

# GOOD PRACTICE GUIDE

# MONITORING AND ASSESSING THE PROGRESS OF POSTGRADUATE RESEARCH STUDENTS

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## Introduction

The University *Code of Practice on Research Students* summarises and enshrines our current policy on monitoring the progress of students on research degrees. 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, and other documents within section 9 of the Guide to Policy and Procedures for Teaching and Learning.

## 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. Having good monitoring procedures in place has a direct positive influence on student submission rates.

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.

University policies stipulate that formal monitoring must be conducted at least once a year for all research students (including part-time and PhD by Distance and others who are studying away from the University). Where students are undergoing Confirmation of Registration, then this can be taken in lieu of an Annual Progress Review for that year of study.

We have learned from experience, that many students who are clearly experiencing difficulties as they reach the end of their registration period have not been monitored as closely as they should have been, or have been not been given sufficient explicit feedback about their performance following review meetings. Although this guide sets out the minimum requirements for progress monitoring, we strongly recommend that more frequent monitoring is carried out, with informal assessments taking place between formal monitoring points.

## School / Department 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. School Directors of PGR Studies are responsible for ensuring that monitoring / assessment of progress is carried out during the expected timescale and that the outcomes are recorded on by the appropriate PGR administrator within the Graduate School / Henley Business School. Directors are also responsible for ensuring that formal records of all reports are kept on file within Schools / Departments.

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 the Department Director of PGR Studies. However, any decisions **relating**

to recommendations for a transfer of status from PhD to MPhil registration, or to registration being terminated should be referred to the Head of School.

## **Selection of monitors / assessors within Schools**

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.

## **Forms and reporting**

New template forms were produced in March 2017 and are available on the Graduate School website (in the Staff section under Policies and Procedures). There are separate versions of these forms to be used for Annual Reviews and for Confirmation of Registration (COR). For both Annual Reviews and COR, there is a combined Student / Supervisor report and a separate Assessors' Report. School / Department PGR administrators should keep records of all forms, for each assessment undertaken, in their electronic student files, as these may need to be accessed and used as evidence if problems arise during the course of the student's registration.

The assessment of student progress should include an assessment of what subject-specific and generic research training has been undertaken and whether the nature and amount of this is appropriate for the student's needs. Schools can make some amendments to the standard forms (normally by adding one or more additional questions) to suit their needs. However, they should ensure that they do not delete any of the questions that are included. Schools should NOT be asking students to complete an Evaluation of Supervisory Requirements form – this is done centrally by the Graduate School.

## **Assessment of taught modules**

A number of Schools / Departments require students to undertake taught courses (usually in year 1 of their programme) and, in some cases, require students to attain a set minimum mark in order to progress. Where this is the case and a student does not attain the minimum mark, the student should be given support and allowed a further attempt to pass the examination / test. Should the student fail at second attempt, the School / Department will need to determine whether or not the student should be allowed to continue with his or her programme, or whether a change of registration, or termination

of registration is recommended. In cases where a change of registration or termination of registration is recommended, Schools should follow the process outlined in section 9.

## Recommended process

- During the Autumn or early Spring term, Schools will need to determine how they will run the monitoring process for that session.
- Ideally, the progress monitoring process should begin around March and be completed by the start of September. Where possible, 'out of cycle' students (e.g. those starting in January) should be mapped onto the standard timeframe.
- Students, supervisors and assessors will need to be informed of how the process will run, and of their roles. Students / supervisors will need to know who will be acting as assessors for the student concerned.
- Schools will need to agree, and inform students, whether all supervisors will be required to read student reports and to produce annual reports or whether this will be delegated to the lead supervisor.
- PGR administrators (or Directors in some Schools) need to send an electronic copy of the Student / Supervisor report form to each student, informing them that their section needs to be completed within four weeks and then forwarded to their supervisor/s (as agreed), and copied to the relevant administrator.
- Supervisors have two weeks to complete their section of the form, and then return the entire form (including the students' completed section) to the relevant administrator.
- Administrators will then forward the completed student / supervisor form to the relevant Assessors, together with a copy of the Assessors' form which is to be completed.
- For Annual Reviews of progress, it is preferable for meetings to be held with students (by Skype if necessary for those studying by distance), to discuss the contents of reports and to provide feedback. This is mandatory for Confirmation of Registration.

## Annual Reviews

- Two assessors are recommended for Annual Reviews. However, where this is problematic due to the availability of staff then a minimum of one assessor and one supervisor (or Director of PGR Studies) is acceptable.
- Assessors should be selected by the Director of PGR Studies.
- It is preferable that the student should be present at all Annual Review meetings.
- The student is responsible for arranging a meeting date with the assessors / supervisor/s.
- The student should inform the PGR administrator once the date is arranged. The administrator will assist with room bookings if required.
- Following the review meeting, the assessors should complete their form within one week and forward it to the PGR administrator.
- If progress is deemed to be satisfactory (i.e. the student is on track and the assessors are recommending that their registration continues), the PGR administrator should send a copy of the form to the student and supervisor/s. If this is not the case, the administrator needs to consult with the Director of PGR Studies and agree how feedback will be given.
- PGR administrators should inform the Head of the Doctoral Research Office about any cases where progress is deemed to be unsatisfactory, or where there have been undue delays to the process (e.g. students or supervisors have not completed forms as directed).

## Confirmation of Registration

- Two assessors must be used for Confirmation of Registration. Supervisors may or may not be involved in the process, but where they are involved they should not be present at the time when decisions are made by the assessors.
- Review meetings with students must be held; preferably in person but if this is not feasible SKYPE can be used.
- PGR administrators are normally responsible for arranging COR review meetings unless the Director of PGR Studies wishes otherwise.
- Assessors should consider a student's progress in line with the criteria listed in section 8 below. Where performance is judged to be unsatisfactory they should follow the procedures outlined in section 9.
- Following the review meeting, the assessors complete their form within one week and then forward it to the PGR administrator.
- PGR administrators need to agree with PGR Directors how feedback will be given to students / supervisors.
- It is essential that there are no undue delays to providing this feedback (nor indeed, to arranging meetings).
- Once informal feedback has been provided, PGR administrators should send an official notification of the outcome to the student via the RISIS portal.
- PGR administrators also need to inform the Head of the DRO of any cases where assessors are recommending a change of registration to MPhil or termination of registration.

## 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)

## Procedures to be followed where progress is not deemed to be satisfactory

- 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. The HoS should send a copy of the letter (with supporting documentation) to the Doctoral Research Office.

- 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.
- 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

- 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 6 months before the end of their maximum registration period to remind them that the end of this period is approaching.
- 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).

## Record keeping

- PGR administrators should maintain a spreadsheet which helps to track each student's progress. They should proactively ensure that there are not undue delays in the process.
- PGR administrators are also responsible for keeping copies of all completed student/ supervisor and assessor forms for each student until after graduation.

This guide, along with the various templates for reporting throughout the stages of progress monitoring, is located on the Graduate School website at:

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

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