

22nd April 2020

Dear Tim and Nicole,

Thank-you for the Open Letter to the Vice-Chancellor and myself dated the 16th April, which had an impressive 269 signatures of postgraduate researchers and a further 25 staff at York. It is very helpful to hear the concerns of this important part of the University community in their own words and to understand the strength of feeling on these matters. I am responding on behalf of both of us.

The Open Letter describes four main areas of concern – access to physical resources, impact on health and well-being, financial uncertainty and career uncertainty – and makes a strong case that the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic upon postgraduate researchers is particularly acute in these areas. I agree entirely.

During the past five weeks there has been rapid change in the external context we work in, and rapid responses have and are continuing to be made by the University. As Dean of the Graduate Research School, my role has been to make sure that the needs of postgraduate researchers are taken into account in these decisions, and we have been considering mitigations to the impact on you in all four areas. I chair the PGR Academic Contingency Group which has two GSA sabbatical officers as members to represent the views of postgraduate researchers. We were meeting daily up until the Easter break and continue to work on these issues. This group is able to make decisions and develop policies which are then ratified by the University Academic Contingency Group.

As a result of this intensive work, we have been able to do many things which address the needs of postgraduate researchers, and many of these address your specific requests for actions, so I will respond to those one by one.

1. Programme Extensions

The Open Letter requests a blanket six month extension for all PhD deadlines (it does not mention Masters by Research or MPhils). This has been actively considered by the PGR Academic Contingency Group on several occasions, but we concluded that such a policy would disadvantage some postgraduate researchers while advantaging others, which is something we wish to avoid.

Some postgraduate researchers will be able to continue researching or writing at a distance, with minimal impact on their academic progress, while others will necessarily need to halt their research entirely because they cannot access the resources or equipment that they need during the lockdown. Furthermore, those at earlier stages of their research may be able to restructure their research projects to mitigate the impact of the current pandemic, thereby demonstrating that they have:

the general ability to conceptualise, design and implement a project for the generation of new knowledge, applications or understanding at the forefront of the discipline, and to adjust the project design in the light of unforeseen problems;
(Policy on Research Degrees, 2.5: 'Descriptor for the awards of the degrees of PhD and EngD')

Thus, whether or not a postgraduate researcher can continue at a distance, or mitigate the impact, will depend on the nature of their individual project, their circumstances more generally, and the availability of their supervisor(s); and so we believe consideration of extensions should proceed on an individual basis. A further factor is that, for all extension requests, the period of extension granted needs to reflect the period of the impact of the exceptional circumstances which necessitated the request. We are not yet in a position where we can determine the duration of impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, and so the duration of any blanket extension would necessarily be arbitrary.

For these reasons, the University has taken the decision to review programme extensions on a case-by-case basis. We have consulted widely across the sector to ensure we are not out of line on this decision.

However, we readily acknowledge that the impact of the pandemic will be causing particular anxiety for those with imminent deadlines, while the current circumstances render obtaining evidence to support extension applications much more challenging, and we have already anticipated and implemented changes to address these concerns. On 7th April, we introduced a streamlined extension request process, and reduced the evidence requirements, where extensions relate to the COVID-19 pandemic. We have also implemented changes in order to be able to speed up decision-making on extension requests. Full details are available on the [PGR COVID-19 FAQ web page](#). With these measures, we believe we can alleviate postgraduate researchers' anxieties while recognising the need to review individual circumstances through a light-touch application process and expedited decision-making.

The Letter thanks us for the changes to the progression Policy which were implemented in March. I am delighted that these changes are helping postgraduate researchers in this difficult time. The rapid take-up of the revised process for requesting extensions suggests that this, too, will have a positive impact.

2. Discussions with funding bodies

We have been and continue to engage with bodies which fund our postgraduate researchers. As you know, UKRI and the Wellcome Trust made announcements on the 9th April about funding extensions and I wrote to all postgraduate researchers about this on the 10th April. We have since then been working hard on modelling this while seeking greater clarification from UKRI about the details of what they are proposing. We hope to be able to make further announcements next week.

We are engaging with other funders as well, both within the UK and internationally, to find out what their plans are for funding extensions and to present the case for generosity and compassion. We are particularly concerned that there are a large range of funders for our postgraduate researchers and there is a risk of very varied responses to the situation, creating unfortunate inequities. For this reason we are lobbying for a consistent approach through recognised bodies such as the Russell Group and Universities UK.

Internally, one of our first responses to the pandemic was to make changes to the Student Support Fund, opening it to postgraduate researchers who are under examination and allowing those in their continuation period ('writing up') to apply for the maximum £3,000. Full details are available on the [PGR COVID-19 FAQ web page](#).

