leaders reported that they felt they received mixed messages from UKRI and their university on what the policy entailed. Many students interpreted the UKRI communications as implying that all final year students would receive an automatic six-month extension, which was not the intention of the policy. Communications from the RO varied by institution, but several students commented that it gave the impression of being a competitive process rather than a light-touch mechanism with only minimal justification for extensions needed. Students commented that amid this confusion they would trust their supervisor most as an authoritative source of information.

ROs and grant holders commented on a lack of clarity in UKRI's open letters and, while the guidelines were helpful, they were often unclear on what was expected, causing confusion and leading at times to inconsistent interpretation within ROs and within cross-institutional DTPs and CDTs. However, grant holders reported that their meetings and correspondence with their research council contacts and, in particular, the webinars run by some councils were very beneficial and provided clarity.

Operationalising the policy: Our aim was to keep the implementation process as simple and administratively light as possible. In September, we asked 10 of our grant holders for more details on the mechanisms they used to review extension requests. Almost all training grant holders had developed a template form with guidance for students, requesting a case for support ranging between half a page and two pages with limits of 300-500 words. These were signed off either by the grant holder alone or with additional signatures of postgraduate research leads. While there was some variation in the information sought, this suggests that processes were not overly onerous, though we acknowledge that some students felt that having a form created additional anxiety. The guidance we reviewed showed a fairly consistent approach to extension availability for a range of reasons, including personal circumstances, that place them at a disadvantage from the impact of COVID-19.

Putting the UKRI policy into practice alongside those of other funders created a challenge for ROs in their aims for equity of support for all their doctoral students and their ability to replicate UKRI's financial provision of support for their non-UKRI students. Additional procedural complications arose when approving extensions for UKRI students outside normal RO processes for such decisions, and this was further exacerbated within multi-institutional DTPs and CDTs.

CHAPTER 3: WIDER ISSUES

The review revealed broader issues for doctoral training during the pandemic, and the role of UKRI as a public funder of these programmes.

Financial health of the sector

The COVID-19 pandemic has hit the UK and global economies hard. Focus group meetings with university leaders highlighted acute pressures on RO budgets to keep all aspects of their operation running through the pandemic and, looking ahead, there was concern that these pressures will further intensify going into the next financial year. Feedback pointed to uncertainty amongst co-funding partners on their ability to continue their sponsorship of doctoral training, which was further borne out in our survey responses, indicating 11% of final year students co-funded by ROs and 20% co-funded from other sources would not be offered support by the co-funder (see Table 2b). This presents a risk to the sustainable funding of doctoral training and the balancing of support for current students and future investment in new cohorts of doctoral students.

Ensuring high-quality doctoral training during the pandemic

Restricted research projects and interruptions to training plans are challenging disciplinary norms in the academic community on what constitutes a doctoral thesis. ROs are preparing students, their assessors and viva examiners to expect that the nature of research examined during and at the end of doctoral training is likely to be different but not diminished; for example, analyses may be different, fewer datasets may be analysed in more depth or research may be conducted in different ways, using different tools.

Maintaining and regulating standards in doctoral education is the responsibility of universities and the regulatory bodies, not UKRI. Decisions on granting extensions to studentship end dates are the responsibility of universities, who weigh these requests against the need to uphold standards in doctoral education, fairness to all students and the availability of finances. The announcement of costed extensions for UKRI students meant that funding end dates would need to be shifted for these students only and set the expectation amongst other students that they would receive similar support. Without prior consultation from UKRI, ROs found it challenging to reconcile UKRI's expectations with their own independent authority to approve extensions through their internal governance structures and did not have enough time to adapt to the high demand it created.

A further issue to emerge in our consultations was the potential impact of changes to the structured training components of UKRI doctoral programmes on doctoral graduate employability. Disruptions and cancellations of student development and networking opportunities such as placements, cohort training and careers events are inevitable in many cases to keep research projects on track but may in the longer-term disadvantage doctoral students in an increasingly competitive labour market.

