

Report

Title: Background and History of Phase 2 Scheme for PGR COVID Funding Extensions

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This document provides an outline to the background and circumstances leading up to the introduction of the UKRI Phase 2 scheme, together with the University's own Phase 2 scheme for the University's doctoral students not funded by UKRI.

1. UKRI

UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) is the main civilian funder of research in the UK. It received its funding from the UK Government via the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. It funds and oversees the work of its research councils AHRC, BBSRC EPSRC, ESRC, NERC, STFC in disciplinary research areas, plus Research England (which provides non-disciplinary-based funds). The funds provide funding for research, postdoctoral positions and studentships for doctoral students.

2. Phase 1 UKRI scheme

In early summer 2020 UKRI announced a COVID-related funding extension scheme (Phase 1) for the doctoral students that it funds. This was run through CDTs and DTPs, and not the University. Additional funding was provided to the CDTs and DTPs retrospectively to deliver the extensions. The eligibility of the scheme was restricted to those students whose UKRI funding ended by 31st March 2021, i.e., those (only) funded by UKRI and in their final year of funding. This was to be the end date of the (Phase 1) UKRI funding extension scheme.

3. Phase 1 University scheme for non-UKRI-funded students

This scheme did not cover the 73% of our c3,000 doctoral students who are not funded by UKRI. Following significant preparatory work by the Doctoral College, the University was amongst the very first in the UK to put forward a funding extension scheme that extended a comparable funding scheme to its non-UKRI students. This scheme covered those funded by the University, by non-UKRI third parties and self funding students. Details of that scheme can be found [here](#).

The message that accompanied the Phase 1 non-UKRI University scheme was that mitigation of the project was key and that students should only apply to it when absolutely needed. The principle of the University Phase 1 scheme was to provide, as far as possible, equitable treatment of UKRI and non-UKRI students, provided that there was a need.

4. Comparison of uptake in UKRI and University phase 1 schemes

Phase 1 of the non-UKRI University scheme operated from July 2020 until January 2021. In that time (only) 83 students applied, of whom 65 were awarded funding extensions. Even though 6 months funding was on offer, the mean funding extensions required was only 3.9 months.

This contrasted with the UKRI Phase 1 scheme, for which over 90% of eligible students applied for a mean of 5.4 months.

There is no academic reason to believe that UKRI students actually required more time to complete than non-UKRI students.

No complaints were received about the existence or operation of the University non-UKRI Phase 1 scheme.

5. UKRI review leading to Phase 2

Over the summer UKRI carried out a review of its Phase 1 scheme. The University participated in this review and attended workshops.

The view of many across the University sector, including Southampton, was that the students who were most likely to be affected by the pandemic were not the students in the final stages of submitting (as UKRI Phase 1 had targeted), but those in the middle of their data gathering phase.

UKRI concluded their review and published its findings in Autumn 2020.

6. UKRI Phase 2

The UKRI review established Phase 2 of their funding extension scheme with an end date of 31st March 2022. UKRI opened up the eligibility for students to apply to students beyond those in their final year of funding, whilst also adopting the recommendation for mitigation of projects that had coincidentally been present in the University's own Phase 1 scheme.

At the same time, UKRI required that Phase 2 was to be run through the Universities rather than the Centres for Doctoral Training (CDT) or Doctoral Training Partnerships (DTP) that had run UKRI Phase 1. This was aimed, in large part, at ensuring that there was equal treatment for UKRI students, regardless of the particular CDT or DTP that they were funded by.

The University had to submit a governance plan (see attached) for approval by UKRI. The University was bound by the externally determined regulations of the UKRI Phase 2 scheme. This included the need to apply and the 3 month maximum period for an extension. UKRI required an application on the grounds of needing to justify the ongoing use of public funds.

The University's governance plan was based, in part, on how the University's Phase 1 scheme had been successfully operating since July 2020. Amongst other safeguards, it contained academic ED&I representation on panels and restriction of private information to only the Special Considerations panel member. The only information required was a maximum 500 word request for the funds and the COVID Impact Log (which students had been asked to maintain since July 2020). There was no compulsion to disclose private information if a student did not wish to.

Full details of the UKRI and University non-UKRI Phase 2 schemes, including the comprehensive guidance and FAQs may be seen [here](#).

7. UKRI Phase 2 funding constraints

Privately, representations were made by the University and others to UKRI that the sums allocated to Phase 2 were insufficient. The response, on multiple occasions, was that the UK Government had not increased the UKRI budget to take account of these extensions and thus funding for Phase 2 had to be found from existing UKRI budgets.

A reduction in grant funding elsewhere was possible, but that this would either require cuts (and so job losses for postdoctoral workers) on existing grants, or to reduce the availability of future postdoctoral positions for the current UKRI doctoral students affected by Phase 2. UKRI responded to Sector requests that funding should be allocated on the basis of most need and that prioritisation should be clearly signposted.

The total number of UKRI students eligible under Phase 2 was 615. The initial funding for the UKRI Phase 2 scheme that the University received from UKRI would fund 3 month extensions for only 22% of the eligible students who might apply. A subsequent release of funds by UKRI increased the coverage to 35% of eligible students.

8. Prioritisation in Phase 2

In order to target these funds at those students most in need, following UKRI guidance, the University prioritised those students who were least able to mitigate the effect on COVID due to:

- Lack of remaining funded time;
- Disability;
- Long term illness (including shielding);
- Neurodivergence;
- Caring responsibilities;
- Protected characteristics.

Once the need for an extension has been established, possession of more than one of these criteria will increase prioritisation of the applicant for funding.

Following an examination of the funding end dates of the eligible cohort, in order to facilitate targeting the funding at the students most in need, it was decided to hold a four rounds of funding panels. This was to stagger the UKRI applications, so that students applied when they were best able to demonstrate their need for an extension and so maximise their chance of success, given the extremely limited UKRI funds and the clearly signposted prioritisation.

The University published extensive guidance and FAQs on the scheme, together with the prioritisation that would be used [here](#).

9. University Phase 2 scheme for non-UKRI students

In response the University committed amended its own scheme and again committed significant funds to launch its own version of Phase 2 for doctoral students not funded by UKRI. Again, the overarching principle was not to disadvantage, or advantage, materially the non-UKRI students over the UKRI students. Hence the University and UKRI Phase 2 schemes followed similar application processes.

10. Outcome of first 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%

11. UKRI Phase 3

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 some additional funds distributed to CDTs and DTPs by Research Councils, 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.

12. Implications for UKRI 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.

13. University Phase 3

The University Phase 2 scheme is currently due to run until March 31st 2022. The University is currently reviewing what scheme it may (or may not) implement for Phase 3.

Public announcements about both schemes will be made in early May, following the relevant University Planning and Resources Group meeting.