3. Continuation and Library fees

Continuation fees (currently £330) are charged where a postgraduate researcher enters their continuation year, or any additional year thereafter (e.g. due to an extension). This fee is a contribution to the costs of providing access to University resources - including email, online resources, software packages, the Library, and staff time - during a period when you are not otherwise paying fees. If you submit within the first three months of your continuation year, this is refunded.

I have asked the PGR Academic Contingency Group to look into a means of ensuring that no one gets charged a continuation fee which they have become liable for because of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. We will circulate further information on any alterations to continuation fees as it becomes available, via the York Graduate School newsletter, [blog](#), and the [PGR COVID-19 FAQ page](#). In the meantime, it seems important to highlight that it is already the case that, where a postgraduate researcher enters an additional continuation period as a result of an extension, and that extension is for three months or less, a continuation fee is not charged.

With respect to Library fees, the Library has already made provisions in this area and you can read about them here: <https://subjectguides.york.ac.uk/coronavirus/students>. In particular, the Library is no longer charging fines for overdue books, has waived all fines accrued after 9th March, and has set all loans to automatically renew. No decision has yet been taken about Library fines in the longer term and your concerns will be passed to the University Librarian. Interlending requests have been free for several years and there are no plans to change this. The Library will do its best to source all such requests electronically. They are also trialling a scheme to have books purchased and sent directly to your home address.

4. Online submissions and vivas

I am delighted to say that we made the decision last year to have e-submission of all theses for examination and this has been in place since September 2019. There is still a requirement to submit a hard-copy of the thesis for the Library, but during the pandemic that will be handled entirely by us and at no cost to yourselves. We hope to be able to move to e-only dissemination and archiving of theses within the next few months.

With respect to online vivas, it has been the case for several years that vivas may be conducted by video-conferencing, with approval from the Standing Committee on Assessment (SCA). In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, SCA gave blanket approval for vivas to take place online, so that permission does not need to be sought during the pandemic, providing clarity and avoiding delays around the arrangement of vivas. However, SCA and the Graduate Research School are conscious that an online viva does not suit everyone, and so there remains the option to postpone the viva until it can be held in person, without the need to apply for an extension from SCA; again, this is a blanket approval in response to these very exceptional times.

We are monitoring closely the impact and efficacy of conducting vivas online, and are planning to modify associated policies to make it easier to request an online viva in future. At this time, I can confirm that the blanket approval for online vivas remains in place until the campus is fully re-opened.

5. Remote working and supervision

It was already the case that postgraduate researchers had a great deal of flexibility over remote working and supervision, with very few absolute requirements for in person meetings (the most significant of which had been the viva, which we have now relaxed). We also have Distance Learning PhDs in several disciplines and will be developing more as quickly as we can.

However, the Open Letter is right to point out that there may have been a reluctance to make appropriate use of these options in the past and that this will have had particular impact upon disabled, mentally unwell and neurodiverse postgraduate researchers. Now that all staff are learning to work remotely and discovering effective use of technologies, we expect that reluctance to diminish and there to be a much greater use of remote working and accessible technologies after the pandemic has ended.

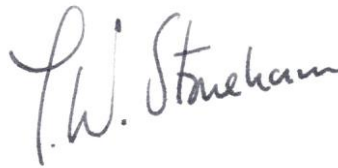
The Open Letter asks for a continuing commitment to implementing these measures and I am very happy to make that commitment now. As well as increasing flexibility in our policies, we will also seek to develop more guidance for remote working and training for staff. While the focus of your request was

supervision, often a one-to-one or two-to-one activity which is handled relatively easily online, we are also moving many training and networking events online (see this [blog post by RETT](#) for details) and will use this experience to provide guidance for staff on delivering both entirely online and also dual-mode research events in future. The University does not currently have a policy on accessible conferences or workshops and this is certainly something we will look into after the pandemic has ended, covering physical spaces, support for carers and enabling remote participation.

I hope this response assures you that we take your concerns seriously and are working hard to mitigate the effects of the pandemic upon postgraduate researchers at York. As noted above, we are currently working on funded extensions and continuation fees but there is still more to be done. More training and support materials and events are being put online, more guidance is being developed for staff, and we are monitoring the online viva process. Attention is also being given to the possibility that there may be restrictions on international travel and some form of social-distancing still in place at the start of the next academic year, so we are looking at how to ensure a smooth start for new postgraduate researchers. We are also organising an open 'Question Time' style Q&A session to answer any further questions postgraduate researchers may have.

There is a dedicated and hard-working team of professionals supporting all this work, while often facing the challenges to their health and well-being that affect so many people during this pandemic. Without them none of the things described in this letter would be possible.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading 'T.W. Stoneham'. The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'T' and 'W'.

Professor T.W.C. Stoneham