Equity across the whole doctoral population

The UK's population of doctoral students is sustained through a variety of revenue streams from funding agencies, ROs, charities, businesses, international sources, self-funded students and by other means. ROs continually strive for excellence and equity of experience for all their doctoral students irrespective of their funding source but achieving this in practice is a challenge. Differences in the terms of grant awards and policy decisions taken by the various sources of doctoral student funding naturally give rise to disparities in experience between students in an RO.

UKRI funds ~25% of all doctoral students in the UK, with variations across our councils by subject. While this is not the majority, it does make UKRI the single biggest funder of this constituency. Due to this influence, UKRI often indirectly sets the standard for doctoral training and student support across the broader doctoral population. Some stakeholders have suggested that the announcement of costed extensions of up to six months for final year UKRI doctoral students set the bar for how all doctoral students should be supported during the pandemic and created pressure for ROs to respond with equally generous support packages. It also created an administrative challenge for ROs to manage and communicate the necessary processes to collate and assess the extension requests, often diverting staff in graduate schools away from other university activities to focus on UKRI students.

Health and wellbeing of research and innovation team members

The teams and networks supporting doctoral students are themselves facing negative impacts on their productivity, health and wellbeing during this period of protracted disruption. The review consultations underlined how supervisors (like students) faced challenges relating to mental health and caring responsibilities, as well as taking on increased workloads. These time demands resulting from the pandemic created a diversity of supervisor availability, but for understandable reasons. Likewise, other researchers and innovators in the team, grant managers and other university staff were experiencing personal challenges.

Working in partnership

The stakeholder consultations conducted for this review gave a consistent message that the timing of the announcement and lack of prior engagement by UKRI with ROs caused significant implementation problems. However, ROs were enthusiastic for stronger engagement with UKRI and its constituent councils on talent and skills policy moving forward. This presents an opportunity for more proactive sector engagement and co-creation of talent and skills policy between UKRI and the research and innovation community.

CHAPTER 4:

Conclusions

Students, supervisors, grant holders, ROs and businesses have been working with great determination and creativity to ensure that doctoral programmes can adapt and continue amid huge disruptions and impacts to projects, training and development plans, and the health and wellbeing of everyone involved. This review and the work of others, such as research by the Student Mental Health Research Network (SMaRteN) and Vitae on the impact of COVID-19 on the research community[18] and the survey by the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) and Vitae of the impact of COVID-19 on researchers in ROs[19], have underlined the impact of these disruptions on student productivity and health and justify the use of policy interventions to support students.

The UKRI policy for supporting its students through the pandemic is intended to complement the efforts of students, supervisors, grant holders and ROs and to provide the necessary flexibility to students and grant holders to complete their doctorates. In this review we sought to understand whether it had been put into practice to its specifications and to make recommendations on future work and activities.

The costed extensions policy has been implemented in line with the guidelines

Evidence collected as part of this review indicates that grant holders have been implementing the policy in line with our expectations of ensuring all students can complete their doctorates and be paid to do so, and of decisions being made using flexible, inclusive and sympathetic processes to accommodate diverse needs. Survey 2 estimated that 92% of students in their final year are being granted extensions averaging 4.6 months, for reasons that include not only lack of access to facilities and resources or disruption to fieldwork but also health and wellbeing and caring responsibilities. A sample of 10 grant holders from across the UKRI councils provided us with details of their processes for recording and reviewing extension requests. The responses received indicate that grant holders have devised and enacted simple and administratively light processes in line with the expectations of the policy.

Penultimate year students, and those with ongoing support needs, require additional UKRI support

Students' experiences of working through the pandemic vary. Some have found that their efficiency improved, while many reported that a range of issues prevented them from working in their usual way.

Evidence in this review suggests that, while projects were affected in every discipline that UKRI funds, penultimate year students and those with ongoing support needs such as assistance for long term illness or students with caring responsibilities will face the biggest challenges in completing their doctoral degrees.

