

Supporting graduates and precarious academics at the start of the Coronavirus crisis

by Carol Atack and Greg Gilles

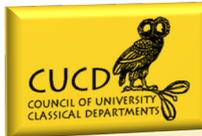
The Coronavirus emergency and lockdown had an immediate financial impact on under-funded graduate students and precariously employed early-career academics. As universities and other businesses stopped their regular operations during March, the paid casual work on which many students and early career academics depended for living expenses dried up almost immediately. Much of this work was done on zero-hour contracts or without any contract at all.

As the lockdown continues, the impact on education is developing and those with previously secure jobs are facing redundancy and pay cuts; but the impact on students and casualised workers was immediate, and in some cases devastating. This short paper describes two schemes set up to provide emergency assistance to classicists in need, and illustrates some of the difficulties faced by colleagues and students.

That the shutdown caused immediate financial crisis for students in this situation became clear very quickly. Smaller, student-run and specialist interest groups appeared best placed to respond. First off the ground was graduate journal and conference organiser [New Classicists](#), with a scheme offering immediate small grants to graduate students in Classics, publicised via messages to the Classicists-I email list (the 'Liverpool list') and through their Twitter and Facebook feeds. This was followed by a scheme from the [Women's Classical Committee UK](#), offering grants to graduate students and early-career classicists. Details of the WCC scheme are on-line [here](#).

By the end of April 2020 these two schemes had disbursed just under £4500 to around 40 applicants, many of them doctoral students without full funding but also including students on various master's level courses. The majority of applicants were studying and/or working in UK Classics departments; some were EU or international students, and New Classicists provided grants to some students studying outside the UK. Applications to the scheme revealed stark realities of the precarity of those graduate students who do not have full funding packages from research councils and institutions but rely on a combination of loans and casual work. Fully funded doctoral students in their third year were given some relief by the announcement that their funding would be extended by six months.

Both schemes asked applicants to provide brief details of their situation; in practice, many gave much more detailed accounts of the impact of the crisis on their financial stability. Many graduate students are only partially funded, if at all, and many have taken out loans for course fees and some of their living expenses. Some students may have their own savings, or support from their families. Others have not had the opportunity to work and build up financial reserves and resilience. These students have typically taken part-time jobs to cover their living expenses. Even fully funded students find it hard to manage on their stipends, especially those living in university cities with high rents and other living expenses. Students who were



managing to stay afloat with a mixture of loans, stipends and paid work often had no savings or reserves on which to draw.

Many of the applicants had shown considerable dedication and commitment in finding paid work, and in juggling that work and study. Their hardship was due to the sudden loss of paid work. International students also faced the dilemma of whether to return home, balancing the costs of emergency travel with the costs of unwinding rental agreements and other UK financial commitments. And many graduate students do not regard the parental home as their primary residence

These anonymised case studies are taken with permission from applications to the funds.

PhD students in their unfunded writing-up fourth year were particularly hard hit. These case studies are representative of several applications from doctoral students who were writing up or in the process of submission:

I am in the writing up stage of my PhD and have been self-funding for my writing-up year fees and for living costs throughout the 2019-20 academic year. I currently have an administrative role at my university which is a zero-hours contract that has now been postponed indefinitely. I had also applied to work on a summer school course, which is no longer taking place due to COVID-19. As a result of this, I currently have no form of income and none that I have been able to secure for the coming months.

This academic year I have no funding at all, so I am self-funding for living expenses... I have received no help so far.

Working three jobs, as a Graduate Teaching Assistant, private home tutor and half-term teacher for a secondary school, all of my sources of income suddenly vanished. I have received no help so far from my university, and I cannot be furloughed by the school as I had not been working in the month before lockdown. This all leaves me with bills to pay and no sources of income whatsoever.

Self-funded and partially-funded students at all stages of their courses reported difficulties due to the loss of the paid work which enabled them to maintain themselves. Many described great efforts earlier during the academic year to secure employment, apply for grants and other forms of funding, and had succeeded in maintaining themselves until the lockdown saw their work evaporate:

I am an entirely self-funded student and am working part-time to make ends meet. The lockdown has resulted in a severe reduction in my work hours, resulting in my usual income being cut in half. This has left me uncertain as to whether I will be able to make rent and bill payments on time.

