

9th October 2020

Dear Candidates and Supervisors,

Re: Open Letter

Response to the open letter from Macquarie students and staff and the request for additional support in light of COVID-19 pandemic

I am writing on behalf of the University in response to the open letter submitted on 28th August 2020, raising concerns regarding the provision of support for HDR candidates at Macquarie University in light of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

I'd like to begin by acknowledging the significant disruption that COVID-19 and the resulting period of campus closure has had on our research community. This impact has been very sharply felt by our HDR candidates who are engaged in research that is time limited and often adheres to very highly defined programmes of work. The circumstances have had a significant impact on data collection, disrupted international collaborations, prevented the dissemination of research, halted day to day engagement with supervisors and research groups and has required, in many cases, significant modifications to research plans and adaptation to remote supervision and remote working. In addition, as we all know, the impact of the pandemic has gone beyond people's professional lives, and many of us have shared the challenges of home schooling, caring for family members and managing the anxiety of isolation from family and friends at home and overseas.

I would like to note the resilience of our HDR community and their adaptability. Many of our candidates have worked hard, with the support of their supervisors, to modify their research programs and have continued to progress their programs of work. However, this has not been possible for all candidates where there has been significant disruption that has been impossible to mitigate. In many cases this is ongoing with continued restrictions on field work, interstate and international travel, and experimental research with external organisations and vulnerable populations.

The approach that the University has taken has been to address the immediate challenges arising from the campus closure and travel restrictions through the use of a range of existing mechanisms, such as paid sick leave, paid carers leave, extension to EWS dates and Leave of Absences. We have tried to be as flexible as we can in our approach to approving variation requests as a way of ensuring that the right support is provided, given individual student circumstances and needs, and in recognition that many candidates have not been able to work on their research during this period.

We have also recognised the unique challenges for students who are close to completion and have experienced disruption at one of the most critical times during their candidature. All MRes Year 2 candidates have been offered automatic 1-month extensions and we have offered up to 4-month tuition fee scholarship extensions to our international PhD candidates.

Over the past 5 months, the Office of Higher Degree Research Training and Partnerships has processed more than 500 candidature or scholarship variation requests. We have communicated the available options to the HDR cohort regularly and kept an updated set of FAQs designed specifically for our HDR students, recently providing additional clarification regarding the entitlements to the range of paid and unpaid leave options available to candidates. It is also important to note that the University's COVID-19 financial assistance program has been made available to HDR students who find themselves in financial distress.

Whilst we spent the early months of the campus closure dealing with the immediate needs of the HDR cohort, in parallel we were also working on the development of a dedicated and specific COVID-19 scholarship extension scheme for PhD students. The scheme provides up to three months stipend scholarship extension to all PhD students who are within 6 months of the end of their PhD and have experienced significant disruption arising from the pandemic. I am pleased that we were able to launch this scheme at the beginning of July, particularly given the financial challenges at Macquarie and across the sector. Macquarie is one of very few Universities that is offering scholarship extensions of this kind and it demonstrates a deep commitment to our students. To date, we have granted upwards of 40 scholarship extensions.

In recognition that disruptions occurring now may impact completion timelines for candidates due to submit in 2021 and the first half of 2022, we will keep the scheme open to any candidates who are unable to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 over the coming 18 months and hence will have the option of applying for an extension to candidature and scholarship as the impact becomes clearer closer to submission. We are currently exploring options for extending the scheme so that all candidates who commenced their PhD prior to July 2020, will have the opportunity of accessing a COVID extension. In my view, the scheme is proportionate to the scale of disruption that many of our students have experienced, it is responsive to individual circumstances and it is responsible, given the broad financial challenges that the University community as a whole will face over the coming 18 months.

We recently completed a phone survey of HDR candidates in conjunction with colleagues in Student Connect. We managed to contact almost 50% of our HDR cohort, over 700 students, and are using the survey as an opportunity to better understand the experiences and needs of our students. I recently presented the analysis to HDR representatives from across the faculties and we will be sharing the findings more broadly with the HDR community as part of a forthcoming webinar event. The survey has been extraordinarily useful in highlighting the range of impacts that COVID-19 has had on our HDR students and confirms that almost a third of our HDR cohort have experienced significant disruption to their studies as a result of the pandemic and the closedown. It also shows that the effect has been variable, with 36% of candidates indicating that their research plans have not been significantly affected. This suggests that a tailored approach to managing individual circumstances may be the most effective in ensuring support is targeted to those most in need. Our intention will be to work with the faculties in using feedback from the survey to identify the immediate and longer-term needs of our HDR cohorts that will allow us to frame and develop new initiatives to ensure appropriate ongoing and tailored support.