Restrictions on working have continued to evolve over the past nine months, with the full UK-wide lockdown in March followed by many labs and workspaces starting to reopen over the summer (albeit with a range of restrictions on working patterns). Despite the recent tightening of restrictions across the UK universities remain open and ROs continue to adapt to this new operational reality. In this context UKRI should consider supporting early and mid-phase doctoral students as follows:

- expect students and supervisors to redesign projects and training plans so that students are able to complete their projects and training within their funded period

- allow greater flexibility on the timing and delivery mode of structured training elements of training programmes such as DTPs and CDTs

- ensure ROs have in place appropriate guidelines for doctoral students, transfer assessors and viva examiners to recognise the disruption caused by COVID-19

- encourage disabled students, those with long term illness and who are neurodivergent, or who have caring responsibilities to seek additional support through the DSA scheme as required to enable them to redesign their projects, and ask ROs to ensure it is possible for students to have a suitable assessment

- consider additional funding to be used on a needs-priority basis once project adaptation and mitigation has been fully explored. It is recommended that this funding be for students who find it most difficult to adjust their projects such as students in their penultimate year, disabled students, those with long term illness and who are neurodivergent, or who have caring responsibilities. Many students in these categories will still be able to adapt their projects.

18 See 'Covid-19: impact on researchers'.
19 See 'Covid-19 impact on researchers'.

Flexible, needs-based interventions provide fair and bespoke support for diverse student needs while ensuring the responsible investment of public funds

The impact of COVID-19 and the national lockdown on doctoral students has varied according to their individual circumstances. General factors at play have included the stage of doctoral degree, the level of access to facilities and fieldwork required to complete the research, caring responsibilities, health and wellbeing, and the suitability of the student's home environment for working. Some students have experienced major disruption to their project plans and productivity while others have been able to continue their work with relatively little impact. The unevenness in this impact justified adopting a needs-based assessment for student support to accommodate their requirements rather than a policy of blanket extensions for all, including on the grounds of the responsible use of public funds.

Having a process to request an extension was necessary to create an audit trail for the responsible use of public funds. It was noted that for some disabled students and those experiencing mental health problems this process could be personally challenging when detailing their requirements. We aimed to minimise this by asking that the process be light-touch to lessen the burden of work on students and supervisors, and by waiving the requirement for medical certificates as justification for COVID-19-related sick leave.

The impact on different demographic groups of students could not be fully assessed at the time of this report. The collection of data regarding individual final year student extensions in October will provide the raw data for such an analysis and will be reported as a separate equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) assessment by the end of 2020.

Flexibility should be afforded to grant holders to meet their grant obligations

The economic impact of the pandemic is putting severe strains on university finances and on the co-funders of doctoral programmes and students. In the coming years these pressures will become increasingly significant and could create major challenges for training grant holders to meet their co-funding commitments made at the start of awards.

Other obligations such as commitments to providing students with structured training, placements, conferences and networking opportunities are also being squeezed as grant holders prioritise the completion of doctoral projects. UKRI should give increased flexibility for training grant holders to provide such opportunities at a later date for those students who will miss out on these experiences because of lockdown.

Student mental health and wellbeing support services are crucial for high-quality, inclusive doctoral training

This review has highlighted the crucial and integral role of student mental health support services in delivering high-quality and inclusive doctoral training and the need for them to be sustainably resourced. Across the piece, while research projects and training opportunities were being modified and restricted, mental health support services were being increased in response to increases in cases of ill mental health amongst students over the lockdown period. Without such support, many students could remain negatively impacted by the experience with consequences for their health and productivity.

It would be advisable for UKRI to review student health and wellbeing on a routine basis to build an understanding of this issue across the doctoral population. UKRI should also consider how support for student health and wellbeing could be embedded into assessment and review mechanisms for its investments in doctoral training.

Reduced doctoral outputs as a result of the pandemic should not be seen to diminish standards in doctoral education

The disruption to doctoral research requires significant re-planning and evaluation of projects so they can be completed within the current restrictions. Consequently, many students may submit their theses with more limited or partial datasets compared to what was initially expected. This reality of doctoral training during the pandemic needs to be acknowledged and accepted, and so too does the fact that the students completing during this time are producing work of the same high quality required for a doctoral degree.

