

# Coronavirus Briefing note

Office for Students

OfS

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## Postgraduate research students

### Introduction

The coronavirus pandemic has dramatically changed the academic experience of postgraduate research (PGR) students. Such students take on a number of roles as students, teachers and researchers. Some study on a part-time basis and have other professional responsibilities impacted by the pandemic. In their personal lives they may have additional responsibilities as carers or need to self-isolate. Some will be contributing to the coronavirus response, either through working on research or as frontline clinicians and other key workers.

This note does not constitute or supplement OfS regulatory guidance. Nor does it stipulate particular approaches or endorse specific institutions. Its purpose is to explore the particular challenges these students are facing during the pandemic, and to highlight the practical ways in which universities, colleges, research organisations, higher education sector bodies and research funders have been supporting them.

UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) has developed a Coronavirus Hub in response to the crisis, which provides advice to the research community including the students that it funds.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, recent government guidance on coronavirus indicates that scientific research in laboratories may now be possible.<sup>2</sup> The government has also provided guidance on approaching this safely.<sup>3</sup>

### Context

Postgraduate researchers undertaking research degree programmes (DPhil, PhD, MRes) make up 4.5 per cent of the 2018-19 student population.

Working with universities, colleges and other stakeholders, the Office for Students (OfS) is producing a series of briefing notes on the steps universities and colleges are taking to support their students during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.

The notes do not represent regulatory advice or guidance – their focus is on sharing ideas and responses, and signposting to further information. They reflect current information as at date of publication in a rapidly evolving situation.

They not only conduct research that will have value in its own right, but may become the academic workforce of the future. 59.2 per cent of postgraduate research students live permanently in the UK, 65 per cent are aged between 21 and 30, and there is almost an equal proportion of male and female students. More equality and diversity data for postgraduate research students is available in the OfS's equality and diversity statistics.<sup>4</sup>

Like other student groups, PGR students may be facing a number of additional challenges at present. For example, some researchers have identified that women have been producing fewer academic papers than men during the pandemic, because they face additional caring responsibilities.<sup>5</sup> Across the whole population there is evidence that people from black, Asian and minority ethnic groups are more likely to be impacted by coronavirus.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, almost 40 per cent of PGR students are international students – some have returned to their country of residence, while for others this has not been possible. As noted in our previous briefing note on international

The Office for Students is the independent regulator of higher education in England. We aim to ensure that every student, whatever their background, has a fulfilling experience of higher education that enriches their lives and careers. We regulate to promote quality, choice, competition and value for money in higher education, with a particular remit to ensure access, success and progression for underrepresented and disadvantaged groups of students.

students, this group may be more likely to experience precarious living situations, isolation, and financial hardship as a result of the pandemic.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, students may find that they no longer have capacity to focus sufficiently on their postgraduate research studies, possibly because of lost income or additional caring responsibilities. Others may have been redeployed to work on coronavirus research or on the frontline healthcare response.

In another briefing note we have looked at the impact on student mental health during the pandemic.<sup>8</sup> Our note on students without family support,<sup>9</sup> and a forthcoming note on disabled students, address issues that these and other student groups may be dealing with. In addition to the above, most students are likely to experience reduced capacity due to the potential scale and speed of change in their own personal circumstances (for example, if they or someone they are caring for becomes ill) or general government coronavirus guidance.

