

To: All MPLS DPhil Students

Hello.

I'm writing to give you a few updates on the latest news with regards to the pandemic response from MPLS, the University and nationally.

Wellbeing and mental health

We are very much aware of the impact that the pandemic situation is having on students' wellbeing and mental health. MPLS takes student mental health very seriously and we are working on additional ways we can support students.

The University has set up a Mental Health Task Force (MHTF), which reports directly to the Registrar and the Chair of Conference of Colleges. MPLS is strongly engaged in this initiative, with a member of MPLS Graduate School Committee being the MPLS representative on the MHTF.

Many of the problems facing students in terms of wellbeing and mental health are not solvable within MPLS. There are difficulties across the University in meeting the demand for services and this is duplicated at a regional level, with NHS services also under considerable strain. Within MPLS, with the Directors of Graduate Studies and graduate student representatives, we are looking at ways to share ideas and best practice across departments to help identify what works to support students' wellbeing.

If you are having difficulties, please make sure your supervisor is aware and also engage with the welfare team at your college. If you are uncomfortable discussing your wellbeing or mental health with your supervisor for any reason, remember that you can contact your DGS or your college advisor. You can also access support online 24 hours a day through Togetherall: <https://togetherall.com/en-gb/>.

More information on support for student wellbeing can be found in the coronavirus FAQ here: <https://www.ox.ac.uk/coronavirus/students/welfare>.

Additional funding for extensions from UKRI and Research England

UKRI students will have received an open letter this morning from Professor Dame Ottoline Leyser, Chief Executive of UKRI, explaining many of the challenges faced by UKRI and the sector as a whole in supporting postgraduate research students. The letter includes significant detail of the challenges faced, but the kernel of the letter is that UKRI have announced a further £7m across the sector to support funding extensions for UKRI-funded students. This is undoubtedly a welcome development, although you should note that this is a sector-wide figure and, as Dame Ottoline's letter makes clear, the level of funding that would be required to support all students is far in excess of that figure.

Alongside the additional £7m from UKRI, Research England will be contributing an additional £11m nationally to support all postgraduate research students affected by the pandemic. This includes institutionally-funded and self-funded students.

At present the University of Oxford has not received any additional information from UKRI or Research England on how much of this money will be allocated to the University or what principles we will need to follow in allocating funding. However, it is undoubtedly the case that additional funding will help us to support a larger proportion of our postgraduate students.

Dame Ottoline's open letter can be found here: <https://www.ukri.org/news/support-for-doctoral-research-students-must-go-to-those-who-need-it-most/>.

Additional flexibility from UKRI

As well as the additional support announced above, UKRI have written to grant holders to outline ways in which existing grant funding can be used more flexibly to support students. MPLS and the University as a whole are assessing the additional flexibility provided and how we can best use this flexibility to support students.

Clarification regarding the CSEF fund

As many of you will have seen, an announcement was made regarding the next round of the COVID-19 Scholarship Extension Fund last week.

To clarify the announcement, the COVID-19 Scholarship Extension Fund will now be a **single point of application for all students in receipt of either UKRI or Oxford-managed funding**. The first round of application will cover students with funding end dates in the range 1st April 2021 to 31st December 2021. A further round of application will take place later this year to cover students with later funding end dates.

****IMPORTANT**** If you are a UKRI-funded student with a funding end date of 1st April 2021 or later and you made a provisional application last summer (form UKRI LY) you will need to reapply to the CSEF scheme when it opens (subject to funding end date eligibility in each round). We apologise for the inconvenience of asking you to apply again, but as the UKRI provision announced in November was significantly different from the provision expected when we asked for applications last summer it will be necessary for applications to be reassessed under the new scheme.

As noted on the CSEF page, you should expect further information to be announced by 25th February (next Thursday).

Limitations on financial support

It is a priority for MPLS to support as many students as we can in as many ways as we can so that they can submit high-quality doctoral theses within a reasonable timescale, but we do need to work within the constraints of funding available. As well as the block grant we have already received from UKRI and the additional money announced this morning, the University and colleges are setting aside significant funding for funding extensions. However, it will not be possible to provide funding extensions for all students. We will work to ensure that the scheme is as fair as possible to all students, but it will also be necessary to consider the parameters set by UKRI, which are to prioritise students who have funding end dates up to 30th September 2021, as well as disabled students, students with long-term illness, those who are neurodivergent, or who have caring responsibilities. Students in these groups are identified by UKRI as potentially finding it more difficult to adapt projects or mitigate the impact of the pandemic.

In order to provide support for as many students as possible, we expect that funding extensions will typically be shorter than the period of disruption experienced. The majority of requests approved are likely to be for up to three months, although longer extensions may be granted in exceptional cases.

Other academic support

You are encouraged to speak with your supervisor about the non-financial support which is also available to you, including adjustments that can be made to your research project or thesis, which will enable you complete your programme.

If you have particular concerns that cannot be addressed by your supervisor, either about your eligibility for a funding extension or about the period of funding extension for which it would be appropriate to apply in your particular circumstances, then please contact your DGS.

Updates to the University's coronavirus FAQs

The FAQs relating to PGR students and Coronavirus at <https://www.ox.ac.uk/coronavirus/students/faq/current-students> have recently been updated. Please do look at these, especially if you haven't done so recently, as they include useful information on changes which have been made to help PGR students during the pandemic.

As a reminder, these changes include:

- Extensions, deferrals of Transfer or Confirmation of Status, and suspensions granted due to Coronavirus are being counted as additional, outside of standard limits.
- The division has produced guidance on how your examiners (or assessors for Transfer or Confirmation of Status) may be able to take into account the impact of the pandemic on the volume and/or type of research produced (while still meeting the criteria to obtain your degree). You can find a summary of guidance here: <https://www.mpls.ox.ac.uk/graduate-school/information-for-postgraduate-research-students/progression>.

The latest updates to the FAQs include:

- More guidance on completion of your logs for recording disruption due to Coronavirus (the logs should help you complete any applications for extensions, deferrals of Transfer or Confirmation of Status or suspension which you may need to make in the future). The MPLS Student Log template can be downloaded here: <https://www.mpls.ox.ac.uk/files/graduate-school/mplspgrstudentlogtemplate.docx>.
- As previously communicated, you will not need to submit a hardbound copy of your DPhil thesis to the Exam Schools in order to graduate, following being granted leave to supplicate, during the 2020/21 academic year. However, if access to your thesis needs to be restricted, a hard copy of your thesis will still need to be submitted to the Exam Schools. It is anticipated that it will be possible to submit these from October 2021, but further information will follow nearer the time.

The FAQs now make clear that hard copies should not be printed and submitted to the Exam Schools or arranged for print and delivery via print services in the meantime, before it is confirmed when it will be possible to receive them.

Residency in Trinity Term

The University has announced that residency requirements are waived for all students during Trinity Term 2021. We are aware that many of you will wish to be in Oxford for a variety of reasons, but if you need to reside elsewhere for any reason there will be no need to apply for a dispensation from residency during Trinity Term 2021.

To conclude, I wish you the best for the rest of the current term. Please continue to look after yourselves and protect our community.

Best wishes,
Mike

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