

COVID-19 Info for Research Students: Update #4 (9 April 2020)

Kia ora Graduate Research Students

We hope this Update #4 finds you well and doing your best to adapt to the challenges created by the COVID-19 pandemic. Our teams at the Graduate Research School, Faculty and School Postgraduate Offices and your supervisors continue to do all we can to support you through these difficult times. We understand that the uncertainty this situation is creating can cause anxiety. This Update is intended to help reduce this anxiety by providing information and guidance. If you have concerns or questions not addressed in this update (or previous updates) please email us at grs@aut.ac.nz. Also, please do stay in regular contact with your supervisors, we are all here to help you.

New Zealand COVID-19 Alert Levels

New Zealand's COVID-19 Alert Level 4 remains in place and all **AUT campuses and facilities are closed**. We have not been given a specific date that Alert Level 4 will be lifted. When it is lifted, it is likely we will step back to Alert Level 3. This will continue to restrict movements and require an extension of social distancing protocols, and this will continue to constrain some graduate research progress.

You can find the latest information on COVID-19 from New Zealand's [COVID-19 information website](#) and via the [Ministry of Health website](#). AUT maintains up-to-date information on our [COVID-19 update page](#), and doctoral candidates can also access the [AUTi COVID-19](#) staff intranet page.

Financial Hardship and Support Options

We are receiving an increasing number of indications that some of you are struggling financially. For many of you, part-time casual employment opportunities have dramatically decreased and this income is important to meet living expenses (rent, food etc). There are financial support options available:

- a. Financial hardship grant: AUT's Student Hub manages a short-term financial hardship grant which can be made available via application for deserving students. Graduate research students (domestic and international) are eligible to apply. For more specific advice and information of potential sources of financial support for students please email: studenthub@aut.ac.nz
- b. NZ citizens and residents: "Kiwis" have a range of government support available to them via [Work and Income/ Te Hiranga Tangata](#). These include such things as help with living expenses and other forms of financial support.
- c. International students: All international students studying at New Zealand universities are required to hold a valid student visa issued by Immigration New Zealand. This visa requires applicants to demonstrate that they personally have a [minimum of NZD15,000 per annum to help cover their living expenses](#) while in New Zealand. It is expected that international students utilise these financial resources to meet their living expenses. Also see point a. above.
It is worthwhile noting that the New Zealand Government COVID-19 Wages Subsidy Scheme does include international students working in New Zealand where their employer has accessed this scheme.
- d. Tuition fees: AUT has not made a decision to reduce, waive or defer tuition fees at this time. While the physical facilities of our campuses are not accessible during the Alert Level 4 "lock-down" all other support services for graduate research students remain available and accessible (eg. library, Student Services, supervision advice, most licenced software, most databases via remote access, online examinations etc).

International Students

We understand that international students are particularly vulnerable during this time because you do not have your normal support networks close by. You may also be anxious about family and friends back home, and you do not have access to the same support options as New Zealanders. In addition, you are often living in small accommodation and sharing with others. It is important that you reach out if you need help, stay in regular contact with your supervisors, and stay in touch with people. For example, you can form a regular on-line “chat-group” with other students (also see our new “chat with Annalise” sessions outlined in the “Staying connected” section below).

Advice with regard to different scenarios for international students

- a. In NZ with a current student visa: All international students currently in New Zealand with a student visa due to expire between 2 April and 9 July have been given an “interim student visa” until 25 September 2020 by Immigration New Zealand (INZ). INZ is not currently processing individual extension applications during the Alert Level 4 “lockdown”, hence this “blanket” extension via issuing an interim visa.
- b. Accepted and outside NZ with a current student visa: INZ has announced that all currently issued student visas will remain valid through 2021. For students who are due to begin enrolment before the end of April we suggest deferring until such time as we know what Alert Level New Zealand will be in from May 2020 and who will be permitted to travel to New Zealand.
- c. Accepted and outside NZ, no visa yet: We suggest that these students defer their plans for enrolment until such time as Immigration New Zealand re-starts processing international student visas and they receive their visa.
- d. Applying for admission from outside NZ: We are continuing to process applications for admission into our postgraduate research programmes and encourage students to continue to apply. If you are admitted you can remain in this status and defer starting enrolment for up to 12 months.

AUT Doctoral Scholarship Recipients

- a. Current AUT doctoral scholarships: The conditions of these scholarships remain unchanged (and payments of stipends continue to be made). If, due to COVID-19 disruption, there is a need to apply for an extension to a scholarship these will be considered on a case-by-case basis towards the end of the scholarship tenure. The AUT Scholarships Office is currently preparing an application form for scholarship extensions and this will be shared soon.
- b. Externally funded doctoral scholarships: The agreements and conditions relating to these scholarships are individual and need to be considered in terms of the specifics of those agreements. If supervisors are the Principal Investigator (PI) on an externally funded project which includes funding/scholarship support for a doctoral student, the supervisor/PI is asked to ensure that the existing support agreement for the student is adhered to if at all possible. If not, then please explore how the project budget can be re-worked (in partnership with the funder) to ensure that the student’s support is able to continue.

