A screenshot of a cell phone

Description automatically generated

Ms Fiona Zammit

Executive Officer

Australian Council of Graduate Research

Dear Ms Zammit

The Government is concerned about the impact of COVID-19 on higher education providers (HEPs) and higher degree research (HDR) students and has taken on feedback received seeking additional support.

**Temporary measures for the research block grants**

In response to sector concerns, the Hon Dan Tehan MP, Minister for Education, has approved two temporary measures to provide funding certainty to HEPs and more flexibility to support students with Research Training Program (RTP) scholarships.

Twelve month extension of research block grants transitional arrangements

The current research block grants (RBG) transitional arrangements are scheduled to cease at the end of 2020. The arrangements consist of:

·         a safety net for Research Support Program funding to ensure that no HEP receives less than 95 per cent (indexed) of its funding from the previous year’s allocations.

·         75 per cent of RTP funding is based on a HEP’s previous year’s allocations, with the remaining 25 per cent determined by applying the funding formulae.

These transitional arrangements will be extended by 12 months until the end of 2021. This will provide for continued stability in RBG allocations during a period of great uncertainty.

Optional six month extension in the period of support for RTP scholarships

HEPs currently have discretion to extend RTP support up to a maximum of four years for research doctorate students and two years for research masters students.

These maximum periods of RTP scholarship support will be temporarily extended to allow research programs to be extended by up to six months for students whose research activities have been materially adversely impacted by coronavirus restrictions. This new provision will be available to current students, enrolled as at 1 March 2020, at the discretion of HEPs. This will enable HEPs to support eligible research doctorate students for a maximum period of four years and six months and research masters students for up to two years and six months.

**Current RTP conditions**

In relation to the existing RTP conditions, the Government wants to ensure that HEPs are also considering currently available flexibilities for RTP students. Some of the flexibility available under the current [RTP Guidelines](https://www.legislation.gov.au/Details/F2019C00917) is highlighted below.

Suspension of RTP scholarships

Where it is clear that a student is unable to adequately continue their course due to restrictions imposed under the coronavirus pandemic, HEPs have discretion to either suspend a student’s RTP scholarship (preserving a student’s period of support) or continue the student’s enrolment (consuming some of the student’s period of support).

Leave entitlements

Paid leave can be used to support RTP stipend recipients during the coronavirus pandemic. Provisions include 20 days paid recreation leave and 10 days paid sick leave for each year of the RTP stipend, which can be accrued between years. RTP students are also able to receive additional paid sick leave of up to a total of 60 working days where a student has insufficient sick leave entitlements available. Both the standard sick leave entitlements and the additional paid sick leave can be used for students with family caring responsibilities, subject to the usual practice of a HEP.

While students are required to provide a medical certificate for sick leave, HEPs have discretion in determining what is considered as alternative acceptable documentation. Medical certificates can therefore be provided by both medical and other health professionals, and can also take account of the broader health and caring requirements of RTP students during the coronavirus pandemic.

Rollover of unexpended RTP funding and 10 per cent cap on overseas students

Under the current legislation, HEPs must seek approval from the department to roll over any unexpended RTP funding and can only spend a maximum of 10 per cent of RTP funding on overseas students.

Given the inherent complexities in managing domestic and overseas RTP student pipelines during the coronavirus pandemic, the department anticipates that many HEPs may struggle in 2020 to maintain the expenditure patterns of previous years. Where a HEP expects to have unexpended RTP funds or to exceed the 10 per cent cap in relation the 2020 grant year, and advises the department during the year this is possible, the department will not seek to impose penalties. HEPs facing these circumstances should contact the RB Grants inbox ([RBGrants@dese.gov.au](mailto:RBgrants@dese.gov.au)) in the first instance to begin discussions.

**Amendments to legislative guidelines for temporary RBG measures**

The two temporary measures above will be implemented through amendments to the *Commonwealth Scholarships Guidelines (Research) 2017 and Other Grant Guidelines (Research) 2017*. The RBG team will advise you when amendments to the RTP Guidelines have taken effect.

Any questions regarding the current RTP conditions and proposed amendments should be emailed to [RBGrants@dese.gov.au](mailto:RBGrants@dese.gov.au).

Regards

**Dom English**

First Assistant Secretary

Higher Education

Australian Government Department of Education, Skills and Employment

[www.dese.gov.au](http://www.dese.gov.au/)

EA: Ahna Hogan, [Ahna.Hogan@dese.gov.au](mailto:Ahna.Hogan@dese.gov.au), 02 6240 5193