



South West Doctoral Training Partnership (SWDTP)

April 6, 2020

Dear postgraduate researcher,

I am writing on behalf of the SWDTP to acknowledge the impact the current coronavirus pandemic will be having upon your studies. The contents of this letter are directed primarily at PhD students. If, currently, you are a Masters student (i.e. in the first year of a 1 + 3 award) then you may wish to jump forward to the next page.

For PhD students, whilst some of you will be able to continue your research by focusing, in the short term, on work that can be done from home, we know also that some have caring responsibilities – young children to look after, for example –, that some face the prospect of fieldwork being cancelled or postponed, that some are dealing with physical or mental health issues, that not everyone is set up for and able to work at home, and that you are all now in a period of isolation away from peers, physical access to labs and libraries, and from other facilities that would normally be available to you. Although we ask you to continue with your research as best you can, we acknowledge that it will not always be possible.

Understandably, the question of funding and, specifically, of extended funding has been raised. We fully appreciate that this is a concern for many and a source of anxiety. As an ESRC-funded DTP we are following UKRI guidance on this matter, the most up-to-date of which can be found at <https://www.ukri.org/news/coronavirus-impact-on-ukri-supported-research/> (please see under Training Grants/Students and note that there is some additional guidance that you can click on and read). It states, *“we recognise that students may find themselves unable to complete essential tasks and/or experiments in order to be ready to submit their thesis, for example due to illness, caring responsibilities or departmental or institution closures. To avoid unnecessary pressure on students, students should continue to receive their stipends and extensions to submission dates should be awarded when needed”*. Other guidance on the UKRI website makes clear that there will be funded extensions where the need arises due to the impact of Covid-19.

As a partnership across five institutions, we are working closely with our colleagues to establish a process by which students can apply for a funded extension, where it is needed. It is likely that extensions will be handled on a case-by-case basis, recognising that the full impact of the current situation won't be known until you are further advanced in your research. In some cases, it may turn out that an extension is not, ultimately, required because the thesis still comes together within the funded period. In others, an extension will be required.

What we ask is that you **keep a log** of what has happened and the time that has been lost, and also **retain evidence** about the impact that Covid-19 has had upon your research. We aren't prescriptive of the form that log takes; it should serve as an aide memoire of what has happened if you need to apply for extended funding in due course. Information about what constitutes evidence is included in the FAQs at the end of the letter.

For the time being, if you are more than 3 months from your funding ending then there is no need, at the present time, to contact us with any request for extended funding. Instead, please keep the log and any supporting evidence. However, **if you are within 3 months of your funding ending** and coronavirus is having a direct impact that will delay your completion then we ask you to contact us at swdtp-enquiries@bristol.ac.uk so we can discuss your situation further.

To re-cap, if you are within 3 months of your funding ending then contact us now if Covid-19 is having a direct impact on the progression/completion of your research. If it is longer until your funding ends, then keep a log and supporting evidence that can be used to support any request for an extension that is made in due course.

There is a further group of students, which are those whose funding has ended but who have not yet submitted. The instruction we have received is that because the funding period has ended for these students so, regrettably, there will be no further funding available from the SWDTP. If you are in this situation and facing hardship, then we advise contacting your home institution to enquire about hardship funding. Please do also let us know if there is anything practical we can do to support you.

Turning to Masters students, we understand that there has been disruption to your studies too. The ESRC's Postgraduate Training and Development Guidelines require that all students should have core training in quantitative methods, qualitative methods and the principles of research design, amongst other expectations and requirements, so we ask you to continue with your courses and assessment and to please contact the SWDTP if there is likely to be a delay in completing your Masters programme (and starting your PhD). We will provide further guidance as we are able.

We have set up a chat room/forum for students who are social distancing/self-isolating to chat with other students, network and have some fun because social distancing doesn't mean that socialisation has to stop. PhDs can feel unique and they come with unique challenges. Social distancing can, oftentimes, feel the same. We hope that forum will provide a space to give/gain support with people in the same position as you. The forum link, once signed up is 'Social Distancing Cohort Support.' Within this there is space for people with caring responsibilities, mental health support and even for ideas for fun activities during lockdown. It can be accessed at <https://www.swdtp.ac.uk/forums/>.

If you have any queries about any of the information raised here then you are welcome to contact us at swdtp-enquiries@bristol.ac.uk. We will try and respond as quickly as possible but please do understand that there may be a delay. A reminder that further advice can be found at the UKRI website, at <https://www.ukri.org/news/coronavirus-impact-on-ukri-supported-research/>. Some frequently asked questions and their answers are below.