For students on masters-level courses (and fully funded doctoral students), the timing of the crisis was particularly difficult for those with termly stipends or loans, many of them relying on part-time wages for living costs as they awaited the next term's loan instalment. For these students, the grants offered by these projects helped them meet essential bills and buy food till those funds arrived.

I cannot express how grateful I am for the WCC emergency grant I received last month, thanks to your generosity I was able to keep myself financially afloat until the final student loan instalment came through.



Some applicants with zero-hour contracts outside academia reported that they would eventually receive furlough payments from government schemes for those jobs, but that this would be at a low rate, and only applied to a proportion of their income.

Many applicants were not just relieved to have the possibility of some financial support from these schemes, but also valued the understanding and awareness of their situations shown by the schemes. Some reported receiving little contact or support from their departments; others had been directed to the schemes by concerned supervisors and departmental pastoral staff. In several cases, the work lost had been work for the university.

Later applications to the scheme suggested that departmental and university hardship schemes were responding to the crisis and open for applications, but some university schemes were restricted to specific expenses such as emergency travel. Some applicants also reported that they were not eligible for schemes offered by their university – for example, some university hardship funds for graduate students excluded those who had already submitted. Nor would funds be available immediately. Schemes at some institutions required approval by a governing body that would meet ‘in a month’. Yet graduate students were among those struggling most with the changed situation, because they very rarely had any funding or savings.

In summary, the situation for under-funded graduate students was bleak. The economic lockdown had changed the picture completely from the situation when students began their courses and assessed the level of financial risk involved in unfunded or partially funded graduate study.

Although the picture emerging from applications was bleak, some academics and their departments responded well and were finding additional ways to support students in need. At the WCC AGM in April, attendees shared examples of good practice from their own departments:

- For departments, repurposing any discretionary funds still available (such as travel, research, conference funds) to support precarious graduate students, either through providing short-term project work or funding short-term studentships.
- For individual academics, using personal research and travel funds which would otherwise not be spent due to travel restrictions: examples included senior academics providing work opportunities for students, for example paying them for editorial assistance in formatting papers and indexing books.
- In some institutional frameworks (particularly Oxford and Cambridge), directors of studies and organising tutors were finding replacement teaching work for graduate students: for example, giving more college supervision or tutorial work to precarious early-career researchers or unfunded graduate students rather than salaried permanent staff.

It is to be hoped that all senior classicists in secure employment have considered what they can do for the precarious students in their departments; the subject’s learned societies might also consider what they might do. Learned societies with charitable status are in a better position to raise new funds for such grants than unincorporated bodies such as the WCC UK or New Classicists. In the USA, the Society for Classical Studies has partnered with the Women’s Classical Caucus (which has a formal relationship with it) to run an [emergency grant](#)



Bulletin 49 (2020) <https://cucd.blogs.sas.ac.uk/bulletin/>

[scheme](#), using in part funds previously earmarked for travel and bursary support for Feminism and Classics 2020. A further community initiative is the launch (May 2020) of [Sportula Europe](#), 'a mutual aid network of Classics and Classics-adjacent graduate students and early careers researchers', which is 'committed to ensuring that students from working-class and historically exploited and oppressed communities do not fall through the cracks left by more traditional scholarship and funding schemes', and builds on the work of its US parent.

What about the future? With the lockdown set to continue, and universities facing huge loss of income and budget constraints, there will be continuing risks for under-funded graduate students in supporting themselves through their courses. It may be that departments will no longer be able to rely on students taking on personal debt and financial risk to fill their seminars. Will self or partially funded students be able to continue their studies as the pandemic continues, or in its immediate aftermath?

Job security for established academics may also be under threat. The reduction in opportunities within universities – such as hiring freezes and suspension of graduate and early-career teaching schemes – will affect many academics. This separate and further crisis that has received some attention, as in Stefan Collini's recent *Guardian* article '[Covid-19 shows up UK universities' shameful employment practices](#)', as well as continuing [UCU campaigns](#) at national and local level. All of these issues deserve our urgent attention.

But the financial crisis has had its most sudden and damaging impact on precarious individuals at the beginning of their working lives, and those in this situation surely deserve the best support we can give them.

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