

**Institute of Dentistry
Postgraduate Research Student Staff Liaison Committee**

**PhD students Q&A Meeting with the Doctoral College and the Dental Dean
3 June 2020**

Previously, the Student Support Office (SSO) invited questions from the PhD students regarding the current disruption of studies due to COVID-19 pandemic. The SSO compiled the questions in two parts: the first was directed to the Doctoral College manager Zi Parker, and the second was directed to the Dean Prof Paul Coulthard. Below is a list of the Q&A discussed. The meeting was chaired by Prof Mangala Patel and Maher Rashwan Mohamed.

Please see below the names and abbreviations of the meeting attendees for your reference in the Q&A.

Students Present:

Maher Rashwan Mohamed – PGR Lead, Dental Institute. (MRM)
Melissa Tiskaya – PGR, Mile End. (MT)
Najlae Boukbir – PGR, Blizard Institute. (NB)
Ahmed Naji – PGR, Dental Hospital. (AN)

Staff Present:

Mangala Patel – Senior Tutor, Student Support (Dentistry). (MP)
Zee Parker – Doctoral College Manager. (ZP)
Paul Coulthard – Dean, Dental Institute. (PC)
Aimee Kennedy – Research Manager. (AK)
Mason Newbury – Student Support Administrator. (MN)
Rebecca Hunter – Student Support Officer. (RH)

Q&A Part 1 with Doctoral College Manager Zi Parker

- a. MRM: How is the University going to manage Students who are stuck Overseas, as the majority of Countries around the World have opted to stay put with International travel? Is there any way the University can help these students? Will they be expected to return back to the University if labs/clinics open in late June?

ZP: Doctoral College (DC) is very aware this is an issue for all of PhD students. At the moment, no student is obliged to return to university. That may change in the next 6 months or so as the situation develops. If a student cannot travel from their country back to the UK, there is no obligation for them to return to the UK. At the same time, the university is opening the campuses and making spaces accessible for students who require working/studying spaces due to difficulties of working at home for example in the case of shared accommodations or childcare arrangements.

- b. MRM: Some PhD students stuck abroad do not require lab or clinic attendance since their project is computer-based. Will they be able to continue their research remotely while maintaining weekly contact with their supervisor(s)?

ZP: answered in previous question.

- c. MRM: What happens to student bench fees that lie unused due to the Covid situation? Most people still had money in their bench fee account which will be lost on 1st July, and then they have to pay another sum for the subsequent year.

ZP: DC is in conversation with the finance team to what can be feasible. If a student has been allocated funding from the Postgraduate Research Fund specifically in the last 12 months, those students were sent an email to confirm DC will honour those fund allocations for the next academic year. As for bench fees, the finance team is studying the issue to decide what is feasible.

PC: To avoid potential loss of bench fees due to finance regulations, perhaps supervisors have to be creative and redirect that funding. Projects have to be flexible and change in nature. Students are urged to have a discussion with their supervisors regarding alternative plans to better use the funds available to them.

- d. MRM: Can students project time be extended if required, without them paying extra, as most of the Students are stretched with their funding and have to manage and pay for their own expenses and living. Could unused bench fees be used to extend project timelines?

ZP: At the moment no, but this position may change. The finance team has to decide. There will be an opportunity for additional funding to be announced by QMUL in the next few weeks. In terms of additional unfunded time, this will be discussed with the finance team on a case by case basis. For PhD students who are in the writing-up stage, they can ask for extension without the need for any additional funding or fees.

- e. MT: Do self-funded students need to pay again if an extension is granted?

ZP: If the extension is during the writing-up period then no fees will be incurred. If the extension is not during the writing-up period, then fees will be at the discretion of the finance team.

- f. MT: If funding for the project is NOT extended, how will the project be judged as a requirement for completing a PhD degree?

ZP: We are aware of the impact COVID-19 has on the research and students' progression. We are putting together a piece of advice for PhD supervisors to re-define the parameters of the research projects. For example, if the project plan involves 10 experiments, would it be possible to produce good research on the basis of 7 experiments instead. The same applies to clinical research or any research that involves human participants. We will ask students and their supervisors to re-evaluate their research and see if what is being put together is still robust but may be slightly

different from what was originally planned. This is a case by case scenario and needs to be discussed with supervisors first.

- g. MT: Most people received their stipend at the end of March, and will receive again at the end of June, will these be deducted from the last few months of the PhD if an extension/interruption is granted?

