

POLICY GUIDANCE: PGR Extensions to Studentship Funding/Fees Scholarships (COVID-19)

Context

1. The ability of PGR students to maintain progress in their studies may be impacted in a variety of ways by the COVID-19 outbreak, including but not limited to:
 - Closure of university/external research facilities
 - Disruption to planned fieldwork or data collection
 - Physical or mental health matters
 - Childcare or other caring responsibilities
 - Leaving the UK/returning home
2. One or a combination of such factors may impact a PGR student's ability to progress their research during this period. The extent of impact may range from minor (as a guide, up to one month's delay does not in normal circumstances warrant special mitigation measures) to major (e.g. several months' delay due to loss of materials/data through lab closures).
3. Where PGR students require more time to complete their thesis due to COVID-19 impacts, an **Extension to the Period of Study** may be sought.
4. Self-funded students who require an extension to their period of study due to COVID-19 impacts will be able to apply for a fees scholarship to cover the cost of tuition fees for the extended period.
5. Where PGR students require additional funding to complete their research – i.e. where the student is in receipt of a studentship, and where the disruption to the programme of study falls within the student's funding period – an **Extension to Studentship Funding** may be sought from the University or from funding bodies, where the eligibility criteria is met.
6. The award of extended studentship funding will not necessarily require an extension to the period of study. Where both a funding extension and an extension to the period of study are needed on the same grounds, these will be considered for approval in parallel. An extension to the period of study can also be sought separately from additional studentship funding, where needed.
7. Approval of an extension to the period of study does not constitute an extension to studentship funding.

Purpose

8. This document sets out the University of Exeter's policy and process for application for extended studentship funding due to COVID-19 impacts. The same process will also cover applications for fees scholarships for self-funded students to cover additional tuition fee costs in respect of any extension to the period of study due to Covid-19.

9. The process for requesting more time to complete a research degree where this is sought separately from a funding extension will be set out in a separate COVID-19 Policy on Extension to the Period of Study.

Scope

10. This policy is intended to support postgraduate research students in the completion of research which was planned to be undertaken during the student's funding period and which has been disrupted due to COVID-19 impacts.
11. In the case of self-funded students, the policy is intended to support completion of the research degree programme, where the research has been disrupted due to COVID-19, by covering the cost of tuition fees for an approved extension period.
12. The policy will support applications – on a case-by-case basis – for funding extensions or fees scholarships of between 1 and 6 months.
13. Studentship funding will be extended on the same basis as the original studentship award (e.g. as applicable: full fees/stipend; partial fees/stipend; fees only). Funding will cover tuition fee and stipend (at max. rate equivalent to current UKRI rate) costs only, not RTSG or other project costs.
14. Fees scholarships for self-funded students will be applied at the start of the fourth year of registration for PhD candidates or second year for MByRes candidates (for FT students; or equivalent point for PT registration).
15. Self-funded students will become liable for fees again at the end of the period of the fees scholarship and must meet the normal criteria in order to move to continuation status.
16. Self-funded students will not necessarily be ready to move into continuation at end of their fees scholarship period, since the scholarship is applied at a common point of registration for all students, whereas the timing of the move to continuations status varies according to when individual students reach this milestone.
17. The policy covers studentships awarded by the University of Exeter and funded from the following sources:
 - a. Studentships funded solely by the University of Exeter from institutional monies (for example, the VC Scholarships, QUEx, International Excellence, College-funded awards and awards funded from philanthropic donations)
 - b. Studentships funded by the University of Exeter in collaboration with non-UKRI external partners (for example, industry or charity)
18. Where studentships are part-funded in collaboration with external organisations, Exeter is only able to cover the University's contribution to the cost of studentship extensions.
19. We will liaise with external funding partners on their ability to commit additional funds to support the cost of extensions proportionate to their contribution to the studentship.

Where partners are unable to commit additional funds, the period of funding extension granted will be limited accordingly (e.g. on a studentship funded 50-50 by Exeter and an industry partner, a six-month extension may only be funded for 3 months if the partner is unable to contribute.)

20. Students who are in receipt of a studentship which is administered by the University but is wholly funded by income from an external (non-UKRI) funder, **should therefore still apply through this process** to provide information to support the Doctoral College, Research Services or Innovation, Impact and Business in liaising with funders or other (e.g. industry/charity) partners with regard to their policy on provision of funded extensions to projects. **It is important that students in this group make an application if they have a case for an extension, even if they believe their funder cannot contribute additional funds, because alternative funding sources may be accessible to support the cost of the extension (e.g. HEIF funding; Research England allocation).**
21. Where funders have announced their own policies on extended studentship funding – e.g. **UKRI** and the **Wellcome Trust** – those policies take precedence and we will put in place additional/parallel processes where necessary to meet funder requirements and timelines for funding extension applications.
22. Self-funded students will be able to apply for a fees scholarship in respect of any approved extension period linked to COVID-19 impacts – this will be managed under this process.
23. For directly sponsored students (e.g. those funded directly by overseas governments or national/international scholarships schemes) are not within the scope of this policy. We can provide support in liaising with your sponsor (e.g. letters of support to confirm the extent/nature of impact on your studies due to Covid-19) to ascertain what provision they will make for extended financial support.
24. PhD candidates who are funded through fellowships which require them to be employed as members of staff (in receipt of salary rather than stipend) are not within the scope of this policy. We will work with the funding body to establish their policy on funding extensions. (E.g. Marie Curie ITN, NIHR and Wellcome clinical fellowships).