## Research activity

### Reorganising, rescheduling and pausing research activities

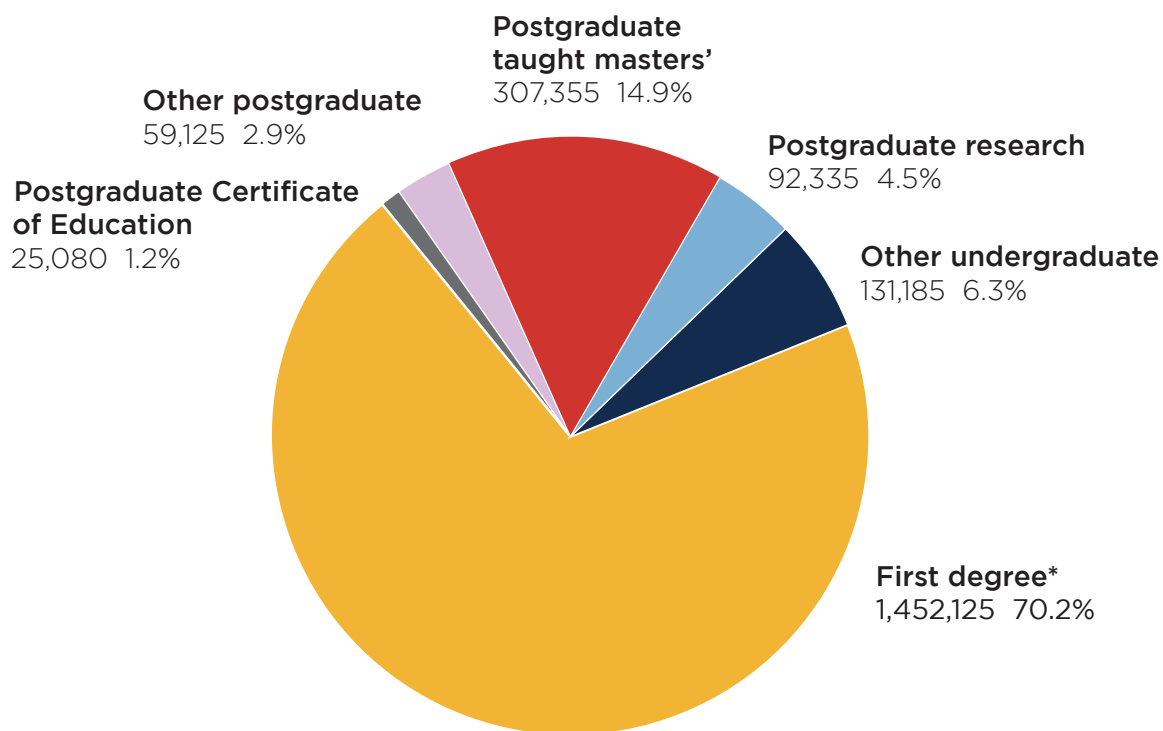
Universities, institutes and other research organisations are considering whether research activity that has been stopped can be replaced

with equivalent or alternative activity, and if not, for how long it must be paused. The prospect of putting research on hold will mean different things to different students depending on the stage of their research, their discipline and their personal circumstances. Those just starting their programme may be able to adjust their focus to accommodate the availability of resources or to work on development activities such as research skills, research ethics, literature reviews, and career planning.

A student in the middle of data collection and analysis will be considering the impact of pausing on the validity of their results. This might mean having to restart data collection later or refining their research question and methodologies. This will be challenging for those whose data is time- or place-bound, for example students working in laboratories, educational and clinical settings. Others may be in the final write-up stage of their degree and will require a quiet and safe space to work.

Whatever stage students have reached in their research, they will benefit from clear advice on what they may need to do to refocus their activities. Any advice from higher education providers will need to be updated regularly as new guidance is published by the government. Some universities have published frequently asked questions on a range of issues affecting their PGR students. For example, advice published by the University of Bath

**Figure 1: Proportions of students at English higher education providers at different levels of study (2018-19)**



\*Including first degrees with a postgraduate component

Source: OfS equality and diversity pages<sup>10</sup>

encourages students to keep a record of how the coronavirus outbreak has impacted their studies, as this information may be important if they need to extend their registration or seek an extension of funding.<sup>11</sup>

Students who have been redirected to coronavirus-related activities may have to pause or stop their research programme during this time.

