

The University of Sydney's
HDR Liaison Committee

Yammer: HDR Liaison Committee
Chair: rebecca.johnson@sydney.edu.au



17/06/2020

Dr Michael Spence AC
Vice-Chancellor and Principal
University of Sydney

Dear Dr Michael Spence AC,

The HDR Liaison Committee and SUPRA are reaching out to you on behalf of our HDR community regarding further extensions of candidature and scholarships. We are grateful for the University's ongoing support during these uncertain and challenging times, in particular, the guaranteed extension of all centrally funded scholarships by 6 months (from 3 years to 3.5 years) and all candidatures by 1 research period. However, we continue to hear from both students and staff for the need of further support. To alleviate distress experienced by students, we urge the university to immediately open applications of a further research period (RP), making a total COVID related candidature extension of two RPs. We also request the university to provide associated financial support to students who are successful at application of further candidature extension (i.e. fee scholarships and centrally funded scholarships when applicable). This was raised at the previous HDR Liaison Committee meeting and in an HDR webinar, in response the DVC-Education acknowledged there is possibility of further extensions to both candidature and scholarship funding on a case by case basis under exceptional circumstances. We now request that the University provide us with the necessary details regarding how impacted HDR students can apply for and access further extensions.

As a top research institute in Australia, we are deeply concerned that our university is falling behind other universities in adequately supporting our HDR cohorts. While we are appreciative of the current measures, the overall financial supports and length of submission extension are not sufficient. The Department of Education, Skills and Employment announced RTP scholarships can be extended to 4.5 and 2.5 years for eligible doctorate and master's students.¹ Other members of the G08 such as ANU and UWA quickly offered extensions up to 4 and 2.5 years, respectively. More specifically, ANU offered a *COVID-19 Extension Scholarship* where upon on demonstration of disruption, applicants are entitled to a 6 months extension (3.5 to 4th year for PhD and equivalent for masters).² Similarly, UWA is offering 2 extra rounds of extensions (3 months each) on top of their existing extension provision available pre-COVID time (6 months), supporting their doctorate students with stipends up to 4 years in total.³

¹ <https://www.education.gov.au/research-training-program>

² <https://www.anu.edu.au/covid-19-advice/research/hdr-candidates>

³ <http://www.postgraduate.uwa.edu.au/news/candidature-and-covid-19> Under *Candidature and Scholarship* tab.

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Many HDRs are facing significant challenge to complete their candidature within the 3.5 years (for PhD, and equivalent of masters) plus one RP. We are concerned that the impact of COVID-19 on research ability will be felt beyond the current measures provided by the University, especially with projects involving laboratory and/or field work. For example, the university laboratories, core research facilities and clinic studies (e.g. ACMM, Sydney Analytical) have been operating under safe mode or completely closed for the past 3 months. Access to many essential facilities are likely to be restricted for a longer period of time, which prevents affected candidates from achieving their research milestones.

In addition to reduced research activities on campus, the global impact of COVID-19 is far from over and will be felt by many HDRs for at least 6 to 12 months. Large international research facilities such as Australian Centre for Neutron Scattering (ACNS, Australia), Institut Laue Langevin (ILL, France) and many others have cancelled at least one round of their user programs. Affected HDRs will not only suffer 6 months delay due to inability to carry out key experiments, but they will also face a much more competitive post-COVID user program where many uncertainties remain. Similarly, opportunities such as major international conferences and exchange programs have diminished for 2020, which are impossible or significantly difficult to rearrange.

Overall, despite the efforts of HDR students and their supervisors to mitigate the disruptions caused by COVID-19, setbacks of 6-12 months are not uncommon among the current HDR student cohort. In response to these unprecedented circumstances, our University has only guaranteed six-month extension for scholarship holders and 1 RP extension for submission, which were frequently provided to HDRs under usual circumstances pre-COVID-19. The mismatch between the challenges HDR student are facing and the level of support provided so far is unsettling. As a result, we urge the University to take further action in properly supporting our HDRs to maintain their personal wellbeing as well as our research excellence. Hereby we present two possible proposals for the University to consider.