Finally, I shall be available online through zoom on Thursday (April 9th) from 3pm to 5pm if you wish to chat with me there. There will be two meetings held. I will provide a brief overview and presentation, with an opportunity for a group-wide questions at 3pm, and then will be online for an hour between 4pm and 5pm during which people can talk to me individually.

Group Meeting 15:00-16:00 Thursday 9th April

<https://zoom.us/j/515716117?pwd=Y0VHYVpUWHJjS0M2LOVCRGNDY2VwUT09>

Meeting ID: 515 716 117

Password: 429464

Individual Meetings 16:00-17:00 Thursday 9th April

<https://zoom.us/j/174496072?pwd=ZVdOZEFFRWNZcGgvUWxRMXhZdy9mdz09>

Meeting ID: 174 496 072

Password: 088403

Please be assured that we are extremely conscious of the pressure that many of you are under. My team is working extremely hard 'behind the scenes' to do everything we can to support you. Please do remember to look after your wellbeing as best you can. Do take some fresh air outside if you are able to do so, safely. Do check-in with other students in your University to find out how they are doing and offer each other moral support. And do make use of your University's health and wellbeing services if you need them.

Yours faithfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'R. Harris', written in a cursive style.

Richard Harris, Interim Director of the SWDTP

Frequently asked questions

Should I continue to work on my research?

Yes, you should continue to progress your research as best you can: for example, some will be able to use this time to work on a literature review, some to undertake data analysis at home, some to transcribe interviews, some to undertake reading, and so forth. However, we recognise that different students are affected in different ways and that, for some, progress will be difficult, limited or curtailed.

Could you just offer a blanket extension for all students, now?

We are not permitted by the ESRC to do this and we support their reason for why not. At the present time, the situation is on-going so it is not possible to fully and adequately assess the impact of the pandemic on individual research projects. Instead, the impact will need to be assessed on a case by case basis.

Presently I am unable to work on my research: should I suspend studies?

In general, we advise against this. We recognise that you may be unable to work full-time on your thesis right now or, in some cases, much at all. However, rather than suspending, which will interrupt your stipend, we ask that you keep a log of what is happening and any other supporting evidence and apply for extended funding at the appropriate time.

What sort of evidence will be required to receive extended funding?

Any extensions to funding will be proportional to time lost as a direct impact of Covid-19 so please keep a log of how you are being affected, its impact on your research and its duration. Please also keep any other supporting evidence you may have. If you have COVID-19 or are advised to stay at home, you should obtain an 'isolation note' by visiting NHS 111 online: <https://111.nhs.uk/isolation-note/>. If you are experiencing previously undiagnosed or worsening mental health issues then you are encouraged to contact a doctor, partly to obtain a medical certificate but also for your own wellbeing. You may also wish to contact the wellbeing / student health services available at your University (see below). Other forms of evidence will depend upon the impact – for example, if you are unable to access secure data and you have confirmation from the data provider that you are not permitted to access it at home, please use that.

My present funding lasts for longer than 3 months but I would like to apply for an extension now. Why can't I?

We appreciate that this can be frustrating but we need to have a process that is consistent with UKRI guidance, can be implemented by our partner institutions, and, wherever it is possible, offers parity with the guidance those institutions give to students who are not ESRC-funded. Even if that process was fully in place, we would still need to fund extensions according to their impact on the research project, which may take some time to determine. In some cases, the impact on the research may lessen over time. In others, it will not. The important thing, for now, is for you to keep the log and supporting evidence.

When can I go for the latest UKRI information?

Please refer to <https://www.ukri.org/news/coronavirus-impact-on-ukri-supported-research/>

Where can I go for support for my well-being and mental health?

Bath: <https://www.bath.ac.uk/professional-services/wellbeing-service/>

Bristol: <http://www.bristol.ac.uk/students/wellbeing/>

Exeter: <https://www.exeter.ac.uk/wellbeing/>

Plymouth: <https://www.plymouth.ac.uk/student-life/services/student-services/counselling>

UWE: <https://www1.uwe.ac.uk/students/healthandwellbeing/wellbeingservice.aspx>

I still have questions, who should I ask?

Dependent on the nature of your query you may wish to contact your advisors, local administrators or SWDTP directly: swdtp-enquiries@bristol.ac.uk. We are here to help you, especially during this uncertain period.