

Dear students

Below are the questions raised by the Students Union in the last two weeks. I have also included questions received (separately) from the UCU last week, noting the potential overlap between the SU and UCU questions.

1 Face to face research

- a) I'd like to know when we can expect the SSREC to issue a statement on human participant research, and guidance on the procedures that will govern resumption of face-to-face research. To my knowledge no such statement has been made to date, meaning that researchers are currently operating in a vacuum. SSREC's wiki states: 'Research that involves data collection in schools, as well as interviews and focus groups with research participants, will be impacted by the current social distancing and self-isolation requirements.' However, under UK law, it would currently be lawful to conduct face-to-face research in line with social distancing measures, so the University needs to have policies governing this eg. under what conditions would this be acceptable? What types of risk assessment would be necessary? What would the procedure be for applying for amendments to prior ethical approvals in light of the new conditions?

It is best that students contact the Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (SSREC) direct via <https://www.bath.ac.uk/teams/social-science-research-ethics-committee-ssrec/>. I understand that procedures are being developed but at the time of writing this, they are not quite ready for release.

2 Hardship Fund

- a) Could you clarify how you intend to 'simplify the application process' for the Hardship Fund? This is critical as the current application process is very off-putting and adds significant stress to an already very difficult situation for many.
- b) While the specific Covid-19 non-furlough scheme hardship fund is welcome, is it possible to extend this to others (e.g. PhD students who are already writing up and have lost vital income), or as suggested in the open letter, set up a much-simplified Hardship Fund? These concerns are pressing for many people.
- c) As advised by the pro-vice chancellor, I applied for the COVID-19 non-furlough scheme hardship fund because that seems to be the only financial support that suits me as a self-funded international student. However, it seems like to me that this hardship fund is to compensate students whom had registered workloads (e.g. exam invigilation) cancelled during the lockdown period. In other words, students like me whom didn't planned any workloads for various reasons (e.g. for me my planned workloads overlapped with important conferences). Would it be possible if the criteria of this hardship scheme can be expanded to benefits more students? For example, award based on previous earning before the lockdown?

The application and administration process for the Hardship Fund has recently been improved by placing the form fully online. The Hardship Fund and the Covid-19 non-furlough scheme hardship fund are managed by Student Services and Student Money Advice. Students with any queries should contact these schemes <https://www.bath.ac.uk/guides/applying-for-the-university-of->

[bath-hardship-fund/](#). In discussions with Anthony Payne (Director of Student Services) he has stated that he is very happy to discuss any issues with students.

3 Funding and extensions

- a) Will there be a review of the 3-month extensions as it is becoming clear that disruption will extend far beyond this period?
- b) Is there a further update on whether university-funded students can expect funding for the extension period?
- c) Will the university commit to advocating with funding bodies to give additional funding for the extension period?
- d) Even though we were told no URSA funding extensions, I would like to request that you rethink that. many students are having difficulties and the hardship fund should not be the only option. There should be an extension for ALL URSA holders. This point was also raised by the UCU.
- e) When will students get responses from funded extension requests?
- f) Why is the university not supporting the doctoral students it funds?
- g) Why is the university not amending regulations that aren't in the students' best interests? [in relation to Jeremy's letter which said that writing up status could not be offered to some due to University regulations] This point was also raised by the UCU.

Together with colleagues in the senior management team of the University, I am fully aware of the financial worries that many of our students face. As stated in previous emails, the university is facing considerable financial pressures and so is not able to commit to providing extensions to funding.

As also previously stated, it has been agreed that the 3-months fees-waivered extensions of registrations (submission deadlines) will be available to all doctoral students. I realise that some students may need further extensions and so they are encouraged to apply for these as they move into their final year (when they are in the best position to judge their actual requirements). All requests for extensions will be looked upon favourably.

Those UKRI-registered students in their final year of funding, who have requested extensions to funding, and for whom the extension has been agreed, are currently being processed as quickly as our processes will allow. Anyone who is nearing the end of their funding and who is yet to receive confirmation that this is in-place should contact the studentship office at fos-pgstu@bath.ac.uk. We are currently waiting for updates from the UKRI about the arrangements for those UKRI-funded students who are not in their final year of funding (defined as those whose funding end date is from 1 April 2021).

The regulations are in place to ensure consistency, quality and academic standards. They are not easily, or lightly, changed. Any changes to the requirement for students to complete a minimum period of registration before transferring to Writing-Up status would have to follow due process, including careful consideration of the implications and possible consequences of the change, not just for current students but also future ones. Any recommendations for change would then go to Senate, the highest academic committee of the University, and whose membership includes student representatives, for final decision.

4 Fee waivers

- a) Is there a further update on fee-waivers for self-funded students?

To repeat my advice in previous emails, if a self-funded student is unable to continue with their studies then they should consider suspending their studies (removing the need to pay for fees).

5 Return to campus

- a) We need more transparency with decision-making! While some answers can't be given because decisions have not been made yet, we want to know what's going on! What's the status of lab-reopening? How are the trials going? Are they successful? When are we going back to the office?
- b) Why is the university declining expenses requests for printing materials and asking students to go to campus?

An update on the reopening of research facilities was sent to all doctoral students by Prof Jonathan Knight, P-V-C Research (Thursday 9th July) – which I hope addresses many of your questions regarding laboratory re-openings.