1. General extension of candidature with relevant fee-scholarships and stipends

The guaranteed candidature extension of 1 RP and scholarship to eligible HDR students announced by the University earlier in the year was greatly appreciated by HDR students. However, the reality is students suffered varying degrees of impact as outlined above and many require additional support. We understand the disruption caused by COVID-19 largely depends on the stage of study. We agree candidates who are in their probationary year or their last 3-6 months (depends on degree type) are less prone to the devastating disruptions on research activities caused by COVID-19. Therefore, we ask the University to open a second round of general extension: 1 more RP (on top of existing COVID policies) for candidature with fee-scholarship and stipends if applicable, to be added automatically or guaranteed to all HDR candidates who meet the following conditions:

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- i) For doctorate candidates, if 2020 RP 2 contribute towards a full-time equivalent RP between the 5th to 14th RP of his/her candidature. (e.g. for any full-time candidates who have commenced between 2017 RP 1 – 2019 RP 2 without suspension)
- ii) For master’s candidates, if 2020 RP 2 contribute towards a full-time equivalent RP between the 5th to 7th RP of his/her candidature. (e.g. for any full-time candidates who have commenced between 2018 RP 4 – 2019 RP 2 without suspension)

2. An HDR COVID-19 hardship relief scheme/package be created?

Similar to the general hardship relief funds, this package should be open to all enrolled HDR candidates and provide financial aid to individuals who can demonstrate their research projects are severely disrupted by COVID-19. Successful applicants would also be provided with advice on documentation to support their future extension applications under pre-COVID provisions. We ask the university to set up two distinct pools of funding for domestic and international candidates under the following possible conditions.

	International Candidates	Domestic Candidates
On Scholarship	<p>Financial Aid:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Payment equivalent to stipend scholarship for 1 RP (i.e. 8,750 AUD since the current stipend rate is 35,000 AUD per annual) • Fee-scholarship for 1 more RP <p>Other:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Letter by supervisor to acknowledge the individual suffered severe disruption due to COVID-19, which can be used to support his/her future application for extension within the relevant school/faculty. 	<p>Financial Aid:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Payment equivalent to stipend scholarship for 1 RP (i.e. 8,750 AUD since the current stipend rate is 35,000 AUD per annual) <p>Other:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Letter by supervisor to acknowledge the individual suffered severe disruption due to COVID-19, which can be used to support his/her future application for extension within the relevant school/faculty.
Self-funded	<p>Financial Aid:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fee-scholarship for 1 more RP <p>Other:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Letter by supervisor to acknowledge the individual suffered severe disruption due to COVID-19, which can be used to support his/her future application for extension within the relevant school/faculty. 	<p>Other:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Letter by supervisor to acknowledge the individual suffered severe disruption due to COVID-19, which can be used to support his/her future application for extension within the relevant school/faculty.

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In the recent student-led report, *Protecting Our Future Researchers*, by the HDR Liaison Committee, the financial hardship and lack of government support felt by many HDRs was described in detail. In summary, 75% of HDRs are expected to experience financial issues as direct result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Many HDRs have lost their supplementary jobs and income while being ineligible for government benefits such as Austudy. In this difficult time, HDRs are becoming more dependent on stipends and scholarships than ever, some rely on it as sole income to afford rent and food. As a result, many HDRs are forced to continue their candidature despite the drastically reduced capacity to carry out their research. Affected individuals will therefore face a significant challenge to complete their candidature within the allowed timeframe and financial support of existing policies.

We urge the University to urgently set up a working group to consider our proposals and develop comprehensive solutions. We acknowledge the current financial challenges for the University but feel our proposal provides not only immediate support to our HDR students it also represents a small investment in maintaining research output for the University. It is our sincere hope that the University will commit to supporting their HDRs to maintain the highest standards of education by research which makes us all proud to be part of.

We appreciate a formal response as soon as possible, addressing the concerns and actions regarding our proposal.

Sincerely yours

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Shurui Miao'.

Shurui Miao
HDR Liaison Committee Delegate
SUPRA Student Representative
shurui.miao@sydney.edu.au

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Rebecca L Johnson'.

Rebecca Johnson
Chair of HDR Liaison Committee

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Minran Liu'.

Minran Liu
SUPRA Co-President

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Date posted to HDR-LC Teams site for comment from delegates.	04/06/2020
Approved by Chair or other HDR-LC Delegate (name, signature, and email)	16/06/2020
Date posted to HDR-LC Yammer channel for wider HDR cohort.	17/06/2020