

**Postgraduate Research Executive Forum**

**7th of April 2020, 12pm**

**Microsoft Teams**

**Minutes**

**List of actions:**

**Kathyrn (Social Anthropology) to send testimonials on the extent of COVID-19’s disruption to fieldwork activities to the Director of Postgraduate Research.**

1. Welcome & Introductions
2. Apologies:
   1. Apologies were received from Carine Lemyre.
3. Postgraduate Academic Convenor update

The Postgraduate Academic Convenor updated that she has recently entered the role and has been in touch with Monique regarding PGR funding issues. The Convenor has attended meetings of the Postgraduate Society and hopes to make her own role and those of the PGR Executive Representatives more visible to students.

1. Matters arising
   1. Issues highlighted by Management (SH)

Steph Haywood from Management presented her paper, in which the following issues were raised:

**Accommodation**: Steph reported that PGR students’ contracts in Halls of Residence end in August. Although some students may wish to terminate their contracts now, this may be problematic if they wish to return before August. Steph asked whether it may be possible for the University to introduce a 3-month renter holiday.

Monique has contacted Residential and Business Services on this issue and will report back to students.

Steph reported that if PGR students are funded by a body in their home country, they are no longer eligible to receive their stipend if they have had to return to their home country.

**Communications**: Steph asked whether PGR students may be able to receive more regular updates from the University which specifically address PGR issues. Steph reported that it would be helpful to hear that an issue is under consideration, even if a decision on the matter hasn’t been reached.

Frank explained that many of the communications which were initially disseminated, such as information on travel restrictions and government communications, were relevant to all students and staff.

Monique reported that the University is constantly drafting new guidance. The submission of draft theses has been moved online, guidance has been released on vivas and supervisions and the continued payment of stipends has been confirmed by the University. These were steps which the University needed to take quite immediately. If there are areas in which there is still a lack of clarity PGR students should contact the Provost. Monique reported that PGR tutors will be paid even if classes are cancelled.

**Childcare**: Steph asked what kind of support may be available for PGRs who are parents or carers, as many are not in a position to take unpaid parental leave.

Emmy reported that FAQs on this issue can be accessed on the main University website under the heading “How can the University support me to combine home working with caring responsibilities”.

Monique encouraged students to access the Student Hardship Fund if they have financial difficulties for whatever reason.

Frank assured students that University staff are very aware that some students have caring commitments and of the difficulties of the situation generally. Awareness of these difficulties will be central to staff’s assessment of PGR students’ progress.

**Annual review processes**: Steph asked if annual review processes could be deferred or offered as an option this year, as some students feel the extensions which they have been offered are not sufficient.

Sibylle explained that reviewers will take the current situation into account, but that it was important for students and supervisors to touch base in order to assess students’ progress and be able to support them. Additionally, UKRI has not suggested that progress reviews should be dropped.

The PG Academic Convenor reported that annual reviews in Geography and Sustainable Development are taking place in the coming weeks. Some students are happy that these are taking place, but others are concerned about the added pressure.

Frank advised that the review processes are an opportunity to receive feedback and advice for any specific needs. Most research undertaken over the past year will not have been affected by COVID-19, so all reviews will have content for discussion.

**Fieldwork extensions**: Steph asked for clarification on the extent to which fieldwork will be considered in assessment and whether students will need to include an outline of how their fieldwork has been disrupted in their theses?

Sibylle reported that the University is trying to support students with fieldwork issues on an individual basis. Students’ circumstances vary greatly and so mitigation and adjustment will differ. Some students will need to include an outline such as this in their thesis. Students affected have been invited to contact the Director of Postgraduate Research in their School.

Monique reported that she is presently working with around 200 funding bodies and higher education institutes. Options under discussion to mitigate fieldwork disruption include the redesign of the fieldwork component, the inclusion of a reflective piece or the addition of a covering letter which officially recognises disruption to fieldwork activities.

**Sick leave**: Steph requested clarification on the issue of a 13-week paid period sick leave.

Monique explained that a policy on this already exists and that she is working to try to extend this to all students and to bring other funders in line with this policy.

Steph requested that the opportunity to take sick leave based on mental health issues be made more explicit in the FAQs.

Monique clarified that sick leave based on mental health issues is already covered by the policy.

**Discounted time**: Steph requested clarification on the meaning of discounted time.

Sibylle explained that discounted time means “the clock is stopped” while students stay engaged with University. This works on the assumption that most students will want and be able to stay engaged and is a means of adapting for the current situation without requiring students to take a leave of absence.

Monique explained that the University is lobbying Westminster and Hollywood and working with Development and philanthropists to help PGR students with extensions to their funding. The University is also liaising with Schools on the issues PGR students are facing.

Kathryn reported that Social Anthropology PhD projects rely heavily on fieldwork and the effects of COVID-19 are therefore greatly impacting students.

Monique reported that it would be helpful to have testimonials on the extent of the disruption and requested that these be sent to the Director of Postgraduate Research.

**Action: Kathyrn (Social Anthropology) to send testimonials on the extent of COVID-19’s disruption to fieldwork activities to the Director of Postgraduate Research.**

* 1. Impact of Covid19 (AW)

Flaminia (International Relations) reported that it has been difficult to secure the external supervisor she wanted as this individual was reluctant to commit to a virtual viva. Flaminia asked whether it would be possible to extend the timeframe between thesis submission and vivas.

Sibylle explained that the University are being flexible and an extension on this timeframe is always a possibility.

The PG Academic Convenor thanked all academic staff for their hard work.

* 1. PGR community and the visibility of PGR Executive Reps (AW)

The PG Academic Convenor explained that the PGR academic representation system is not as defined and fluid as the system at Undergraduate level and that she hopes to make the structure more visible to students.

Zach (Chemistry) suggested that it would be helpful to make representatives more aware of the opportunities of the role. Zach also suggested that the role be expanded to encourage PGR Executive Representatives to organise careers and social events for PGR students in their Schools.

Carolina (Biology) reported that Executive Representatives in her School are assisted in organising events.

The PG Academic Convenor suggested the introduction of a weekly email from herself to all Executive Representatives to better publicise her role.

The DoEd reported that she is working with CAPOD to develop a training session for the incoming cohort of Postgraduate Executive Representatives, which will train reps in the responsibilities and opportunities of the role and provide information on organising career and community-building events specifically for PGR students.

1. Updates or comments from PGR Executive Representatives

No further comments were received.

1. Updates or comments from University staff

The Provost encouraged PGR students to contact University staff with issues as they arise so that both parties can work together to address these. The Provost advised that PGR representatives don’t need to wait until Executive Forums to raise any issues or concerns.

1. AOCB

No further comments were received.