

GUIDANCE FOR DEVELOPING CRITERIA FOR CONSIDERATION OF DISRUPTION TO RESEARCH FOR PGR STUDENTS IN ASSESSMENTS.

Introduction

1. In light of the Covid-19 pandemic the University has sought to develop a process that allows the disruption to planned research for postgraduate research (PGR) students to be taken into account at transfer, confirmation and viva examinations. The details of the process are provided in the sections below.
2. As criteria for passing transfer, confirmation and the viva are set at the divisional and/or departmental/faculty level, local guidance will need to be prepared and shared with relevant staff, PGR students and examiners (for transparency and simplicity, you may wish to prepare one document which is shared with all of the relevant audiences). This document outlines the process and is intended to assist with the preparation of that guidance. An example of completed guidance, from the Medical Sciences Division, is also provided in [Annex A](#).

Purpose

3. The purpose of this process is to allow for disruption to PGR students' planned research caused by the Covid-19 pandemic to be taken into account in milestone and viva assessments.
4. The process is intended to provide students who may need or wish to complete their milestone or viva examinations on time, but whose research has been disrupted by the pandemic, with a mechanism for doing so, provided they have met the standards of intellectual rigour and make a 'significant and substantial contribution' to the relevant field of research of standard required of a research degree, as set out in local regulations.

Scope of the process

5. This process is open to all PGR students. It is not a compulsory part of the examination process for milestones or the viva. The process is still open to students who have obtained a suspension or extension, as it is recognized that individual circumstances may change and it may not always be possible to completely mitigate the impact of the pandemic through these measures. It should be noted that although the process aims to assist students who wish to complete on time, it may also be used by students who have gone or are likely to go beyond the time limits for a milestone or submission of the thesis due to an agreed suspension or extension.
6. It is important to note that this is not a mitigating circumstances process; it is intended to deal with disruption to research arising from the pandemic. Issues arising from long-term illness, bereavement and the like should be dealt with through the normal mechanisms available, such as suspension, extension and changing a student's mode of study from full to part time, unless these circumstances have been caused by the pandemic and have contributed to the disruption caused.
7. The process mainly considers DPhils as they make up the majority of research degree students, but the process may be adapted to suit other forms of research degree.

Principles underpinning the process

8. The process has been developed with the following principles in mind:

- a. Where possible, plans for work and research should be adapted to accommodate the disruption caused by the pandemic. The process should be used where this is not possible and/or not possible in the time available;
- b. Use of the process should not compromise the academic integrity of the award, the threshold for the intellectual quality of the work produced should remain in place, as should the requirement for high quality research.

Producing guidance

9. The Policy and Guidance on Research Degrees requires that there be clear criteria for milestone assessments and the viva that a student's performance can be measured against. These should be the starting point in considering how the process may be applied. The Medical Sciences Division has provided an example of how these criteria can be adapted (see [Annex A](#)).
10. In line with the underpinning principles, the academic standards for each milestone and the viva itself should remain in place. However, there can be some flexibility in consideration of the scope and volume of work produced, provided it is clear that the student's planned work would have been sufficient. The sections below expand on how the process will work for each milestone assessment and should help with creating local guidance.

Early stages of DPhil (up to Transfer)

11. For some students at this stage, it may be possible to absorb the disruption caused by the pandemic by adjusting their planned research. For others, this may not be possible, e.g. where funding is tied closely to a specific project and timeframe that can no longer be met. In such cases, which are expected to be rare, it should be possible to make adjustments to the programme of work, e.g. rearranging the sequence of proposed research, or focussing on secondary research such as literature reviews.
12. Where primary research is considered essential for Transfer and cannot be adapted, detailed plans may be provided by the student in place of the actual research to describe how the student would have been conducting their work had it not been disrupted. A statement detailing the specific ways in which the pandemic had affected the student and/or their work should also be provided.
13. In these circumstances, if the student, the supervisor and the DGS agree that a Transfer examination should go ahead, then this may take place. (The final decision rests with the student who should be given clear advice and guidance on the options available and the potential consequences.)
14. Disruption caused by the pandemic should be recorded and excerpts from the student's log may also be included, should they wish. This should be considered by the examiners in determining whether a student has demonstrated that they have provided a sufficient body of evidence to demonstrate both the volume and standard of work required.
15. Guidance provided to examiners, staff and students should state clearly how local criteria for Transfer can be applied and how allowance for disruption can be taken into account using the GSO2 form. It is a good idea to provide an indicative word limit for student supporting statements, so that they have a guide in terms of how much to write, but the limit should not be applied proscriptively.