### Access to research infrastructure

Many research facilities – including libraries, laboratories, museums, archives, interview spaces, studios, performance spaces and clinical environments – have been closed as they are unable to operate safely. The impact of this varies across disciplines, with a significant impact on those that require access to specialist infrastructure and equipment. Humanities and social science researchers will also be affected by restricted access to archives, libraries, museums, communities and individuals.

Publishers and libraries have given increased access to digital resources to facilitate online research and teaching. King’s College London has produced an online guide to signpost students to additional online materials, and Queen Mary University of London is running virtual training on accessing online library resources. From January 2021 the Wellcome Trust’s policy on open access is changing.<sup>12</sup> Published outputs that arise from its funding must be open and accessible to

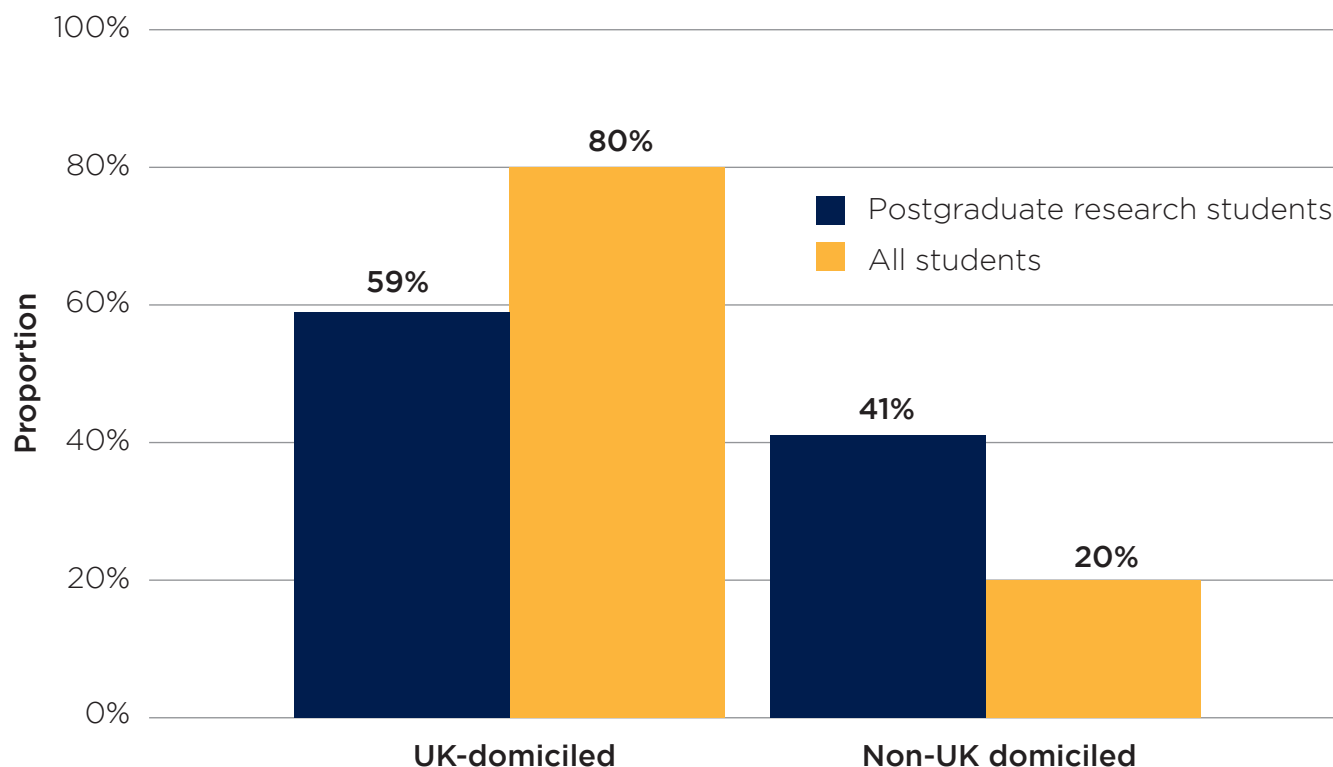
## Queen Mary University of London: Adapting researcher development provision

Queen Mary University of London’s Researcher Development team adapted its training provision for online delivery, including virtual writing courses and retreats to support continued research activity.

