



## South West Doctoral Training Partnership (SWDTP)

October 22, 2021

Dear SWDTP member,

I hope you are now well settled into this academic year and into your studies. Because some time has now passed since either your induction or since I last wrote to students, I thought I would take this opportunity to remind you of the various opportunities the SWDTP offers you and also to reflect on the possible complications of COVID-19, now that cases are rising quite sharply again. Some of you, who are new starters, will have received an email recently also outlining the various ways the SWDTP supports your studies. Do, please, refer back to that too as we are keen for all students to take advantage of what is on offer to them. As something of an aide memoire for all students, I highlight some of those opportunities below.

If you have not already done so, can I strongly encourage you to sign-up for the SWDTP newsletter. You can do so by [entering your details here](#). This is best way of keeping up-to-date with the training opportunities and other events that we and other related organisations offer. These can be invaluable in providing some of the skills and support that will help you through your PhD, to make connections with other students and organisations, and that are also often transferable to other employment opportunities and settings that are outside of academia.

I would also like to remind you of the various opportunities to showcase your research and to learn from other students doing the same. [A handful of tickets are presently available for our annual student conference](#), which is a great way to learn from and be inspired by your peers. We have an in-house journal, too, which [you can find out more about here](#). There are also various funding opportunities available to you that go beyond your 'baseline' scholarship – [see our website here](#). You may find it beneficial to spend just a little time browsing our website, [www.swdtp.ac.uk/](http://www.swdtp.ac.uk/) and, to re-iterate, the newsletter is the best place to be informed of what is happening and available with the SWDTP and across its partners.

Turning to less positive news, COVID remains endemic in the country with the potential to disrupt health and research alike. Back in July I wrote to students explaining the situation in terms of possible funding extensions in exceptional cases. [You can read my email here](#). We have received a few queries about this so it will be helpful for me to elaborate a little upon our policy on awarding further funded extensions to students, some of whom may not have been eligible previously, whereas others may have received an extension already.

What I have to stress is that extensions of up to 3 months will only be awarded in truly exceptional circumstances that are directly linked to Covid-19 and where every effort has been made to accommodate the impact by making changes, where possible, to the research project. This may include scaling back the scope or ambition of the project as initially conceived – for example, by reducing the number of planned interviews, the number of fieldwork sites or length of fieldwork, or by focusing more specifically on fewer parts of the planned research. It is important that you

discuss this with your advisor as, of course, this must be balanced against doing research that meets the requirements of a PhD.

Although we are not precluding other possibilities, exceptional circumstances are likely to be those that are unexpected and difficult to plan around. For example, new or exacerbated medical conditions (that are not addressed by a period of paid 'sick leave'), or increased caring responsibilities, rather than more general circumstances such as restricted access to a library facility, to interviewees, or because of delayed fieldwork where this is still scope to continue with other work. In all cases, modifying the project to fit the current funding window should take priority over seeking an extension for the work because we will only award extensions where such modifications were either tried and unsuccessful or not appropriate to the nature of the extenuating circumstances. For students who have recently started, we would expect that the research is 'COVID-proofed' insofar as that is possible, with contingencies in place should, for example, international travel for research be curtailed.

I fully understand that setting constraints around the likelihood of receiving an extension will limit eligibility. The reality is that our funds are limited and we cannot afford to give an extension to every project that has been impacted by Covid-19. Therefore we have to prioritise the most exceptional cases.

I also understand that uncertainty over eligibility increases anxiety. Applications for extensions can only be made in the final 12 months of your current funding window but if you wish to approach us informally to ask whether we are likely to fund an extension then you may do so by contacting [swdtp-enquiries@bris.ac.uk](mailto:swdtp-enquiries@bris.ac.uk).

Finally, I know that being asked to reduce or curtail some aspects of a thesis is not what people want to hear. However, it is consistent with what ESRC/UKRI have required throughout the pandemic. If there are issues that you wish to raise or discuss in relation to this then remember that you can do so through your student reps or you can email me directly at [rich.harris@bris.ac.uk](mailto:rich.harris@bris.ac.uk).

I look forward to seeing some of you at the student conference in November.

With best wishes, Richard

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'R. Harris', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Richard Harris, Director of the SWDTP