Eligibility

25. In light of the scope of the policy, PGR students will be eligible under this policy where:
 - a. Their funding period ends on/after 01 March 2020 (and started prior to 01 March 2020).
 - b. They are self-funded and registered on their programme of study on/before 01 March 2020.
26. PGR students in any year of study (who meet the eligibility criteria on funding period/registration above) are eligible to apply if progress in their research has been impacted by the pandemic.
27. Funded students must be in receipt of a studentship within the scope of the policy.

28. Self-funded means those who are and always have been responsible for meeting the cost of tuition themselves or those who were funded at one time directly by an external sponsor (i.e. funding that is not administered by the University of Exeter) but that funding has expired and the student is now responsible for meeting the cost of tuition themselves.
29. Students who are on an interruption of study for the duration of the COVID-19 restrictions period will not normally be eligible (since the research activity is paused and research degree programme and funding timelines adjusted accordingly, and tuition fee payments suspended). There may be exceptions to this, depending on the particular funding arrangements, and students should seek advice from the PGR Support Team as needed.
30. Students who are interrupted for part of the duration of the COVID-19 restrictions period may seek a funding extension/fees scholarship where specific COVID-19 impacts on research occur outside of the period of interruption.

Criteria

31. It is recognised that COVID-19-related disruptions to research degree programmes may be temporary, partial, and/or capable of mitigation. Applications are invited and will be assessed in this context.
32. Causes of disruption will include:
 - PGR student redeployed to work on COVID-19 related research
 - Project impact (e.g. postponement of critical activities where alternatives are not available and impact cannot be mitigated.)
 - Personal impact (e.g. additional COVID-19 related caring responsibilities)

Expectations

33. Students and their supervisors have been encouraged to explore whether changes to the research project are possible and would reduce the length or need for an extension. This could mean adapting the research question, approach or methodology, providing that this still enables the student to conduct research at a level appropriate to their programme.
34. Where a student is currently unable to conduct research, we would expect concentration on desk-based work at this time (where possible). For example, conducting literature reviews that had been planned for later, draft thesis writing, preliminary data analysis, etc.
35. The length of extension requested should be commensurate with time lost, taking into account the effect of any mitigating actions to reduce the length or need for an extension. Extensions of between 1 and 6 months can be requested.
36. Many students will have been able to make full or partial progress on their research programme, and therefore we do not expect that all students will require a funding/programme extension, and that many extension requests will be of less than 6 months' duration.

Application Process

37. Applications will be considered on a case-by-case basis.

38. Students and supervisors will be requested to provide – via an application form – information about the nature of the impact, any steps taken to mitigate the extent of the impact and reduce the length of the extension, and the duration of extension requested.
39. A College panel will be convened to consider applications and recommend decisions on the award of funding extensions/fees scholarships.
40. The Dean of the Doctoral College and the DVC Research & Impact will have oversight of outcomes from College panels.

Timescales

41. Applications have been considered through a number of rounds on a phased basis since June 2020. This was intended to allow for the initial period of Covid-19 disruption to settle and for the extent of impacts (and period of extension required) to be fully appraised.
42. All eligible students had had an opportunity to apply for a funding extension/fees scholarship by the end of January 2021. A **final round of applications**, for any remaining students who have not previously taken the opportunity to apply, will be held in June 2021, based on a current understanding of the COVID-19 impacts upon research activity and University operations.
43. The timeline for final application round is planned as follows:
 - Call for applications issued: w/b 24 May 2021
 - Closing date for applications: midday 21 June 2021
 - Panel meetings: varied per College, June/July 2021
 - Outcomes confirmed to applicants: by end of July 2021
44. Any eligible students who have a case for a Covid-related extension and who have not yet made an application should apply in this final call (further rounds are not anticipated) – e.g.:
 - University funded students: any eligible students who have not yet applied and who have grounds to request a funding extension under this policy should make an application in this final round.
 - Students in receipt of a University of Exeter administered studentship which includes a full/partial contribution from external partners (e.g. industry): any eligible students in this group who have grounds for a Covid-related extension should apply in this final round. **It is important that students in this group make an application if they have a case for an extension, even if they believe their funder cannot contribute additional funds, because alternative funding sources may be accessible to support the cost of the extension** (e.g. HEIF funding; Research England allocation).
 - Self-funded students: any eligible students who have not yet applied and who have grounds to request a fees scholarship under this policy should make an application in this final round.