The team consulted with PhD students and research staff to develop additional courses addressing the challenges they face and the support they need to stay well, cope with uncertainty, and continue research activity under lockdown. Topics include keeping connected with colleagues, maintaining productivity, accessing research materials online, changes to the recruitment landscape and technological solutions.

everyone. In the interim Wellcome has also called on researchers, journals, and funders to ensure that findings and data relevant to the coronavirus outbreak are shared openly to help inform the public health response. The statement of principles has been signed by over 140 organisations in the UK and globally.<sup>13</sup>

**Figure 2: Proportions of postgraduate research students by domicile compared with all students (2018-19)**



Source: OfS equality and diversity pages

### Student perspectives

'As a humanities student, there are many resources that are not available online but I need for my studies. Hopefully, when restrictions are eased a little, I can still access physical books without using the library (such as library loan pick-up system).'

'I am researching social care, so the other participants are professionals who are key workers. They are operating at reduced capacity and not able to take part in research processes.'

'I am sure my university will offer an extension to my submission deadline, but there has been no indication as to whether or not funding will be extended.'

### Academic communities and networks

Academic networks can be specific to a particular research area or take the form of a wider doctoral or discipline community. They provide opportunities for academic enrichment and collaboration and career progression through meetings, conferences and professional development courses. Restrictions are impacting the delivery of these types of event, though where possible, they are being moved online.

### University of Surrey Doctoral College: Supporting the researcher community

The university's normal community and professional development activities (such as its 'Three-minute thesis' competition and university-wide doctoral conference, as well as the full suite of skills and career training) are continuing as planned, but in virtual form.

Some activities are being delivered more frequently, in acknowledgement that researchers need increased contact and support. The university is holding more 'writing retreat' sessions and its bimonthly 'Researcher Cafe' is now taking place weekly. Virtual Institute of Directors Programme activities are available to entrepreneurially focused researchers.<sup>14</sup> The doctoral college has also invested in Headspace licences<sup>15</sup> to complement wellbeing services offered by the university, all still available virtually.

National and international researchers are supported through the '23 Things' online course,<sup>16</sup> which this year has researchers from UK institutions and New Zealand university partners. The course keeps researchers connected with and inspired by other researchers, while developing skills to help them promote themselves and their research.

### Funding

Postgraduate research students fund themselves from a variety of sources depending on their personal circumstances. Beyond self-funding, this can include studentships and research funding from the UKRI research councils, research foundations like the Wellcome Trust, universities and colleges, private companies or third sector organisations. Some students rely on casual or fixed-term part-time jobs, often as teachers or research assistants, while others are completing their studies as part of their professional role.

### Major postgraduate research funders

Major postgraduate research funding bodies have adapted their policies to accommodate postgraduate research students to complete their degree as far as possible.

UKRI has asked its research council-funded training grant holders to talk to their students about whether they need to adapt or extend their projects. It has offered UKRI students the possibility of a funding extension, depending on certain conditions set out in its guidance. Training grant holders have been asked not to place an onerous burden of proof on students to provide evidence to justify their extension.<sup>17</sup> The Wellcome Trust has provided a six-month extension to cover student stipends and staff costs on grants that end in 2020-21, and three additional months funding for those ending in 2021-22 in the first instance,<sup>18</sup> with other options available depending on how government coronavirus guidelines develop.

### Other funders, including self-funded

Postgraduate researchers not supported by major funders face critical challenges in addressing potential funding shortfalls. Many postgraduate researchers are supported – at least in part – by non-profit and private sector organisations, which may be unable to offer funded extensions. Others fully or partially fund their fees and or income themselves, and these funds may no longer be available. Hardship funds may be available to these students. Many providers are experiencing increased levels of demand from PGR students.