My office is committed to understanding the needs and experiences of our candidates and we recognise that the impact of COVID-19 is likely to have long lasting consequences for many of our graduate students. HDR candidates are highly valued members of the Macquarie community and I am grateful to those candidates and members of staff who have raised concerns and specific requests for support in the open letter that was submitted to my office. I'd now like to deal with each one of those requests in turn:

1. The request to offer an automatic six-month extension of candidature and stipends to all students

Macquarie University has made the decision to offer a 3-month scholarship extension as we judge this to be both proportionate to the scale of the disruption and sustainable given the resources currently available. We have also committed to supporting this scheme until the end of 2021 in recognition of the ongoing impact and consequences of COVID-19 on candidate progress. We are currently considering extending the application window for this scheme, subject to available funding, until the end of 2022 to ensure all candidates who commenced prior to July 2020 will qualify for an extension if they are able to demonstrate extreme disruption to their progress.

We acknowledge that other Australian Universities have introduced a range of schemes to support HDR candidates who have been affected as a result of COVID-19. These schemes vary across institutions as a function of what existing provisions were in place prior to COVID-19, the standard duration of PhD candidature, the scale of disruption in different regions of Australia and the availability of resources. We believe that our COVID-19 extension scholarship scheme, in conjunction with other leave provisions available to candidates ensures that we are able to respond flexibly and generously in meeting the needs of our HDR students.

We are not offering a universal 3-month extension for two reasons. First, we are committed to ensuring that the funding is directed to those candidates with the greatest need. Many HDR students report that they have managed to modify their research programs successfully in response to the disruption arising from COVID-19, whilst many others have been significantly disrupted. Each candidate's experience is different and it is important that we make the right decisions in directing resources to candidates who require this support. Second, our resources are limited and we have to ensure that there are sufficient funds available to support current HDR candidates and recruit and train new graduate researchers in future years.

2. The request to offer paid COVID-19 leave for HDRs of up to 60 days, upon application, to limit the premature exhaustion of paid leave and unpaid leave

Macquarie university has in place a range of leave options for its candidates, both paid (for stipend holders) and unpaid, that are both flexible and generous. All candidates are able to access up to 60 days sick leave through the duration of their candidature, which was extended in scope to incorporate provision for carers leave during the shutdown of schools and child care facilities earlier this year, and this is on a paid basis for eligible stipend holders. In addition, candidates are able to access an additional 60 days leave as part of the HDR Variations to Candidature Policy for medically substantiated periods of illness, on a paid basis for stipend holders in accordance with the conditions of award. We have recently updated the HDR variations to [candidature](#) website to ensure that these provisions are clear for candidates. In principle, our paid sick leave provisions together with the COVID-19 extension scheme, provide PhD candidates with up to 9 months extension to candidature, which is on a paid basis for scholarship holders. Given that less than 3% of our candidates will typically utilise the full sick leave entitlements available to them in a year, we believe

that the current paid leave allowances are sufficient to meet most stipend holders' additional needs arising from the impact of the pandemic on research progress.

3. Request to meet with HDR's periodically over the next 12 months to discuss the ongoing impact of COVID-19

Understanding the experience of our HDR students is critically important, not just for responding to the impact of recent events, but also to inform the further development and enhancement of research training at Macquarie. I am committed to ensuring that we develop effective mechanisms for ongoing engagement and communication with our candidates. I have recently met with HDR representatives from across the four faculties to discuss the results of the HDR survey and how the University has responded to the impacts of the pandemic on research students. I also recently met with representatives from a self-organised group of HDR students who came together to advocate for the broader HDR community and we will also shortly be organising a University-wide webinar open to all HDR candidates. I am very supportive of developing more structured engagement mechanisms for HDR students and we have begun discussions on the establishment of an HDR Advisory Committee as a mechanism for HDR representation on the Higher Degree Research Management Committee (HDRMC).

4. Request to apply measures universally to both domestic and international students, part time and full time.

We are committed to providing support that is tailored to the individual needs of our HDR candidates, irrespective of their funding arrangement, enrolment mode or citizenship. Our commitment is to ensure that all students are able to progress successfully through their research degrees to completion, and we will endeavor to do whatever we can to mitigate the ongoing impact of COVID-19 to facilitate such progression.

I'd like to finish by thanking the HDR community who have shown enormous resilience in the face of very challenging circumstances and have come together so effectively to support one another, whilst also making the broader University aware of their experiences and needs. I'd also like to thank our HDR supervisors, the Faculty HDR offices and the Central HDR teams for their extraordinary contribution over recent months in response to these challenges, with a clear commitment to put our students first. Although the University is now open for business and many HDR students have been able to return to their research, it is evident that the impact of COVID-19 on the University sector is ongoing and this will be felt for many years. It therefore remains critically important that we continue to be sensitive to these impacts and regularly review our response in light of ongoing discussion with supervisors and students.

Yours sincerely,



Professor Simon Handley
Pro Vice-Chancellor
Higher Degree Research, Training and Partnerships