UKRI is not a regulator of doctoral education but nonetheless, as a major funder of doctoral training in the UK, it should state clearly that a robust education system means that doctoral candidates completing during the pandemic will have the same high-quality skills and attributes expected of all other doctoral graduates.

The funding landscape for doctoral training is complex with multiple interdependencies, creating risks for sustainable doctoral support

There is great diversity in funding sources and models for doctoral programmes and individual students across the higher education sector. Funding agencies like UKRI, ROs, businesses, charities, public sector organisations, international funds, doctoral loans, self-funds from students and others contribute to a complexity of funding streams used to sustain doctoral training in the UK. To further complicate things, students receive different stipends and levels of financial support for their research and training as set by their funders and are often on co-funding models with two or more different funding sources.

This environment makes it very challenging to provide equity of support and experience across the entirety of the UK's doctoral population, and these risks should be considered when developing future strategies for doctoral training and a new deal for postgraduate research[20].

UKRI should engage more proactively with stakeholders to co-create and implement its talent and skills policies

This policy was developed and announced in March and April at pace and in an uncertain and rapidly evolving environment. UKRI wanted to respond quickly to ensure students, grant holders and ROs had some certainty on the future of their projects.

However, our decision to announce the policy prior to consultation or communication with ROs limited their ability to respond quickly and coherently to students. Additional information on policy implementation was sent directly to UKRI grant holders but UKRI did not always directly inform university leadership and management of the policy details. Instead, they received this information internally from multiple training grant holders, with varying interpretations, causing challenges in coordinating a central response. Likewise, more prior consultation with representative groups of students and supervisors may have been valuable in shaping the policy for optimal effectiveness.

The review highlighted the need to communicate clearly with senior university leaders responsible for research and talent (and especially doctoral education) and with students. There was real appetite amongst the ROs and students we consulted for more engagement with UKRI on talent and skills policy and programme delivery, and this creates an opportunity for UKRI to engage more proactively with these groups and sector bodies to co-create and implement policies and programmes for mutual benefit.

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20 See the UK research and development roadmap.

CHAPTER 5:

Recommendations

To address the issues discussed in this report, it is recommended that:

- UKRI announces a clear policy outlining how it will ensure those students who find it most difficult to adjust their projects can complete their doctoral degrees, such as students in their penultimate year, disabled students, those with long term illness, who are neurodivergent, or who have caring responsibilities

- new and early-stage UKRI doctoral students must modify projects with the support of their supervisors and grant holders to ensure they can be completed within their funded period

- in implementing this policy, UKRI should:

  - ensure open, fair and transparent processes for the review and award of costed extensions by requiring ROs to set out their approach prior to the release of funding

  - monitor the financial health of the sector and, through UKRI's constituent councils, consider and advise ROs and grant holders of any changed expectations for existing commitments

  - monitor the impact of COVID-19 on doctoral students

  - review the health and wellbeing of students on a regular basis

- UKRI should continue to encourage grant holders to seek contributions from students' co-funders for extensions

- an analysis of the impact of COVID-19 on different demographic groups of final year students be published

- UKRI reviews the DSA scheme guidelines to ensure that these recognise the impact of the pandemic

- UKRI gives more flexibility to training grant holders to provide students missing out on development opportunities such as skills training, placements, conferences and networking events with the opportunity to complete them after their doctoral degrees

- online training and virtual networks need to be inclusive and follow good practice in EDI

- support for student health and wellbeing should be embedded into the assessment and review mechanisms for new investments in doctoral training

- UKRI issues a statement with other funding agencies and sector bodies to emphasise that the impact of the pandemic on doctoral research does not impact standards in doctoral education

- communications from UKRI on policies such as this be copied to university leaders and central administrative services to enable ROs to coordinate their responses

- UKRI should consider the complexity and interdependencies of funding models for UK doctoral training and the risks to sustainable funding when developing future strategy for doctoral training

- UKRI develops an engagement plan for talent and skills strategy and policy development and dedicates resources to delivering it

- ROs should consider where data-sharing is possible between departments so that disabled students, those with long term illness and who are neurodivergent do not have to repeatedly demonstrate their additional needs; where this is not possible, they should make it clear to students why they require them to restate a position.