### Academic supervision

Academic supervision is a core aspect of postgraduate research students' experience and success. This is typically a one-to-one relationship between a research student and one supervisor that is often conducted in person, though co-supervision and group supervision are also prevalent.<sup>19</sup> The success of these relationships has an important impact on research students' wellbeing and the quality of their work.

The most immediate change is the need to conduct academic supervision remotely. Other impacts include the capacity of supervisors and students themselves to prepare for and regularly attend supervision meetings. Both supervisors and students may have to refocus on

### Student perspectives

'My supervisor team has been very aware of difficulties and, despite not being able to physically meet, they seem more accessible than ever.'

'Academic supervision is fine by video call; however, for many of us the stress of the change in working has put an even greater strain on supervisor relationships.'

coronavirus-related work; may have additional family responsibilities that mean they have less time for their work; may not have an appropriate or sufficiently private workspace; or may have relocated as a result of social distancing guidelines (including international students returning to their homes overseas).

The UK Council for Graduate Education (UKCGE) has provided several resources in support of remote supervision, including a web-based seminar delivered by practitioners. One consistent recommendation is the importance of maintaining regular communication, to understand the candidate's and supervisor's academic and pastoral capacities and priorities.

### Assessments

Different types of assessment are required during a research degree. These include progress reviews in the early stages, the submission of a body of research, and the final oral exam or viva at the end.

Universities have recognised the need to provide alternative or remote assessment while taking into

### Imperial College London Graduate School: Conducting remote PhD viva examinations

The Graduate School is responsible for the postgraduate experience at Imperial College London. As well as providing guidance on postgraduate education policy and practice, it offers more than 140 professional development opportunities to masters' and research students.

In response to the coronavirus lockdown measures, the college is offering remote PhD viva examinations. To support staff and students taking part in such examinations, the Graduate School worked with others across the college to create good practice guidance.<sup>20</sup>

The guidance covers information on supporting students through a remote examination, using technology confidently, pre-viva checklists and contingency planning.

### University of York: Adapting assessment practices to minimise student burden

The University of York has developed a coronavirus webpage for PGR students that sets out procedures to accommodate changes in students' capacity to complete their work.

For assessments, the university has built on its established, university-wide 'annual reviews of progress' for PhD students. Before lockdown, the reviews involved a panel meeting with the student, their supervisor and other staff members. To reduce burden during the pandemic, the university has temporarily adapted the annual progress review process for all research students with a progression deadline between 23 March and 31 October 2020.

Candidates deemed to have made satisfactory progress on the basis of evidence gathered over the last year will automatically progress to the next stage of their studies. Those about whom there were existing significant concerns prior to the coronavirus outbreak will have a progress review, modified to take account of lockdown restrictions. For consistency and to protect student interests, the progress reviews are chaired by the Dean of Graduate Research.

account the need to maintain standards. Compared with undergraduate degrees, the numbers of students requiring this adapted assessment are small. Nevertheless, they are resource-intensive, for the student as well as the assessors and panel members. Vivas may be delayed for a variety of reasons: the panel may comprise several people, each of whom may be at reduced capacity, may become ill, may have other responsibilities or may be operating in different time zones. UKGCE has released advice on virtual vivas giving suggestions for both candidates and providers, including detail on ensuring the candidate is supported throughout the process.

### PGR student wellbeing and mental health

Supporting wellbeing and mental health is as important for postgraduate research students as it is for all students as explored in our previous briefing note on student mental health during the pandemic.<sup>21</sup> Isolation, motivation and a sense of belonging are particular issues for many PGR students, and it is likely that social distancing and other restrictions on travel have amplified these concerns. Pressures around finance and employment, disruption to research programmes, supervisory relationships, and sickness and additional caring responsibilities will also be important factors.

