

Graduate School

**Monitoring and assessing
the progress of doctoral
researchers:
Good Practice Guide**

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1. Introduction to the Guide

The University *Code of Practice on Research Students* summarises and enshrines our current policy on monitoring the progress of students on research degrees, also referred to as doctoral researchers (though the terms will be used interchangeably in this guide). The purpose of this guide is to provide additional, detailed information and suggestions for good practice where relevant. The guide primarily relates to monitoring and assessing the progress of PhD students, although parts of it will also be relevant for those studying for MPhil degrees. It does not apply to those studying for Professional Doctorates, LLM or MRes degrees.

In addition to the *University Code of Practice on Research Students*, this guide also complements a number of other sources of relevant information including, School / Department Postgraduate Research Student Handbooks, Ordinance V, and other documents within section 9 of the Guide to Policy and Procedures for Teaching and Learning.

2. The purpose of monitoring progress

From a University perspective, the purpose of monitoring and assessing progress is to ensure that research students are making satisfactory progress and are receiving appropriate levels of supervision, training, and support. In addition, the performance of our research students, in terms of their submission and qualification rates, is increasingly being assessed and used by external bodies such as the Research Councils and HEFCE. Some information is also now made publicly available so that other Universities, potential students and their sponsors can see how well we perform.

3. Key stages

Annual monitoring

In order to ensure that a student progresses to a successful and timely completion it is necessary to monitor progress at regular stages throughout their doctoral studies. University policies stipulate that formal monitoring must be conducted at least once a year for all research students (including 'part-time' and 'working away'). Some Schools / Departments may wish to supplement this requirement with additional progress checks (for example, during the first six months, or in the later 'writing up' stage). This annual monitoring should include an evaluation by students of their supervisory arrangements.

Confirmation of registration (Formal review stage)

From the start of 2010-11, research students who are studying for a PhD register at entry for a PhD, rather than for an MPhil / PhD. In line with this change, the process previously referred to as 'transfer of registration' (to PhD status) and taking place part way through their programme, has been revised. There remains a rigorous, formal assessment of progress (known as 'confirmation of registration') at an equivalent stage of progress (see section 5 below), which may result in the student being transferred to MPhil status or to the student being referred to the University's procedures for PhD & MPhil Student Academic Engagement and Fitness to Study, which might ultimately lead to their registration being discontinued.

4. General points that apply to all stages

a. School, Graduate School and Faculty roles and responsibilities

Schools have full responsibility for monitoring and assessing the progress of their research students, for making decisions about whether registration should be continued each year and for making decisions about whether or not students' registration should be confirmed as PhD at the appropriate time; this is outlined in more detail in section 5 below.

In Schools where research student matters are primarily organised on a departmental basis, Schools can delegate some responsibility for monitoring and assessing progress to Departments, and the process can be overseen by Department Directors of Postgraduate Research Studies. However, any decisions relating to recommendations for a transfer of status from PhD to MPhil (at the confirmation of registration stage), or to registration being terminated at any stage during the programme, should be referred to the Head of School.

School / Department Directors of Postgraduate Research Studies (PGRS) are responsible for ensuring that the monitoring / assessment process is carried out during the expected timescale and that the outcome is reported to the Doctoral Research Office within the Graduate School (see section 4c below). They are also responsible for ensuring that formal records of all reports (including the evaluations of supervisory arrangements) are kept on file within Schools. Directors should read all assessor reports and follow up any concerns that are raised. Where appropriate, remedial action should be agreed with the student and supervisor/s, and a further assessment arranged. If, on the basis of reports received, the Director feels that the student is making insufficient progress to be permitted to continue, he / she should

raise the matter with the Head of School (and also the Department where applicable) (see sections 5 and 7 below).

School / Department Research Committees would NOT normally be responsible for overseeing the progress of individual students. This may be done in a School / Department PGRS committee, or may be a matter for discussion between the Director of PGRS and the Head of School / Department, depending on the organisational structures within the School. However, Research Committees should maintain oversight of submission and qualification rates and other relevant indicators.

The Doctoral Research Office, based within the Graduate School, provides a further level of quality assurance in terms of ensuring that assessments of progress have taken place at the appropriate time, that all annual updates on progress have been received and logged, that progress is deemed to be satisfactory and, if not, that appropriate remedial action is being taken or a change in registration status is being recommended. Where appropriate, the Doctoral Research Office staff will inform the Dean of Postgraduate Research Studies of any instances of Schools failing to comply with agreed practice.

Faculty Postgraduate Research Studies Committees need to maintain an oversight of submission and qualification rates and other relevant indicators across the University. They also need to receive regular information on the number of extensions and suspensions that have been agreed. However, they do not receive detailed information about the status of individual students.

b. Selection of monitors / assessors within Schools / Departments

Progress should normally be assessed by at least two individuals who are 'independent', i.e. they are not supervisors of the student in question. They should have experience of supervising PhD students and preferably at least one should have some familiarity with the broad area of research in question. These individuals are sometimes referred to as 'monitors' and can, for example, be the School Director of PGR Studies or a nominated colleague. It is acceptable for monitors / assessors subsequently to act as internal examiners for students they have been involved in monitoring during their programme. Where students are supervised by one or more people from another School or organisation, it is preferable for there to be a monitor / assessor appointed that each School (or organisation).

