

Report

Title: Response to Petition to SUSU

From: Professor C.J. Howls, Director of the University Doctoral College

We recommend that the accompanying “Background” document be read before reading this response.

We respectfully request that the SUSU Senators do not disseminate these reports publicly as they may contain sensitive information, which has been provided to them as a courtesy to facilitate their deliberations.

We believe that the petition has been overtaken by external events due to the introduction by UKRI of a Phase 3 of COVID funding extensions, as explained below and in the Background document.

1. University and Doctoral College Response to COVID

COVID has posed unprecedented challenges for both the individual and organisations. From the first days of the pandemic, the University, through the Doctoral College, sought to try to mitigate as far as was then practically possible the effects of COVID on doctoral research students.

Within the first few days of the pandemic, regulations were changed to allow blanket candidature and progression milestone extensions, examinations and reviews were moved online together with a streamlined special considerations process.

The Doctoral College sought and obtained agreement that doctoral students who teach should continue to be paid, even if the then in-person teaching did not proceed.

A [guidance page](#) was set up as a one-stop-shop for doctoral students and supervisors. This covers topics including, travel and fieldwork, sickness and self-isolation, research plans, training, progression reviews, special considerations, extensions, suspensions, thesis submission, conducting vivas online, teaching, visas, information security, library services, together with key contacts and mental health resources.

A regular communication stream was set up with fortnightly digest, supplemented by urgent emails, sent to each doctoral research student.

A COVID Impact Log was established in July for students to document the effect of COVID on their progression for use in applications for extensions and at progression reviews.

The Doctoral College moved all doctoral training online, launching a one-stop-shop [PGR Development Hub](#), expanding its provision with nearly 20 new online, live, training courses covering all stages of doctoral study.

Over summer 2020 the Doctoral College developed and enacted a 51 point action plan as part of the Active Campus group to facilitate the return of as much doctoral student activity to campus as possible. This included work on mental health and wellbeing.

Students are also now able to submit a COVID Statement along with their doctoral thesis, documenting the impact of COVID on their work, which examiners must consider and report on as part of their evaluation.

In May 2020 the Doctoral College started work on a COVID funding extension scheme to cover the 73% of our doctoral students who are not funded, and so eligible to apply to, the then UKRI Phase 1 scheme.

Southampton was one of the first Universities to offer such a comprehensive scheme, offering parallel financial benefits as the UKRI Phase 1 scheme. This scheme ran from July 2020 to January 2021, with no complaints.

2. Response on General Text of Petition

Full details of the Phase 2 scheme may be seen [here](#).

As explained in the more detailed accompanying Background document, the University did not willingly create a “highly competitive” application process for UKRI Phase 2.

The funding UKRI initially gave to the University for the UKRI-funded students in Phase 2 would only allow 22% of the eligible students to receive a maximum three-month extension. Equivalently, this would fund all eligible UKRI-funded students for an extension of just under 3 weeks. UKRI required that these funds should be targeted at those most in need. It was therefore necessary to have some form of application process so that those most in need received the required extensions.

The scheme used in Phase 2 was similar in process to that used in Phase 1 of the University scheme for non-UKRI students that operated, without complaint, between July 2020 and January 2021.

The University strongly disputes the statement in the petition that the application process is “discriminatory”. Phase 2 has specific prioritisation based on illness (including shielding), neurodivergence, caring, and (contrary to the assertion in the petition) protected characteristics. A full EIA was published along with the guidance which was discussed with the University ED&I Manager.

3. Petition has been Overtaken by Events

We believe that the petition has been overtaken by events.

In March 2021, UKRI changed policy. They announced a Phase 3 of the COVID funding extension. This will return responsibility for funding extensions to individual CDTs and DTPs (with a requirement to adhere to the Phase 2 equality principles). Phase 3 is intended to be the ongoing funding extension scheme over the coming years.

The funding for UKRI Phase 3 is to come from additional money distributed by Research Councils to CDTs/DTPs and use of flexibilities in existing CDT/DTP funds, such as the reduction of recruit for 2021/22. UKRI students who have already applied for funding extensions in Phase 1 and phase 2 are, in exceptional circumstances, allowed to apply in Phase 3.

Phase 3 cannot start until UKRI Phase 2 funds have been spent. For that reason, in order to transition to Phase 3 as soon as possible, the University has sought and obtained permission from UKRI to vary the duration of Phase 2.

The intention is that the second round of UKRI Phase 2 will be the last. This will also provide all eligible UKRI Phase 2 students with additional clarity as to when to apply. For candidates unsuccessful in Phase 2, they will be able to make an application in Phase 3.