SMaRteN, the student mental health network,<sup>22</sup> and Vitae, which supports the professional development of researchers, have conducted research to help understand the impact of the lockdown on the working lives of doctoral researchers<sup>23</sup> and research staff. The initial findings suggest that while many doctoral students are feeling supported by their providers and supervisors in particular, there are concerns about financial insecurity, extension to their studies and the likely impact of coronavirus on their future research career. Where an organisation provides clear guidance on new working arrangements, respondents demonstrated higher reports of wellbeing.<sup>24</sup>

## Looking ahead

Postgraduate students undertake research that will have value in its own right, but may also become the academic workforce of the future. The immediate responses to the pandemic have focused on supporting current postgraduate research students. Providers are now likely to be considering the impact on future cohorts of postgraduate research students and admissions for the next academic year. A variety of factors will influence this decision-making process, including student, academic and financial imperatives.

It is likely that universities, colleges, and research funders will be analysing the impact on future research capacity and programmes of pausing or stopping research activity. Universities and colleges in England have responded where possible by providing alternatives, such as remote provision, assessment and supervision. This experience of delivering alternative approaches may provide valuable lessons for the post-coronavirus environment.

This briefing sets out some of the ways in which universities and colleges are having to change to support postgraduate research students. It is not exhaustive, and we anticipate challenges and responses will continue to evolve as the pandemic develops.

## King's College London: Digital wellbeing support for PGR students and supervisors

King's College London offers digital wellbeing resources for PGR students, including the PGR Wellbeing Toolkit<sup>25</sup> and the Wellbeing Thesis<sup>26</sup> (a collaborative initiative between King's College, the University of Derby and Student Minds funded by the OfS and Research England).

Alongside existing provision, King's is offering a series of new digital workshops focused on navigating change and uncertainty, dealing with stress, building resilience, and managing workloads. Sessions cover theory, practical tips, and small group discussions in virtual breakout rooms, offering a valuable chance for PGR students to connect and talk candidly about the struggles they may be facing.

To support supervisors, the Centre for Doctoral Studies, the Disability Service and the PGR academic lead ran a webinar outlining how to support students with disclosed or emerging mental health conditions, what to do in an emergency, and supervising virtually during the pandemic. Resources have also been made available online.

## University of Bradford: Supporting research student wellbeing and mental health

The university's provision has been adapted to include elements that relate to wellbeing and professional development, as well as research. This includes work on:

- creativity
- personal qualities
- self-management
- research management.

The university took a 'multi-modal' approach to supporting PGR mental health and wellbeing. To supplement online support services, staff have been holding 'e-drop in' sessions for students who are concerned about completing their research from home. Tips by students, for students, about how to adapt and cope have been published and shared.

For those with technology or bandwidth issues, and those who are weary of additional screen time, the university has been encouraging the use of telephone calls. The university has recognised that PhD study can be isolating and is sharing messages about maintaining community using any mode that is suitable and is safe.

## Information and resources

**UKRI**, 'Guidance for the research and innovation communities': <https://www.ukri.org/research/coronavirus/guidance-for-the-research-and-innovation-communities1/>.

**The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education** supporting the assessment of postgraduate research students: <https://www.qaa.ac.uk/en/news-events/support-and-guidance-covid-19/postgraduate-awards-experience>.

**Wellcome Trust**, 'Coronavirus (COVID-19): Information for grant applicants and grantholders': <https://wellcome.ac.uk/grant-funding/guidance/coronavirus-covid-19-information-grant-applicants-and-granholders>.

**UKCGE**, 'COVID-19: Considerations for doctoral degrees guidance note': <http://www.ukcge.ac.uk/article/covid-19-doctoral-considerations-guidance-note-456.aspx>.

**UKCGE**, 'Guide to online supervision': <https://supervision.ukcge.ac.uk/resources/ukcge-guide-to-online-supervision/>.

**UKCGE** supporting members through the pandemic: <http://www.ukcge.ac.uk/article/supporting-members-during-covid-19-coronavirus-pandemic-454.aspx>.