Some Schools set up larger 'monitoring teams' that include the supervisor/s. In such cases, there should always be at least one member of the team who is not involved in supervision. Any decisions relating to whether the student has shown sufficient

progress in order to proceed to the next stage must be made without the involvement of the supervisor/s.

It is good practice for there to be some continuity in terms of who acts as a 'monitor' for a particular student over the course of their registration.

c. **Reporting**

Please note that standard University templates for reports by students, supervisors and assessors are available at:

<http://www.reading.ac.uk/graduateschool/supervisorsandresearchstaff/gs-staff-policies-and-procedures.aspx>

i) Student reports:

At least once per year, each student should produce a written report outlining their progress during the preceding year (or interval since last assessment if more frequent). The content of these reports should ideally be discussed with their supervisor/s before submission. Schools will want to specify the precise format of these reports but they should cover the following areas;

- summary of work completed, including written work
- a plan for the following year, including plans for publications or other outputs
- what subject-specific and generic research skills training undertaken
- what demonstrating or other University-related work has been carried out

Reports must be sufficiently detailed in order to be used as evidence in cases where PhD and MPhil Student Academic Engagement and Fitness to Study procedures are later invoked, or where students appeal against decisions resulting from the confirmation of registration process.

If students fail to submit a report within two weeks of the due date (and no extension has been approved), they should be sent a warning letter from the Head of School to inform them that if they do not submit a report within three weeks (5 weeks from the original due date) they will be subject to the University's PhD and MPhil Academic Engagement and Fitness to Study procedures and their registration may be suspended. Letters should be copied to the Doctoral Research Office.

Oral presentations:

In addition to written progress reports, each student would normally be expected to give at least two oral presentations of their work to an appropriate audience within their School / Department / Research Group during the course of their programme.

ii) Supervisor reports:

At least once per year, each supervisor should also produce a written report for each student whom they supervise, commenting on the progress of the student in question. Again the precise format of these reports will vary across Schools, but reports should cover the following areas;

- whether progress is deemed to be satisfactory and, if not, what actions could be taken to ensure that progress becomes satisfactory
- the standard of any written work submitted
- whether the student has given an oral presentation of his / her work to an appropriate audience within the School / Department since the last progress review
- the appropriateness of the training activities undertaken by the student with reference, where appropriate, to the initial Learning Needs Analysis
- an anticipated completion date

Students should receive for information a copy of the supervisors' reports.

iii) Assessor reports:

The assessors should produce a joint written report based on reading the student and supervisor reports and preferably on meeting with the student in question (see section 5 below). The report should comment on the student's progress to date and their likelihood of completing on time. It should outline any concerns and, where appropriate, suggest actions that might be taken to alleviate these. The report should include a clear recommendation as to whether registration should be continued and, during the confirmation stage, whether or not a change in registration is warranted.

Students should receive a copy of the joint assessors' report.

d. Evaluation of supervisory arrangements

Students should also be asked to comment on the adequacy of their supervisory arrangements at each stage of the monitoring process. A standard University-wide

form is available for this¹. Completed forms should be returned to the School Postgraduate Office / PGR Administrator and in most cases will be considered by the School / Department Director of PGRS. Where concerns are raised, the Director should speak to the student in question to ascertain further information and, if appropriate, raise any concerns with the supervisor and / or Head of School / Department. Students who are supervised by the Director of Postgraduate Research Studies should submit completed forms for consideration by the Head of School/Department.

e. Assessment of Research Training

The assessment of student progress should include an assessment of what subject-specific and generic research skills training has been undertaken and whether the nature and amount of this is appropriate to the students' needs. Information on research training should be provided in the student's report and comment should be made on this as part of the supervisor's report.

f. Record keeping

It is essential for Schools / Departments to keep a record of all student, supervisor and assessor reports for each student for the duration of the registration of the student. In larger Schools, this task may be allocated to a specified member of administrative staff. However, as mentioned in section 3.1, it is the responsibility of the School Director of PGRS to ensure that appropriate record keeping takes place.

5. Detailed Procedure for Annual Progress Checks

During year 1

1. During induction, or an equivalent session for students who do not join in the Autumn Term, students should be informed about the role (and expectations) of supervisors, the role of the School / Department Director of PGRS, and the nature of the monitoring / assessment process.
2. During the first term of registration, Schools should determine who will be responsible for assessing the progress of each student (at least in year 1).
3. Progress of all students (including part-time and working away) should be assessed during their third term of registration (i.e. the summer term for those starting in October). At the start of the summer term, the Doctoral Research

¹ The standard University form for research students' evaluation of supervisory arrangements can be found via <http://www.reading.ac.uk/graduateschool/supervisorsandresearchstaff/gs-staff-policies-and-procedures.aspx>

Office will send to School Directors of PGRS a spreadsheet listing each student, with information to be completed by the School by the end of the summer term.