I recognise that many other students will have other issues such as needing to resume traveling for fieldwork or to work at other research institutions, or simply needing to return to use the Library. This is why the Doctoral College has developed the page <https://www.bath.ac.uk/guides/guidance-for-doctoral-students-on-returning-to-campus/>, which will continue to be updated as new information is announced. As already mentioned in previous emails, I am working closely with the Summer Priorities Restart Group representing doctoral student interests on a range of issues concerning reopening of facilities.

Following the Government advice to work from home if you can, there are, as yet, no plans to return to offices (for staff or students). However, the Summer Priorities Restart Group will be considering these aspects, subject to any change in the Government advice.

The issue of students being declined expenses for printing materials and being asked to go to campus is an issue to be taken up with individual departments. I would recommend that students raise any issues with the SU, who can then collate feedback and report to the relevant group within the university.

(and a related issue from the UCU) Work stations. The work station assessment allows students to change their work station within what's possible but there doesn't seem to be an acknowledgement that many students just don't have the space for a healthy work environment. Their health is being impacted by disrupted sleep forced upon them by having to work in bedrooms as many shared houses don't have sufficient shared space. They are students who attempted to get resources for printing at home then when attempting reimbursement from project funds (which normally cover printer credit) they were asked why they didn't print at uni. Since students are being asked to work from home where possible and protecting other staff's health by doing so there should be support wherever possible to help students work effectively from home, not challenges.

I very much appreciate the difficulties for students in working from home, often in cramped student houses and flats. I realise that, while it is no consolation, the same is true for most staff

members who, like many doctoral students, are working in similarly difficult situations, and in some cases caring for family members as well as home-schooling children.

The Doctoral College has been in discussion with key contacts in the Faculties and School to seek clarification as to how individual academic departments and the School are managing this. We are seeking clarification from them and I will get back to you in a future email.

6 Travel guidance

- a) Given that the Government guidelines have now changed regarding permitting travel to certain countries, can you advise if changes will be made to the travel guidelines that the University have issued (i.e., stating at all University related travel is currently suspended). Can you advise when these changes are likely to be made?

This is currently under consideration. I expect new guidance to appear on the website soon.

7 PGWTs

- a) When will students be told if they have GTA contracts next year?
- b) (The UCU has also sought clarification whether GTAs will be offered contracts for the next academic year, rather than casual contracts.)

As reported previously, employment of students for teaching activities is organised within academic departments. I am aware that academic colleagues are currently extremely busy with the complexities of redesigning much of its teaching provision (including modes of delivery, class sizes, forms of assessment, etc.), against a background of continuing uncertainty. Once departments have clarified plans for the next academic year, they will then be able to advise doctoral students about their particular needs. Doctoral students should therefore liaise with their departments.

Several other points raised by the UCU (in relation to my email of the 03/07/20), not covered by issues raised (above) by the SU:

Training funds are essential to research activities. If students can't afford to live then they won't get to the point of ever going to a conference. What's being suggested is that student supervisor pairings are given the option to access that money for stipends or fees. If these funds sit in a pot whilst students are unfunded then it is inevitable that students will drop out and never get to return to access the funds. We need to consider what is most essential and for most students surviving the lock down whilst they are unable to research is more essential than attending a conference next year. This also doesn't consider final years who had saved a budget to attend events that will no longer happen. They will finish their PhD before these events return so therefore funding their livelihoods and fees would enable them to finish their PhD but saving money for a non-existent conference is pointless.

Not all students have access to such training funds and so even if these were released then many students would not be able to benefit. The funds are there for a defined purpose and will be

required for equipment, consumables, travel, fieldwork or other costs that will enable the students to perform their research once they return to study. Many funders also place strict conditions on what these funds can, and cannot, be used for. The Hardship Fund is there to support students experiencing financial difficulty.

None of the points acknowledge the **mental health** impact of the uncertainty. To be able to effectively research students need to be able to engage their brain to process new ideas with comprehension and understanding. Whilst being faced with uncertainty about whether they can afford to live in 3 months time it is almost impossible to engage the brain in this way. The doctoral college doesn't seem to have acknowledged that stress prevents research ability even if students have time and a computer etc. The brain is the most essential tool and the uncertainty being forced on students by delayed extension results and lack of funding is making research impossible for lots of students.

The stress that is being put on students by not confirming extension results or providing sufficient funding for livelihoods is increasing the allostatic load on those students. This has a long term health impact on those students making them more prone to chronic health conditions. The doctoral college and the university needs to acknowledge it's responsibility for the health of students, the current information is damaging students health. Extension outcomes need to be announced soon to reduce this damage and more reassurance of funding and support for non-final years and non-UKRI funded students is needed.

The university is well aware of the challenges posed by the coronavirus pandemic and the resulting lockdown. It has affected students and staff in many different ways. However, I am confident that colleagues in the Doctoral College, together with others in units across the university, continue to work hard to do whatever they can to help doctoral students within the tight constraints imposed by an uncertain and difficult environment. As well as continuing to work closely with Student Services (amongst others) to ensure that doctoral students have the counselling support in-place when they need it, Doctoral College staff are in regular contact with Anthony Payne (Director of Student Services), who asked me to emphasise the support services and preventative programmes that are available to help students deal with disability, stress and mental health issues (see the various links from <https://www.bath.ac.uk/campaigns/support-for-doctoral-students/>). He also added that he is more than happy to discuss with the students concerned ways of improving the service offer.