ZP: Most PhDs are funded for either 36 or 48 months depending on the programme. The DC will continue to fund according to the same period. In case of external funding, such as UKRI, there may be an extension of funding. There will also be an opportunity for PhD students to apply for additional funding to pay of extra months at the end of the PhD programme. We have continued payments so not to leave students out of pocket during this period. Students will need to apply for a funded extension for the additional months beyond the 36 or 48 months of the programme.

- h. MT: Many of our researchers are self-funded International students, who are working on Limited Visa. Is there any way, University will help students by collaborating with Home office, in extending their study time, which was lost due to COVID.

ZP: I am not allowed to give advice on visas as I am not a member of the immigration compliance team. However, our immigration compliance team is looking into this specific issue. The Advice and Counselling Service provides an updated advice on Immigration and COVID-19 [here](#).

- i. AN: For clinical studies that were interrupted due to the lockdown, how will the effect of COVID-19 be mitigated towards PhD degree completion?

ZP: Students will be asked to look at their methodology and decide whether clinical data can be collected in the same way with the opportunity to apply for additional funding to add to their time of the study. We are aware of the disruption of clinical studies as some clinical PhD students have returned to the NHS, so there are several issues to consider.

Q&A Part 2 with the Dental Dean Professor Paul Coulthard

- a. MT: When will all labs open for research purposes and for how long during the days at ME?

PC: We are starting to open the labs, for example at the Blizard Institute labs will be open from 8 June but an official sign-off is still required before opening. For Mile End campus, the current date for re-opening is 1st July but we might be able to open sooner. At the moment, Shameem is in the labs to identify 12 lab areas for work providing that we meet social distancing requirements.

PC: I will provide some general comments to answer some of your questions broadly. This [COVID-19 pandemic] is unfortunate for students as it is for everybody. We are all trying to work together to mitigate the risks. Our no. 1 priority is your safety, and that of the staff. We are working very hard trying to get things back to 'normal', however there is not going to be a 'normal' for anybody globally, so we are trying to look at things differently, included in that is expecting a longer working day as it makes sense. If any work can be done remotely, then the work should be done that way.

The dental hospital has been closed in terms of dentistry for some time and was put for general hospital use for screening cancer patients amongst other things. This phase has now finished and the dental hospital will resume some of its work with a new working pattern with the distancing and screening of patients being considered. The next phase after that is routine care which can be started now according to the latest update from the Office of the Chief Dental Officer of England. We are working out procedures for patient pathway in the building. We are applying to extend the working hours in the hospital, so instead of starting at 8am and closing 5pm, instead to close at 8pm. This could allow for 3 clinical sessions in the day with clearly identified times for clinical work and patient appointments.

- b. AN: When will the clinics re-start for research projects and will the working hours of the Dental Hospital be extended beyond 9am to 5pm? For example: 9 am to 9pm?

PC: We are applying to extend the working hours in the hospital, so instead of starting at 8am and closing 5pm, it will close at 8pm. This could allow for 3 clinical sessions in the day with clearly identified times for clinical work and patient appointments.

- c. AN: Most of the students are concerned about going to the Mile End campus to sort of their issues like reactivate their University card and so on. Can we somehow make sure we don't have to visit the Mile End campus to manage Administrative or IT related issues?

- d. AN: Will projects be compensated for clinical recruitment time lost due to the lockdown?

- e. AN: My research project involves aerosol generating procedures (AGP). Is the Dental Hospital ready to resume and provide dental procedures involving AGP for research patients?

PC: This is possible however the CDO identified a priority list for procedures which we need to take into account. For example, patients with pain are to be seen first. Non-AGP treatments are prioritised over AGP treatments. We also have to take into account the length of the procedure, the exposure to aerosols without the use of an air rotor, e.g. patient coughing. Also, clinical students need training for PPE and fit testing. We have educational videos that are being produced to explain the new changes to practice safely.

f. AN: Is the Dental Hospital ready for the demands of PPE for research settings (given the current level of shortages)?

PC: We are in a good place in terms of PPE so we have good stock levels.

g. AN: My daily commute to QMUL is no less than 3 hours on public transport (2 buses and 2 underground trains) and I am concerned because I would not wish to come into the Hospital for minimal activity and would prefer my day is condensed to do as much as possible so I make as fewer journeys as possible. Will there be sufficient access to the clinics to allow condensing the appointments while allowing a gap between patients for decontamination?