4. Reporting should follow the principles set out in section 4.c. Where the assessors' report indicates unsatisfactory progress, the student should normally be given advice on how to improve their performance and an opportunity to submit a revised report by a specified date. In any case where this is not appropriate, or this has been tried but progress is still unsatisfactory and the assessors recommend that registration should not be continued, the School / Department Director of PGRS must refer the case to the Head of School, who would need to consider invoking the University's PhD and MPhil Student Academic Engagement and Fitness to Study procedures, which may lead to the termination of the student's registration. Any correspondence with the student should be copied to the Doctoral Research Office.

Assessment and Confirmation of Registration

1. During year 2, full-time students will normally be assessed and considered for confirmation of registration as 'PhD'. At this stage, the progress of part-time students should continue to be assessed in the same way as in year 1.
2. For full-time students, the assessment for confirmation of registration should normally be carried out before the end of their fifth term (which allows time for any second assessment following completion of further work). For part-time students, this assessment would normally be carried out between 24 and 30 months from the start of their registration.
3. In addition to producing written progress reports (and in some Schools further written material), students should normally be seen in person by the monitors / assessors as part of the assessment process.
4. Recommendations for confirmation of registration (or otherwise) should be made on the basis of the following criteria:

Criteria for satisfying Confirmation of Registration

- a. Is the work presented by the student such as might reasonably be expected as a result of their having studied for the equivalent of around 12-18 months full-time for a PhD, depending on the timing of the confirmation process.
- b. Has the student shown that he or she is able to exercise independent critical judgement.
- c. Has the student demonstrated that he / she understands how his / her research topic is related to a wider field of knowledge.

- d. Has the student demonstrated the ability to produce an original contribution to knowledge
 - e. Is the amount and nature of the subject-specific and generic research skills training that has been undertaken by the student appropriate to his / her needs, as identified through a Learning Needs Analysis or similar process.
 - f. Is the student's work, and his / her understanding of it, of a standard that indicates that it will lead to the successful submission of a PhD thesis within 3-4 years full-time registration (or part-time equivalent)
6. Where progress is deemed to be satisfactory and therefore confirmation as a PhD student is granted, the School should then inform the Doctoral Research Office, who should then write to the student confirming that this is the case.
 7. Where assessors believe that these criteria are not met and do not recommend confirmation of PhD registration status, the student would normally be given advice on how to improve their performance and an opportunity to provide a further report and be re-interviewed (normally within three months). Where performance is still deemed to be unsatisfactory at this second assessment and the assessors recommend transfer to MPhil status, the School / Department Director of PGRS must seek the confirmation of the Head of School. Where, following any necessary consultation, the Head of School confirms the decision, he / she should send the student a formal letter indicating the decision, outlining the grounds on which that decision has been made. The letter should draw the student's attention to the process for appeals by research students against confirmation of registration decisions and the deadline by which any appeal must be submitted (see 8 below). The HoS should send a copy of the letter (with supporting documentation) to the Doctoral Research Office.
 8. Students wishing to appeal against decisions to transfer their registration to MPhil need to lodge a written appeal with the Dean of Postgraduate Research Studies, via the Doctoral Research Office, within two weeks of being informed in writing by the Head of School of the 'confirmation of registration' decision.
 9. In cases where assessors agree that progress is such that the student would be unable to attain either a PhD or an MPhil qualification and that registration should not be continued, the School / Department Director of PGRS must refer the case to the Head of School, who would need to consider invoking the University's PhD and MPhil Student Academic Engagement and Fitness to Study procedures, which may lead to the termination of the student's registration. Any correspondence with the student to this effect should be copied to the Doctoral Research Office.

Year 3 and beyond

1. It is important that regular contact is maintained by the School / Department Director of PGRS (in addition to supervisors) with each student during the writing-up phase. The Doctoral Research Office will email all students (copied to supervisors) 12 months and 3 months before the end of their maximum registration period to remind them that the end of this period is approaching. At the 3 month stage, they will be warned that their registration will be terminated if they do not submit by the maximum registration date, unless they have been granted an exceptional extension.
2. In such cases of non-submission, a formal letter informing students that their registration has been terminated is sent within 14 days of the maximum registration date. An appeals process is in place for students who wish to appeal the decision².
3. The School will have discretion to assess the likely ongoing requirements - in terms of supervision and access to facilities - of all students who are finishing their minimum registration period. On the basis of this assessment, the University will determine the appropriate fee level that should be applicable once the minimum period of registration has passed. Schools will be prompted by their Doctoral Research Office to provide this information towards the end of the minimum period of registration. Further information on the principles relating to fee levels for research students is included in the University *Calendar* (section H).

Professor Dianne Berry
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An electronic version of this guide is located on the Graduate School website at:
www.reading.ac.uk/gs-good-practice-guides.aspx

The various templates for reporting throughout the stages of progress monitoring are located on the Graduate School website at:
www.reading.ac.uk/gs-staff-policies-and-procedures.aspx

² The policy is located at <http://www.reading.ac.uk/web/FILES/graduateschool/pgrterminationappeals.pdf>