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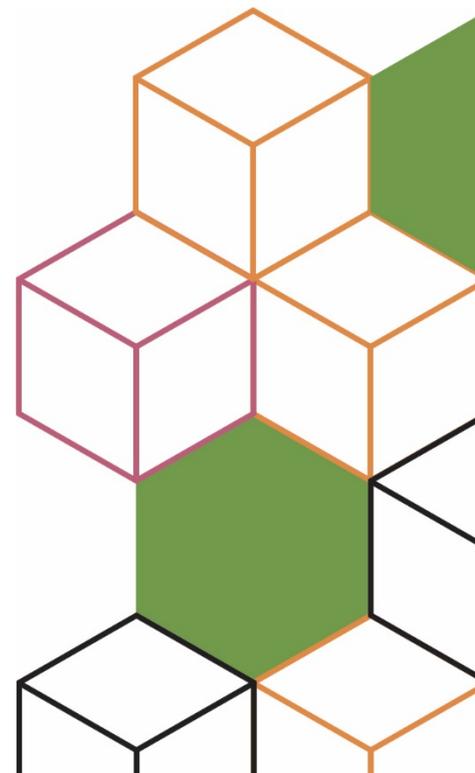graduate student
association

July

2020

Graduate Student
Association

Covid-19 Support for Graduate Researchers

Background

GSA has been made of aware of many graduate researchers who have had their research disrupted in the first half of 2020, with impacts for the latter half of the year still unclear. The Covid-19 pandemic has resulted in campus closure and travel restrictions, with many graduate researchers unable to perform data collection or having to substantially modify their project/research. Ethics application approval times have been delayed, impacting on some students' research programs. Graduate parents have had to take time away from study for home-schooling and additional caring responsibilities. Many students have lost income and employability due to the economic impacts of Covid-19, often with cascading consequences in their lives. Additionally, we have heard from numerous graduate researchers who have had difficulties adjusting to working from home, or who have experienced mental health issues during this challenging time.

Consultation

GSA has sought input from graduate researchers using the following channels:
- An initial meeting of graduate researchers convened to discuss their concerns.
- Two online "Town Hall" events for graduate researchers (30/06/20 and 2/07/20).
- Responses to the "Tell us how COVID-19 is affecting you" form on our website.
- Calls to our 1800 number to discuss graduate concerns.
- Input from graduate student representatives and their networks, namely the three Graduate Leaders Forums

Issue #1: Candidature extension policy

Establishment of generous and fair extension policy publicised as a matter of priority. We put forward the following recommendations as essential:
1. The policy should be announced by the end of July at the latest.
2. Candidature extensions should be accompanied by stipend extensions, for all who are current or recently expired stipend recipients.
3. There should be no University-imposed cap on candidature or stipend extensions, with extensions granted for six months or more where needed. The commitment to six-month extensions as standard should be clearly articulated in the policy and adhered to by all faculties. Stipend extensions should be available up to the limits set by the Department of Education, Skills and Employment.
4. The application should be simple to complete and should be submitted by the student rather than the supervisor (as there are some serious concerns expressed by graduates who do not have a functional relationship with their supervisor).

Concerns have been raised about Covid-19 leave already taken being deducted from any extensions that are granted. This is an overly bureaucratic approach which has the potential to be confusing to students. While graduate researchers should not be able to take leave twice for the same period, they should not be granted an extension with leave deducted.

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Confidentiality/Privacy is another issue which emerged in consultations. Some students are required to include sensitive medical information (e.g. pertaining to mental health) in their application pertaining to themselves or their family members. Students have expressed their rights to limit the number of people seeing this information and have particularly expressed concerns about divulging this sensitive information to their supervisor. There are several options for the University to manage this, for example, hiding attachments to the application (e.g. doctors' notes) from the supervisor. Another possibility is providing the student with a record of University employees who have viewed the application, so they are aware of who has seen their personal information. Students have experienced indirect discrimination in some cases due to the mishandling of confidential information and do not have any legal remedy to address their concerns.

Finally, the Covid-19 extension policy needs to be distinguished from the existing extension and leave provisions. Students who need extensions and leave for unrelated reasons should access this through existing entitlements. Covid-19 extensions should be over and above existing extension provisions, and not impact students' ability to access extensions for other reasons, particularly at the end of their candidature.

Issue #2: Milestone extensions

Some graduate researchers have had impending milestones, which have not been postponed unless the student is on leave. This presents a problem for those who will be applying for Covid-19 extensions but have been unable to do so - due to the lack of procedure.

Currently, academic chairs are able to recommend confirmation extensions for up to three months for PhD students and six weeks for Masters students. There are some students for whom these extensions are insufficient, creating unnecessary stress.

We recommend that milestones be treated flexibly for 2020, with postponements easy to attain where needed.

Issue #3: Financial assistance

Graduate researchers with stipends remain ineligible for Emergency Support Fund access in the current policy and process. We have heard from graduate researchers whose progress is impacted by not having a computer or other resources required to work from home. Given that Research Training Program stipends are valued at below minimum wage, graduate researchers do not have financial access in many cases to purchase computers, particularly when these resources were previously provided by the University onsite before COVID 19.

We recommend that Emergency Support Fund (IT category) eligibility be opened to all graduate researchers, as a matter of priority to avoid further extension applications.

Issue #4: Procedures

It is imperative for extension and leave processes to be well designed and not onerous on the student. We recommend that there should be an independent and

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easily accessible appeals process for rejected (or partially rejected) applications. It is preferable for the appeals to be centrally managed to ensure fair standards across faculties.

Issue #5: Supervisor survey undertaken

We note concerns have been raised about the supervisor survey from earlier in the semester – many students were unaware their supervisor was being surveyed and therefore did not notify their supervisor of the impacts of the information requested. Others may have understated the impact due to not wanting to be seen as weak by their supervisor. Additionally, this survey was taken several months ago in a rapidly changing environment. We regard the survey as a useful tool for the University to estimate impact on graduate researchers, but caution against applying the results for other uses such as determining extension eligibility.

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