**Vitae** supporting members through the pandemic: <https://www.vitae.ac.uk/news/vitae-news-2020/coronavirus-covid-19>.

**OfS quality and standards guidance**: [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/guidance-for-providers-about-quality-and-standards-during-coronavirus-pandemic/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/guidance-for-providers-about-quality-and-standards-during-coronavirus-pandemic/).

UK government **guidance on working safely** during coronavirus for labs and research facilities: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/working-safely-during-coronavirus-covid-19/labs-and-research-facilities>.

**UKRI written response** to Women and Equalities Committee inquiry, 'Unequal impact: Coronavirus (COVID-19) and the impact on people with protected characteristics', to be published.

We thank those universities and colleges that provided case studies and interventions described in this briefing note. We are grateful to Research England and UKRI, UKCGE, and Vitae, for sharing their ideas and insights. We are also grateful to the National Union of Students and the UK Council for International Student Affairs for seeking feedback from students, and of course the students who shared their experiences with us.

The case studies and interventions described in this note have been developed at pace and have not yet been evaluated for effectiveness. They are offered in the spirit of sharing practice that others may find useful and applicable to their own contexts.

# Notes

1 See <https://www.ukri.org/research/coronavirus/>.

2 See <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/our-plan-to-rebuild-the-uk-governments-covid-19-recovery-strategy/our-plan-to-rebuild-the-uk-governments-covid-19-recovery-strategy>.

3 See <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/working-safely-during-coronavirus-covid-19/labs-and-research-facilities>.

4 See [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/equality-and-diversity/equality-and-diversity-data/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/equality-and-diversity/equality-and-diversity-data/).

5 See <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2020/may/12/womens-research-plummets-during-lockdown-but-articles-from-men-increase>.

6 See <https://www.nhsconfed.org/resources/2020/06/phe-review-disparities-in-risk-and-outcomes-of-covid19>.

7 See [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/coronavirus-briefing-note-supporting-international-students/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/coronavirus-briefing-note-supporting-international-students/).

8 See [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/coronavirus-briefing-note-supporting-student-mental-health/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/coronavirus-briefing-note-supporting-student-mental-health/).

9 See [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/coronavirus-briefing-note-students-without-family-support/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/coronavirus-briefing-note-students-without-family-support/).

10 See [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/equality-and-diversity/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/equality-and-diversity/).

11 See <https://www.bath.ac.uk/guides/coronavirus-advice-to-doctoral-students/>.

12 See <https://wellcome.ac.uk/grant-funding/guidance/open-access-guidance/open-access-policy>.

13 See <https://wellcome.ac.uk/coronavirus-covid-19/open-data>.

14 See <https://www.surrey.ac.uk/employability-and-careers/researchers/institute-directors-student-membership-programme>.

15 See <https://www.headspace.com/>.

16 See <https://23things2020.wpcomstaging.com/>.

17 See <https://www.ukri.org/news/government-announces-support-for-phd-students-as-a-result-of-coronavirus-disruption/> and <https://www.ukri.org/news/coronavirus-impact-on-ukri-supported-research/#Training-grants>.

18 See <https://wellcome.ac.uk/grant-funding/guidance/coronavirus-covid-19-information-grant-applicants-and-granholders>.

19 See <https://www.qaa.ac.uk/quality-code/advice-and-guidance/research-degrees>.

20 See <https://www.imperial.ac.uk/study/pg/graduate-school/staff/supervisors-guidebook/effective-partnerships/>.

21 See [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/coronavirus-briefing-note-supporting-student-mental-health/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/coronavirus-briefing-note-supporting-student-mental-health/).

22 See <https://www.smarten.org.uk/about.html>.

23 See <https://www.vitae.ac.uk/>.

24 See <https://www.vitae.ac.uk/news/vitae-news-2020/release-of-initial-findings-to-sector-following-response-to-covid-19-survey>.

25 See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6FXqePRHhUQ>.

26 See <https://thewellbeingthesis.org.uk/>.