

## **HDR Students Webinar**

### **22 October 2020, 11:00 AM**

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### **General questions raised by HDR candidates regarding the University response to the impact of COVID-19**

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#### **Why is MQ not offering a 6-month extension to RTP scholarships in line with changes to government policy?**

Whilst the government has provided flexibility for institutions to extend scholarships for students in receipt of RTP scholarships, they have not provided any additional funds to support this. At Macquarie, less than 20% of domestic and fewer than 10% of international students are in receipt of RTP stipends. We have made the decision to invest in a 3-month scholarship extensions scheme that is open to all PhD candidates rather than limiting this to a small group of eligible students.

#### **Why is MQ not offering 6-month stipend extensions for candidates like some other Australian Universities?**

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. 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 2022 in recognition of the ongoing impact and consequences of COVID-19 on candidate progress.

#### **Why are scholarship candidates not automatically offered the 3-month stipend extension?**

We are not offering a universal 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.

### **Why can candidates only apply for the stipend extension within 6 months of the end of their PhD?**

For many candidates it is hard to predict the impact of current events on progression at a future point and given ongoing travel restrictions and limitations to certain types of research activity there remains significant uncertainty. Some candidates who have experienced significant disruption now may well be able to mitigate this impact over the months and complete on time without requiring an extension. Some candidates, on the other hand, who have adapted their program of work successfully now, may experience disruption at a later point. We believe that candidates and supervisors will be in the best position to judge the need for an extension closer to the submission date. This will ensure that extensions are provided to those candidates most in need at a time appropriate to their candidature.

### **What is extreme disruption? What evidence is needed to demonstrate this?**

As part of the APR process, that opens on 18<sup>th</sup> September, candidates will get the opportunity to detail the disruption arising from COVID-19. All candidates have been provided with examples of the type of extreme disruption that they can record on their APR. We will shortly be launching a COVID-19 impact record where candidates can also record disruption and use as the basis for an extension request at a later point. Slide 12 (in the webinar slide deck) provides some illustrative examples of extreme disruption.

### **Pre-registered questions raised prior to the webinar**

***Concerns linked to the impact of VR and reduced expenditure on supervision, casual teaching, availability of discipline expertise and financial position of candidates.***

### **Can you outline how the University is responding to the potential impact of Voluntary Redundancy on candidate supervision?**

The University has existing mechanisms for managing the transition of supervision where the supervision for a candidate may need to change for many reasons. Supervision can, and does change. Supervision is a local matter for Departments and Faculties, and in accordance with University Policy candidates are to be supported by at least a Principal supervisor and an Associate supervisor.

We would advise HDR candidates who do not have an Associate supervisor is to have a conversation with their Principal supervisor and Department about Associate Supervision. Candidates who are unsure of their current supervisory panel can check their supervision in eStudent, and changes to supervision are made via the online form in eStudent.

Where candidates are close to completion and their Supervisor leaves MQ due to redundancy, the University is normally supportive of supervisors remaining affiliated with the University in an Honorary or Adjunct capacity (appointed by the Department), and while appointment of an Adjunct or Honorary staff member as a Principal supervisor requires approval of the DVCR, the PVC would be supportive of this approach

**Is it likely that casual work will be available to candidates in 2021 in light of the potential reduction in courses and casual teaching budgets?**

The entire sector has been impacted in 2020 by the loss of international student tuition revenue and will continue to be impacted by this, as well as recent changes to the funding model for undergraduate programs, into 2021. Fewer students and less revenue will mean a reduction in the need for casual teaching and less resources available to support it, and this may result in less hours being available. However, the University will continue to deliver most of its courses and units, and it is very likely there will continue to be a significant number of casual positions available.

**What additional support will be made available for students who may struggle financially without casual teaching opportunities?**

The University will spend approximately 16 million dollars in 2020 on the Student Success Support Package, through which a number of different measures are available to students in financial distress. This scheme is open to HDR candidates.

**Are there any cuts planned to the services provided by student well-being?**

The University has not *planned* any cuts to any *services*. Voluntary redundancies may mean that there will be reduced FTE in some professional service delivery areas, but the University is committed to maintaining a full and effective set of services to support student well-being.

**How are OHDTRP supporting employability of candidates in light of reduced casual teaching opportunities?**

The Support and Development team will continue to provide workshops and training to enhance employability through our HDR Professional Development group. In addition, our team is working with PLaCE (Professional Learning and Capability Enhancement) to provide future training in the Learning and Teaching space.

***Questions concerning the phone survey***

In late June the OHDTRP and Student Connect coordinated a COVID phone survey to better understand the experiences of our HDR cohort with respect to COVID. This survey included all HDR candidates in MRes Y2, PhD and MPhil programs, international and domestic, part time and full time, and all candidates who were enrolled, on leave or under examination at the time of the survey. Candidates were phoned twice.

**Do you consider the phone survey representative in light of a 50% response rate?**

The response rate was actually very good for a survey of this kind. If we assume a total population of 1500, a response rate of 731, delivers a margin of error of just 2.6%, with a 95% confidence interval.

**Does the data indicate any differences between scholarship and non-scholarship holders or between different faculties or between F/T and P/T students?**

The survey showed that the experience of candidates was very similar irrespective of funding or enrolment status. However, there was some indication that the groups most reporting the greatest impact were F/T, International, Scholarship holders.

