



UKRI Students

24 April 2020

Impact of Covid-19 on doctoral studies

Dear doctoral students,

These are certainly unusual times and it's hard to overuse the word 'unprecedented' – none of us have experienced anything like the current disruption and as we develop answers for the crisis now, we need to look also to the future.

As UK Research and Innovation Director of Talent and Skills, I am working with many colleagues to help ensure existing UKRI doctoral students can finish their studies. With about 100,000 students, the UK is one of the largest providers of doctoral training in the world. In 2018/19, UKRI alone invested over £400m in doctoral programmes; at any one time we are supporting about 20,000 doctoral candidates across the full breadth of disciplines and research types. This is a major investment and a definite signal that we are determined that the experts of tomorrow can be nurtured in the UK.

Many UKRI doctoral students have told us that they are concerned about being able to finish their research degree. I want to reassure you that I and my colleagues at UKRI are alive to these concerns and are doing everything within our remit to help. I recap below the steps we have taken so far and discuss some next steps.

First, we made sure that all doctoral students funded by UKRI will continue to be paid their stipend. In receiving your stipend, your studies have not stopped – wherever feasible, you should be doing some work towards your research degree.

Inevitably, however, many of you cannot continue your research in the way you would like to – because, for example, your lab or library is closed, field work can't continue, or you are part of a particularly vulnerable group or have additional caring duties. We know from our own experiences that many of your lives have currently been turned upside down and that you need time to adapt, so open communication between students, supervisors and universities to work together and ensure impacts on mental health and wellbeing are minimised is really important.



Over Easter, UKRI and the government announced additional funding was being made available to support students in their final year on all doctoral programmes supported by UKRI, across all of our research councils. This means that your programme will have new money to pay stipends and fees for students in their final year of funding, for an additional six months. We expect that this will allow these students to complete their studies, but that there may be a small number who need longer. We encourage you to keep talking with your supervisors and training manager.

Many students at earlier stages of their research may also require an extension of some kind because of pandemic disruption. Each student and project will be impacted differently, perhaps due to personal circumstances or the nature of research. Some, fortunately, may still be able to complete their projects in time, others will have lost critical stages of data collection that will delay their projects longer than the shutdown. We know that programme directors and supervisors are better placed than us to understand the impacts of COVID-19 on each project and the extent to which they can be mitigated, so you should discuss this with your supervisors and programmes, whatever stage of your research degree you are at.

We are providing detailed guidance to universities and your programme managers, appreciating that as the situation develops, we will need to refine and review further.

We follow guiding principles in developing support for you; we want all doctoral students to be able to complete their studies, and to be funded to do so. We aim to make sure that you are treated fairly, your personal circumstances are taken into account, and that decisions are made on a generous basis with as little paperwork as possible. We will ensure guidance is clear that students will not have to “make up lost time” by working unreasonable hours, or every weekend and holiday. We will work with your research organisations to ensure that those particularly vulnerable at this time, including people with disabilities, underlying health conditions and with caring responsibilities, are not disadvantaged.

In the meantime, I am keen to keep hearing your feedback on how we are doing. When the immediate crisis passes – which it will – we will need our doctoral students more than ever.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Rory Duncan', written over a light blue circular stamp.

Professor Rory Duncan
UKRI Director, Talent & Skills