

Lizzie Rodulson  
President  
The University of Surrey Students' Union

23 February 2021

Dear Lizzie,

Thank you for bringing a number of concerns about support for postgraduate students to our attention. As you know, Kate Gleeson met with Lester Buxton and Diana Dakik on the 12<sup>th</sup> January and had an initial conversation. In that meeting she was able to share a response to most of the issues relating to PGRs, but all agreed that it would be helpful to prepare a written response to the matters raised, including those regarding postgraduate taught students.

When Kate met with you on 15<sup>th</sup> January, I believe you agreed that this was the best way forward. However, it has not been possible to provide responses for the specific postgraduate taught student issues at this stage, and I hope you will not mind my reporting back here on matters relating to PGRs only.

I will use the structure of your original email to guide the response.

**For all postgraduate students:**

- Provide assurance of multiple rounds of Emergency Students Support Fund for the rest of the academic year.

The University remains committed to providing good support for our PGRs throughout the pandemic disruption. As you know, the University's Executive Board has committed to supporting a three-year Disruption Fund which is specifically for Postgraduate Researchers, and which provides additional stipend for PGRs who need to extend their study as a result of disruption by the pandemic. A significant amount of money - £479,000 has already been committed to this fund. The first wave of the Disruption Fund focused on those PGRs who were coming to the end of their funding, to provide immediate support to ensure that PGRs could complete. I am proud to be able to report that to the best of my knowledge, no PGR has permanently withdrawn from their studies as a result of the financial impact of the pandemic.

For the next wave of the Disruption fund, we will be receiving applications from students whose funding ends after March 2021. The application process opened on Monday 22<sup>nd</sup> February, and the first deadline for applications will be on 8<sup>th</sup> March.

In addition to the financial support provided by the COVID-19 PGR Disruption Fund, PGRs can also apply through this route for Sick Pay and self-funded students can also apply for no-cost extensions.

The University also offers a Student Hardship Fund which has been recently replenished with additional funds. Since March 2020, 17 PGRs have applied for support from this fund, 11 have been successful, and received in total £43,135.

I note that the Fund has received only one PGR application since September, and I am working with Kate Gleeson and Lucy Evans to ensure that PGRs continue to be aware of the Fund, and that there is no impediment to PGRs taking it up.

- Provide clear information regarding wellbeing support in departments

The University continues to provide excellent support for wellbeing for staff and students. Alex Pavey in the Doctoral College has worked very closely with the Wellbeing team on developing their strategy and has collaborated to provide nationally accredited Mental Health First Aider training to those who work with PGRs. At an early stage in the pandemic we distributed free licences for a popular Mindfulness app called Headspace. We also supported one colleague to gain accreditation as a mindfulness trainer – resulting in our ability to offer mindfulness groups to PGRs at no cost. We have also increased the availability of one-to-one pastoral support and have increased the number of Researcher Cafes in an attempt to break down the isolation that many students are currently experiencing. We try to draw attention to wellbeing issues, and mental health concerns in particular, by sharing Information about available support in a variety of ways. These include the Wellbeing and Doctoral College web pages, the University of Surrey Bulletins and the Doctoral College newsletters. Information is also provided to PGR representatives through the PGR Engagement Forums, and to supervisors through the Faculty Research Degrees Committees.

Alex Pavey in the Doctoral College team is currently conducting a gap analysis – using recently reported surveys about PGR mental health – to ensure the provision at Surrey stacks up against national best practice. The Doctoral College team have worked closely with the Wellbeing service to ensure that we are joined up in our approach, and we have been recently assured by the senior members of the Wellbeing team that there is currently a good level of support for PGRs.

- Clear, consistent and targeted communications from the University for PGT and PGRs, including separate targeted communications for GTAs/PGWTs.

The Doctoral College has worked to increase the frequency of communication with PGRs throughout the pandemic, for example, by increasing the frequency of newsletters and by holding PGR open forums with the Students' Union. While we acknowledge that some central communications in the early days of the pandemic were not targeted to PGRs in a very clear way, we have liaised very closely with the University Communications team last summer and autumn to address this issue. The Doctoral College Communications and Experience Manager now attends the University Communications weekly team meetings to ensure the clarity and targeting of messages to PGRs.

- All online content to be provided in an accessible format.

Training provided by the Doctoral College is provided in accessible formats and feedback is collected to ensure attention to the quality of the training provided. The Doctoral College team has worked closely with colleagues across the University to ensure the quality of the online provision, and the feedback so far received has been very positive.

- Increase the provisions of technology support, including access to laptops and Wi-Fi.

There were delays in obtaining IT equipment for new PGRs at the start of the pandemic due to lack of availability in the marketplace as people across the world began to work from home. IT services have designed a new system for anticipating requirements and ordering ahead to anticipate new arrivals. This forward planning has resulted in shorter waits even for those with more complex IT requirements and unusual specifications. Reports from Faculties suggest the new system is proving to be very effective.

