

28 May 2020

Michelle Donelan MP
Minister of State for Universities
20 Great Smith Street
LONDON
SW1P 3BT

Dear Ms Donelan

The University and College Union (UCU) welcomes the establishment of the University Research Sustainability Taskforce and we hope that it will result in positive outcomes for university research and knowledge exchange. However, it is regrettable that neither staff nor students are represented as "sector stakeholders" on the Taskforce and would ask you to ensure that the key issues facing staff and students are fully taken on board by inviting the participation of the National Union of Students and University and College Union.

Our starting point, therefore, is the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on researchers in UK higher education. All university employees are facing a heightened sense of uncertainty at the moment but certain categories of staff, particularly colleagues on fixed-term and casualised contracts and disabled, international and BME staff, face greatly increased anxiety and stress as a result of the pandemic.

In terms of specific groups of researchers, we are very concerned about the current situation facing postgraduate research students (PGRs). Thousands of PGRs (and postdoctoral researchers) have had their research disrupted and are struggling to undertake key tasks such as data collection and analysis and engaging in dissemination activities. At the same time, very few of these researchers have been offered funded extensions - for example, in the new [SMaRteN and Vitae survey](#), only 12% of final year PGRs report that their institution has provided an option to extend their doctoral studies.

We note the recent announcement by UKRI to grant six-month funded extensions to final year UKRI-funded studentships but call for this guarantee to be extended to all studentships, especially students already registered with universities as [disabled, chronically ill or neurodivergent](#).

Another worrying development for PGRs is the decision of a number of universities to

implement wholesale cuts to graduate teaching posts in the 2020-21 academic year. Opportunities to undertake paid teaching provide a financial lifeline for many PGRs, especially self-funded students. It is also a key opportunity to develop their teaching experience which can be important for gaining a future academic post. Without fully funded extensions and graduate teaching posts, we fear that many PhD students will be forced to drop out of their studies. Covid-19, therefore, is not just having a significant impact on PGRs current research activities, but is likely to have long-term implications for their future careers.

Fixed-term researchers also face greatly increased anxiety and stress as a result of their precarious employment status. According to the SMARteN and Vitae survey, 40% of the research staff surveyed report that their research contract ends during 2020. UCU has called on UKRI and other research funders to ensure that fixed-term researchers have their contracts extended as a result of Covid-19. We regret the fact that funded extensions have not happened in any significant way across the sector. For example, it is worrying that only 10% of research staff in the SMARteN and Vitae survey report that their funding has been extended in the context of the pandemic.

In the absence of fully-funded contractual extensions, we are calling on higher education institutions to apply for the full range of financial support that HM Treasury has already announced for businesses, including the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme. However, these job retention schemes remain stop gap measures and longer-term proposals are needed to ensure greater security of employment for researchers in UK higher education.

For researchers from a migrant background, the government's bureaucratic, unfair and often extremely dysfunctional immigration enforcement regime is an additional source of stress and anxiety. Some aspects of the enforcement regime have been suspended during the crisis but we are continuing to lobby the government and university employers to protect and extend the rights of migrant staff to live and work in the UK. Moreover, the long-term success of our research base will require further reform to immigration rules to make the UK an attractive country for international researchers and their families to come to.

In the short-term there is a need for joined up thinking between government departments, universities and funding bodies on the specific issues facing international staff and students. For example, UCU members have raised concerns that some institutions have provided funding extensions for research projects or doctoral programmes but there is no guarantee that visas for affected international staff will also be extended and applying for visa extensions may incur an additional cost to those individuals. As a result, we need to think holistically about the ways in which different groups of staff and students are being affected by Covid-19 and how they can be properly supported.

For staff on teaching and research contracts, the crisis has resulted in a significant

increase in workload and stress, particularly regarding the shift to remote teaching and assessment, while at the same time, people are struggling to combine work duties with caring responsibilities. In this context, it is difficult for academic staff to focus on existing research requirements such as submitting new funding bids and there is already [evidence](#) that the lockdown is having a negative effect on female academics' ability to produce research outputs.

Despite these worrying developments, the Research Excellence Framework (REF) continues to take up a disproportionate amount of time and resources of academic and professional services staff relative to its perceived benefits. UCU welcomed the initial proposal to postpone REF 2021 submission deadline as "the only sensible move in the current circumstances". However, we are concerned that some universities are still carrying on as though it is 'business as usual' with respect to REF processes. In the context of the current crisis, an elaborate, high-stakes competition for basic levels of research funding is both wasteful and unproductive. UCU believes that the radically changed landscape in higher education that is likely to result from Covid-19 warrants the cancellation – rather than simply the postponement – of REF 2021. Going forward, the higher education sector should unite behind a simpler and a fairer system for allocating institutional research funding from 2022-23.

In the meantime, there is a need for increased funding for research to address the financial crisis facing higher education institutions. UCU welcomed the UK government's commitment in the budget to reach 2.4 per cent of GDP invested in R&D by 2027. However, given the sharp fall in GDP that will occur during 2020 as a result of Covid-19, it is vital that there are genuine increases in UK research funding over the next few years.

One of the challenges will be to address the current underinvestment in UK research, particularly as other countries such as [China](#) have embarked on a huge programme of investment in science. In the past few years, while the costs of doing research have been rising, the amount of available funding has not kept pace. Recent analysis by [HEPI](#) has found that university research is underfunded by £4.3 billion a year compared to its real cost. The problem is that research grants do not cover the full costs of research – for example, the latest data shows that UKRI research grants cover about 72 per cent of costs. Moreover, the dramatic loss of international student fee income from 2020-21 will make it harder for higher education institutions to cross-subsidise underfunded research.

In response to the current Covid-19 crisis, UCU welcomes the [£75million research funding boost from the Scottish government](#) as a positive first step and believes that the Westminster government should also provide additional research funding and support to protect universities from potentially huge losses in income. Unfortunately, the Department for Education's proposal to merely bring forward £100m of quality-related research funding does little to address the long-term funding shortfall facing universities in England.

As a result, UCU is calling for a *major increase* in quality-related (QR) research funding to help cover staff salaries, PhD studentships and other research costs over the next two years. A temporary increase in QR funding, however, should be accompanied by some additional distributive criteria: firstly, in order to sustain a more diverse network of research activity across all institutions and regions, the extra funding should be distributed in a less selective way than on the basis of existing REF 2014 * weightings and secondly, in order to ensure the development of the next generation of academic talent, there should be a requirement for institutions to prioritise investment in early career researcher posts and PhD studentships as part of the support package.

Finally, a new research investment strategy needs to go hand-in-hand with a clear and coherent government plan aimed at retaining wider academic and institutional capacity and maximising the positive impact higher education can make upon recovery. This should include action by government [in seven key areas](#) and include measures to underwrite present funding levels, restrict competition between institutions and protect against university and college closure.

I believe that it is critical to the higher education sector that the University Research Sustainability Taskforce sets out a clear plan on increased research investment, especially in university staff and students, and I would welcome the chance to discuss this with you further.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jo Grady". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized 'J'.

Dr Jo Grady
General Secretary

Copy: Amanda Solloway MP, Minister of State for Science, Research and Innovation