Deadlines and Milestones

- a. Confirmation of candidature (PGR9): Each faculty manages the confirmation of candidature process for doctoral students. Faculties have been asked to work through how PGR9 processes can continue remotely at present. You should seek advice from your Primary Supervisor and the Faculty Postgraduate Office on PGR9 processes if you are due to complete your PGR9 in the next two months.
- b. Doctoral oral examinations: The Graduate Research School is now running doctoral oral examinations remotely (via Zoom). All supervisors, students, examiners and convenor with oral examinations scheduled in April and May have been contacted and protocols for online oral examinations have been developed and shared.

- c. Masters (thesis/dissertation) and Honours (dissertation) students: Currently due dates remain unchanged but consideration is being given to how we might extend these for students delayed as a consequence of COVID-19.
- d. Extensions/Leave of Absence and PGR8 Progress Reports: We will be adding a section to the PGR8 Progress Reports which asks students and their supervisors to reflect on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the student's progress. This can be used as a basis for an accompanying extension or leave of absence request.

Research Student's Tuition Fees

Because the implications of the COVID-19 disruption are not yet able to be quantified and because they are likely to be different for each research student, no decisions have been made with regard to changes to tuition fees (such as fee waivers). Currently enrolled students are still liable for tuition fee payments as per the invoices received.

Research Ethics Approvals

Please remember that as a research student your research ethics approval is usually held by your Primary Supervisor. As a consequence, your Primary Supervisor holds responsibility for ensuring that the relevant approvals and directives from AUTECH are adhered to. AUTECH has decided to suspend all ethics approvals that require physical proximity with people until the public health Alert Level reduces below 2.

This means that you may not collect data or recruit participants for research where your method means that you are near people, e.g. interviews, focus groups, observations, performance tests, or anything where you are in the same space as their participants. If you wish to change to use online or other remote means to collect data or recruit participants, then you will need to seek an amendment to your AUTECH approval via your Primary Supervisor. When considering such an amendment, AUTECH will take into account public health and ethical issues, including informed and voluntary consent, within the context of social distancing and self-isolation. If you already have approval to use online or other remote means to collect data, then you may continue to do so in accordance with that approval.

Online resources and learning opportunities

The Graduate Research School (GRS) is continuing to develop and offer online resources for graduate research students and their supervisors on the [Student Digital Workspace \(SDW\)](#) and [Thesislink](#). Have a look, you may find these resources helpful.

Staying connected

We encourage you to stay in regular communication with your supervisors (a minimum of a weekly "catch-up" is recommended).

The Graduate Research School is also hosting online chats during the week for postgraduate research students. If you have any questions related to research support, or you just want company to chat about your day over coffee, drop in for a chat with GRS staff member Annalise Davidson.

The online drop-in sessions are scheduled on:

- Tuesdays and Thursdays at 10:30am-11:00am*
Group sessions
[Access through Zoom](#)
- Tuesdays and Thursdays at 2:30pm-3:00pm*
One-on-one sessions
[Access through Zoom](#)

**Sessions may change subject to demand*

You do not need to attend the full duration of the session, just simply drop in whenever you're ready. There may be a short wait for Annalise to be available for a chat.

Mental Health and Wellbeing Advice and Support

This continues to be a challenging time for all of us. Please also recognise the pressure your supervisors are under as they work to develop online teaching resources that they have been asked to deliver from the end of this month. It is important we look after ourselves and that we are patient and kind with one another. Remember our student wellbeing team can support you if you are struggling. There are a variety of services available to you including:

- **R U OK Online:** The R U OK Advisor team have an online presence via the [R U OK Facebook page](#). If you want to talk to someone and stay connected with other students, you can join the page and send a message to the team. They are also able to connect you with AUT Student Services and resources.
- **AUT wellbeing:** You can make an appointment with an AUT Counsellor to talk about your support needs. Phone 09 921 9292 or email counselling@aut.ac.nz.
- Students also have access to **free alternative counselling services**, which are private and accessible online or over the phone. Visit www.puawaitanga.nz/aut or phone 0800 782 999.
- You can also **call or text 1737 for free** any time of the day or night, to speak to a trained counsellor.
- The New Zealand Ministry of Health has some [helpful tips for staying healthy and well](#) during this "lockdown" period.

Enquiries, questions and concerns

If you have any specific concerns, questions or issues you would like help with, please email the GRS grs@aut.ac.nz and we will do all we can to help you.

Noho ora mai rā

Graduate Research School Team