- Postgraduates to be prioritised for access to laboratories and on-campus facilities in line with government guidelines with health and safety measures provided in line with the Unions.

Although we very much value the work of our Postgraduate Researchers, we are not able to prioritise them above all other researchers in terms of access to facilities. Each Faculty has a clear plan, which shares the resources fairly and according to need. Supervisors are mindful of the acute pressures felt by PGRs given the fixed-term timescale under which they work. However, this is not dissimilar to the situation that many researchers find themselves in, and while Departments are mindful of the needs of PGRs and make careful plans to ensure they can complete their work, there is a difficult balancing

act to ensure all researchers get the access that they need. Associate Deans for the Doctoral College within each Faculty are crucially involved in the allocation and prioritisation of resources. Where there are issues about access, they will provide guidance and ensure everything possible is done to ensure PGRs can continue with their research.

The Health and Safety aspect of this question is addressed under the next bullet point.

- No postgraduate researchers should be forced to attend on-campus activity if they feel unsafe.

All laboratories are compliant with Government Health and Safety Guidance. As each new stage of the Pandemic unfolds, the risk analyses and Health and Safety protocols are reviewed and changes made where necessary. We are very clear that with all the necessary Health and Safety measures in place, the campus is a safe place to work. However, we are also equally clear that our PGRs have different needs and concerns.

No one is required to attend on-campus activity if they feel unsafe, consistent with current government guidance. All PGRs are given advice and support by their supervisors about what is best for them in terms of completing their research in the current circumstances, and to ensure they feel comfortable in whichever environment they continue with their research. This arrangement will be reviewed from time to time as and when government guidelines change.

- Provide financial support for those students who need to extend their VISAs due to COVID

The PGR Disruption fund only provides funding in the form of additional weeks of stipend. There is no provision for students to apply for other costs, including the cost of VISAs or COVID testing. Where a student experiences financial hardship, potentially caused by visa extension costs, the appropriate route is to contact the Money Team who can advise on application to the Student Hardship fund.

#### **For postgraduate researchers:**

- All Research students to be offered automatic extensions to submission deadlines (that they are free to take up) of three months minimum.

Any PGR disrupted by the pandemic can apply for an extension to registration. The process for doing this has been simplified during the pandemic to make it as straight forward as possible. Extensions are not automatic, but the burden of proof is not onerous and where PGRs meet the criteria they receive an extension.

- GTA workloads to be closely monitored to ensure that they are not overburdened with teaching responsibilities.

The Code of Practice for PGRs Who Support Teaching is very clear in stating that no PGR can do more than 80 hours of teaching support in any semester. PGR support for teaching is managed within Faculties, but the Doctoral College consults routinely with Faculties through the Associate Deans to ensure that each Faculty complies with the Code of Practice.

- Pay for GTA/PGWT teaching that was contracted but cancelled because of the lockdown to be honoured.

The University does not employ Graduate Teaching Assistants. However, we do encourage PGRs to gain valuable experience, and a modest financial reward, by supporting teaching through demonstrating, seminar and tutorial support. As is common across other Higher Education Institutions, support for teaching is not contracted work and, therefore, if the work does not take place, there is no payment. Continuation with many kinds of teaching support has been possible during the pandemic because of the hybrid approach to teaching that we are now using at Surrey. However, it is inevitable that some of the support that PGRs may have expected to provide has not taken place. Consultation with the Associate Deans has not revealed any concerns being raised locally

within the Faculties, but we are aware that it is not always easy for students to raise concerns of this kind. Please be assured that where students are in financial hardship because employment opportunities that they were relying on have been disrupted by the pandemic, they will be able to apply to the Student Hardship Fund for support.

- Support for any PGR/PGT students who wish to temporarily withdraw

Support is provided for all PGRs who need to temporarily withdraw. This support is provided by supervisors, members of the Research Degrees Office who can give advice about all the potential implications and the processes involved. In addition, PGRs can call upon the Postgraduate Research Director in their Department, and the Associate Dean for the Doctoral College if any difficulties arise.

I trust that the above addresses your concerns around postgraduate research students, but if not, please do come back to me. In the meantime, thank you for your leadership during such a tumultuous time – it is reassuring to know that we have a such a good colleague to work with on seeking to ensure the wellbeing of all students at the University of Surrey.

Yours sincerely



Professor David Sampson  
Pro-Vice-Chancellor, Research and Innovation

cc Professor Osama Khan, Pro-Vice-Chancellor, Education  
Lucy Evans, Chief Student Officer  
Patrick Degg, Vice-President (External Engagement)  
Dr Kate Gleeson, Director of the Doctoral College  
Hannah Jones, Students' Union