PC: We are applying to extend the working hours in the hospital, so instead of starting at 8am and closing 5pm, instead to close at 8pm. This could allow for 3 clinical sessions in the day with clearly identified times for clinical work and patient appointments so that the student can see as many patients as possible during the day in the hospital.

h. AN: For clinical studies that were interrupted due to the lockdown, how will the effect of COVID-19 be mitigated towards PhD degree completion? Will testing for COVID-19 be available for clinical PhD students prior to or during their clinical activity?

PC: Clinical studies need to be creative and think about how it can be different. For undergraduate students, their progression will be the same however their assessment and training will be different but remain as robust and valid to meet GDC requirement. You should discuss with your supervisor what you can be doing that is productive and can be counted as meaningful and equivalent to the time not spent in the lab or with patients. It would be good to think in creative ways about your research rather than stop completely for 3 months and then tag on 3 months at the end of the PhD period. We are working on providing testing for staff as well as patients.

i. AN: Instead of QM desktops in our offices, will it be possible to provide us with QM laptops to access the QM network and subscription-based software?

PC: We can arrange access to some softwares as required, and access to the building can be arranged in case students need to physically get some data. Any specific network or software needs can be discussed with your supervisors who can then contact Lorna Ireland who would be able to help. Bench fees can be used as well for softwares to help with the projects if required, after discussing this with your supervisors.

j. NB: In the Blizzard dept., most of us work close to each other, and even the distance between any two desks is less than 1 M. May we all know, how university plan to tackle this issue.

PC: The labs will require a sign-off before opening to make sure they comply with social distancing rules and safety of staff and students. This is being worked on already.

- k. NB: On any Normal day, we have 24 hours' lab access, as most of our experiment needs long time, and students sometimes have to continue their work late night, or sometimes into the early morning hours. May we all know if the University has plans to change this by reducing lab access? Not having 24 hours lab access can be very detrimental for our experiments.
PC: 24 hours access will not be feasible. Instead, the labs will be accessible from 9am to 9pm which hopefully will allow enough time for access and completing the work.
- l. NB: In case of a second wave of COVID-19 starts during research, what will happen to the research and students who are already in the middle of their research?
PC: It will be the same as now, but let's just hope a second wave does not happen. We never know and we are all nervous about that. It is unlikely to have another sudden lockdown like what we had as we are anticipating such a wave. So when you are back to your research, may be you need to re-think and re-structure your project in case a second wave happens so that you are able to collect data when possible, and do other aspects of research during lockdown.

Q&A Part 3 with the Student Support Officers

Coming back to the Study, after a long time, can be tough for students. Is there any way University can help students to keep their Motivation high by providing some kind of counselling and support?

MP and RH: students are welcome to, and should contact SSO for any concerns they have and we will be happy to help in any way possible.

AN: The Doctoral College is arranging a session of practical advice for PhD students (Q&A) on Monday 8 June 2020. Perhaps the SSO and the Research Manager (AK) could organise a similar session for IoD PhD students.

MRM: Question for RH of SSO: there are several PhD students in the Dental Physics Unit who have zero-hour contracts as demonstrators in the lab. Due to the lockdown, can these students receive some compensation for not being able to work as demonstrators, i.e. loss of income?

RH: Happy to look into this further with the relevant departments in the university but would need an email with some further information about these students and their contracts so the proper advice can be sought.

NB: Before the lockdown, there used to be meetings for PhD student support groups. Are there similar meetings taking place online to help PhD students?

MP: SSO (RH and DH) have been holding a Q&A online Teams meetings for IoD PhD students, but turn-out was not great. However, if details can be provided about meetings that have taken place for PhD students in Blizzard, then perhaps further meetings can be arranged by merging meetings for more than one group.

Miscellaneous questions which may have been answered above

Q: Do we have to travel to the university everyday as before for the working hours of 9am to 5pm (our core hours of 10am to 4pm)? how can we avoid rush hours on public transport during COVID-19?

A: Answered previously by ZP and PC that working hours will be extended to allow flexible access.

Q: If I have kids who are not back at school, and/or kids who require school drop offs and pick-ups, will I be expected to maintain the same level of attendance as before? Can this be substituted with remote working where possible?

A: Answered previously by ZP and PC that if any work can be done remotely then no obligation on attending the university.

Q: If extensions/interruptions are granted, does this mean they can work from home if possible? Or is it necessary they must come in?

A: Answered previously by ZP and PC that if they can work from home, then no obligation to attend.