**Is the OHD RTP planning a follow up survey to capture ongoing COVID impacts?**

The OHD RTP is committed to conducting a follow up survey on the cohort and are currently considering how we may best administer such a survey, given that the cost of administering a survey of this kind is significant. We will keep the cohort updated regarding our plans.

**What actions have we taken so far in response to the phone survey?**

The University has introduced a range of initiatives in response to the needs of our HDR candidates and responded to issues identified through the survey and more broadly by the HDR community. The actions that we have taken include:

- The establishment of a COVID-19 scholarship extension scheme which has been extended for applications until the end of 2022
- The provision of updated COVID FAQs to address concerns raised by the candidates
- Provision of detailed guidance regarding the leave options and entitlements available to candidates
- The introduction of a COVID Impact Record to allow candidates to record the degree of disruption to their research program
- The introduction of a voluntary statement in the thesis submission to indicate to examiners how the direction of a candidate's research program changes as a result of COVID-19
- The survey highlighted broader concerns with communication and in response, my team have engaged with communication specialists across the University and have initiated work on developing a more effective communication strategy
- We also received some really positive feedback which we have passed on. The professional and academic staff of the university are deeply committed to the HDR cohort and research training, and while every single staff member has felt the impact of COVID in their personal and professional lives, the positive feedback from candidates reassures us that our response has been meaningful and appreciated by many of the candidates.

***Questions related to scholarships and variations*****Can candidates change to P/T enrolment and maintain their scholarships?**

Part time enrolment can be approved on a case by case basis in situations where a candidate is unable to meet the requirements of full-time enrolment (minimum 40 hours per week devoted to research, in accordance with the HDR Rules) – this may be for a range of reasons from personal, medical or employment circumstances.

Stipend scholarships are a living allowance to support full time research study. Part time scholarships may be approved on a case by case basis, in accordance with the relevant Conditions of Award, and normally only where full-time enrolment is not possible due to caring responsibilities, or medically substantiated disabilities/illness.

**The 3-month scholarship extension scheme is open for applications until the end of 2021. How will the university recognise disruption to candidates who were in the early part of their PhD during the pandemic?**

The application close date for the 3-month scholarship extension scheme of the end of 2021 was certainly not designed to be exclusionary. The intention was to continue to monitor the longer-term impacts beyond 2021 and respond accordingly. However, we appreciate that candidates who are in the early stages of their candidature are seeking reassurance that they too will have a mechanism for accessing a scholarship extension, where they have not been able to mitigate disruption to their research program as a result of COVID. I'm pleased to announce that we will be modifying the terms of the current scheme, to ensure that all candidates who commenced prior to July 2020 will be able to apply for the 3-month scholarship extension once they have reached the appropriate point in their candidature.

**PhD students can apply for a 6-month candidature extension, but the scholarship extension is only available for 3 months. Will International candidates be able to apply for an additional 3-month tuition fee scholarship to cover the additional 3 months?**

The COVID Extension scheme is a 3-month scholarship extension. As always, the OHD RTP is being as flexible as possible and where circumstances are such that the candidates are extremely disrupted due to COVID, then we will strive to support as many international candidates as we can on a case by case basis

From session 1 2021 the OHD RTP will be changing the way that international candidates are charged tuition fees at the end of their candidature. In recognition of the actual engagement and supervision required when candidates are in the final write up stage we will allow up to a month grace period from the EWS date (no tuition charged and no EXT form required), and then for every 3 months from the EWS date a flat \$2K write up fee will be charged

**Why is the University only offering a 3-month scholarship extension? What provisions will be put in place for candidates whose disruption to research data collection has extended beyond this?**

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. 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 2022 in recognition of the ongoing impact and consequences of COVID-19 on candidate progress. Many students have successfully modified their research plans despite being unable to collect data during the past few months. Where this has not been possible, we are responsive to individual circumstances and will use the mechanisms available to support extensions or LOA's based upon individual cases.

**Will cotutelle candidates be able to extend their candidature even if they are based at the partner institution? Will the University commit to waiving tuition fees for these students if they are extended?**

Yes, all candidates enrolled in MQ PhD programs are able to apply for extensions of candidature in accordance with the HDR Variations to Candidature Policy (up to 1.0 EFTSL in total). Extensions of candidature for Cotutelle candidates are normally by agreement with the relevant partner institution. Cotutelle candidates who are in receipt of MQ funded scholarships are eligible to apply for the COVID extension scheme in accordance with the scheme guidelines for a 3-month (full time equivalent) tuition scholarship extension.

**Can candidates retrospectively apply for sick leave which they have not previously used?**

Applications for sick leave must be made as soon as is practicable to the required leave, and retrospective leave applications are only ever approved where evidence is provided that the candidate could not physically have applied at the time (examples might be serious injury or bereavement), and medical documentation is provided.

**How is the APR being used?**

The annual progress report process provides an opportunity for the candidate and supervisor(s) to critically reflect on the progress in the candidate's individual research program during the current year and on intended research directions in the year ahead so as to ensure a quality and timely completion of the research program. Candidates are given the opportunity to raise any challenges they have faced in the so that they are on record, and the Supervisor and Department can work with the candidate to support their progress and address these challenges. The annual report therefore provides a formal record of these discussions, so that it can be used to support applications for extension or other types of candidature variations down the track. This year some questions were added with respect to the impact of COVID on the research progress of the cohort. While the questions may be similar to those asked in the Phone Survey, the answers provided by candidates in the Annual report remain confidential, and between the candidate, Supervisor and Faculty, and may be used by the candidate to support future variation requests.