The University is reviewing its corresponding policy for non-UKRI students. Further announcements will be made in the next couple of weeks.

4. Response to Specific Points:

It is not always clear from the points below whether they relate to the UKRI or University non-UKRI Phase 2 funding schemes or both.

- ***Support the Pandemic PGRs position that all PGRs studying during the pandemic should be entitled to access a 6-month funded extension, with further extensions available based on need.***

The decision on the length of funding extensions for UKRI students is a matter for UKRI. The University scheme mirrors the UKRI scheme so as not to materially advantage or disadvantage the doctoral students who are not funded by UKRI.

UKRI has already introduced Phase 3, which, using additional flexibilities in the existing UKRI doctoral training grants will allow students who have already received funding in Phase 1 or Phase 2 to apply, in exceptional circumstances, again.

The University is working to expedite the commencement of Phase 3 as soon as is practically possible.

- ***Campaign for both UKRI and the UK government to make more money available to support researchers, including PGRs, affected by the pandemic.***

This point is a matter for SUSU. The University has repeatedly privately engaged with UKRI over the need for additional funding.

- ***Lobby UoS to immediately overhaul the current Phase II extension application system, including:***
 - ***Allowing PGRs to apply more than once for an extension if their first application is unsuccessful.***

It is not clear whether this is referring to the UKRI Phase 2 or the University (non-UKRI) Phase 2 scheme. UKRI determine the regulations for its own scheme. The University scheme is aligned to the UKRI scheme so as not to material advantage, or disadvantage, students not funded by UKRI. When it starts, UKRI Phase 3 will allow repeat applications in exceptional circumstances. As such this point has been overtaken by events and is thus redundant.

- ***A specific and measurable plan for how UoS will ensure fairness across application rounds, marginalised groups and research areas.***

The change of UKRI policy has allowed the University to speed the transition between Phase 2 and Phase 3. The intention is that there will now only be one more round of UKRI Phase 2. Full details will be announced after a decision at the Planning and Resources Group meeting on 7th May. (Until then, we respectfully request SUSU Senators not to communicate or to make public statements about these changes.)

Under a UKRI change of policy, students who are unsuccessful in UKRI Phase 2 may be eligible to apply again in Phase 3.

The guidance and process in Phase 2 has explicitly prioritised applications from people with:

- Disability;
- Long term illness (including shielding);
- Neurodivergence;
- Caring responsibilities;
- Protected characteristics.

The Chairs of Faculty Special Considerations panels sit on the Phase 2 decision panels, together with academic ED&I representatives. Panels can call on Enabling Services for advice.

Phase 2 explicitly requires cross-disciplinary decisions on funding to ensure fairness across research areas, which has been embedded in to the panel membership.

- ***To reduce the unnecessary burden of proof put upon PGRs to disclose trauma experienced during the pandemic by requesting the only the minimum evidence necessary.***

The guidance makes clear that only a maximum of 500 word case and the COVID Impact Log should be submitted in the application. This is similar to the requirements of the University Phase 1 scheme that ran, without complaint, from July 2020-January 2021.

Students are not compelled to submit additional information, only if they wish to. Students may elect not to disclose their application or details of it to their supervisor. Confidential information is restricted to the Chair of the Faculty Special Consideration Panel who provides guidance to the panel on the severity of the circumstances, without divulging the details.

- ***Lobby UoS to collate and publish the outcomes of the Phase II extension applications including the number of successful and rejected applications.***

This information was due to have been released after full completion of each round of Phase 2. The first round of both schemes closed in March 2021. At the time of writing, of the applications that have been resolved, the success rate for UKRI students was:

Phase 2 Scheme	Applications	Success Rate
UKRI	33	86%
Non-UKRI	31	87%

It is anticipated that this rate will rise when cases pending decision have been resolved.

- ***Work collaboratively with the UCU to campaign for fair and equitable treatment of PGRs throughout the Covid-19 pandemic and beyond and support the UCU national campaign to have PGRs recognised as workers.***

This point conflates two separate issues, namely COVID funding extensions and employment status of PGRs. The latter is a UCU campaign. Not all PGRs are members of UCU, but they are members of SUSU.

It is also not clear as to whether this point relates only to the teaching activities of PGR students, or to their doctoral studies as a student enrolled for a degree, or both.

If this point relates to the doctoral studies of the student, there are some additional benefits and protections that student status conveys over and employment contract (including tax benefits and protection from redundancy).

If this point relates to the teaching activities of doctoral students, then a review of the “PGRs Who Teach” Policy has been commenced by the Doctoral College. The review will include input from SUSU.

The University has also met with UCU and has made a proposal for a collaborative way forward on teaching contracts. It is awaiting the UCU response.

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