Second and third years (full-time equivalent) of DPhil (up to Confirmation)

16. Disruption in second and third years may be more significant as it is likely to happen when the bulk of a student's primary research is conducted. However, it may still be possible to adapt the research conducted and complete on time depending on the student's experience and the impact of the disruption felt. Confirmation provides an opportunity to assess progress and determine whether it is feasible for the DPhil to be completed on time.
17. Depending upon the progress made and the nature of the research, the pandemic may result in odd patterns or diversions in research. For example, some students may have been redeployed to carry out research on the coronavirus which is closely related to their original thesis topic. In such cases, there is a strong argument for permitting this new research, as long as it would qualify as part of 'a significant and substantial contribution to the field', to be included within the thesis.
18. Confirmation is intended to confirm that a student is on course to submit within the next three terms (if full-time, six terms if part-time). In submitting for Confirmation, the DPhil student will need to demonstrate that, despite the disruption to their research, there is still a sufficient body of work available for a judgement to be made at Confirmation by the examiners, and that it will still be possible to produce a full thesis in the expected timeframe.
19. As with Transfer, the student may include an account of research that would have been undertaken but for the pandemic and how it would have contributed to the thesis, or details of the research undertaken instead of that originally planned. The examiners may take this into account when determining whether a student has met the requirements of Confirmation. There would still need to be sufficient evidence that a student had the aptitude and ability required to meet the requirements of Confirmation and had made sufficient progress in producing a thesis (so it would not be possible to pass if no primary research had been undertaken at all).
20. It may be harder for examiners to make an allowance for the impact of the pandemic at Confirmation than at Transfer as Confirmation is concerned with demonstrating the ability to complete a thesis of the required standard. Examiners may expect students to spend more time making good on disrupted research rather than accepting the prospect of an incomplete thesis.
21. Therefore, the guidance for Confirmation will need to state what allowances may be permitted. Any allowances made cannot compromise academic standards or put at risk the student's ability to complete the thesis on time to the requisite standard. However, it may be possible to make allowances on the volume and scope of research undertaken. The guidance will need to underline that to pass Confirmation, students will need to demonstrate that they have met the necessary academic standards, that there is a clear plan and direction to the student's intended research and that, if a limited amount of research has been completed, there is clarity about how further research could have taken this forward.
22. As with the guidance to be provided on Transfer, the guidance on Confirmation should be based upon local criteria for the assessment. When allowing students to submit supporting statements, departments/faculties may wish to provide an indicative word limit.

Post Confirmation (up to and including Submission of Thesis)

23. At the point of submitting their thesis for examination, to enable any disruption caused by the pandemic to be taken into account in the period between Confirmation and Submission of Thesis, students can include a statement outlining what research had originally been planned, how this would have contributed to the thesis and how the pandemic altered those plans. Supervisors may also include a supporting statement on the GSO3 form.
24. As at Confirmation, guidance will be required for examiners in determining what allowances may be made in considering the thesis. These allowances cannot compromise the integrity of the award. The thesis will still need to meet the criteria on academic quality and standards set out in the General Regulations for DPhils or the appropriate research masters programme and the relevant divisional and/or departmental/faculty regulations.
25. For example, examiners should assess the thesis and the student at the viva Examination using the criteria on academic quality and standards set out in General Regulations for DPhils at Clause 7.6:

“In making this recommendation (for award of a DPhil), the examiners must include in their report statements that:

- *the student possesses a good general knowledge of the particular field of learning within which the subject of the thesis falls;*
- *the student has made a significant and substantial contribution in the particular field of learning within which the subject of the thesis falls;*
- *the thesis is presented in a lucid and scholarly manner;*
- *in their opinion the thesis merits the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy;*
- *the student has presented a satisfactory abstract of the thesis.”*

26. However, it may be possible, while still meeting these criteria, to make allowances in the volume and scope of research undertaken. The General Regulations for DPhils also provide that:

“Examiners shall bear in mind that their judgement of the substantial significance of the work should take into account what may reasonably be expected of a capable and diligent student after three or at most four years of full-time study in the case of a full-time student, or eight years in the case of a part-time student.”

27. The recommendation of the examiners is a matter of academic judgement. It is not proposed that the guidance should attempt to define precisely the limits of any allowance to be made for volume and scope. The guidance should instead ask examiners to take proper account of the disruption caused by the pandemic in the production of the thesis and to determine, in their academic judgement, whether the core academic requirements for a DPhil have been met. As a consequence, students and supervisors should be confident that the thesis is likely to meet the relevant standards prior to submission.

June 2020

ANNEX A

Documenting impact of Covid-19 on PGR study at assessment stages and in the final examination

Early stages of DPhil (up to Transfer)

Students may have absorbed disruption experienced due to the coronavirus pandemic by adjusting planned research (e.g. turning to data analysis, changing the order in which work is planned), others may have changed aspects of their programme of work – for example changing emphasis or focus – or focused on secondary research such as literature reviews while unable to access laboratory space. Most students will have experienced some significant disruption in the progress of their research.

At the front of their Transfer report students should therefore provide:

- (i) A brief summary (approximately 300 words) of the work they were planning to complete before university buildings were closed to non-Covid-19 research.
- (ii) A further statement (approximately 300 words) of the work they have been/were able to conduct while their laboratory space has been closed to them, if different from (i).
- (iii) If appropriate – for example if it demonstrates the feasibility and/or likely success of their research project – students may wish to include detailed plans/protocols for specific studies they were intending to conduct. These could then form a basis for discussion at the Transfer assessment meeting and give assessors additional information as to the volume and standard of the work completed and planned on which to make a decision regarding the outcome of the Transfer process.
- (iv) If appropriate, then brief excerpts or details from a student's Covid-19 log may be provided as well but this information may have been captured already in the two brief statements (i) and (ii), above. Examples where this might be appropriate include where the student has experienced changed personal circumstances (such as ill health or additional caring responsibilities), **has experienced additional difficulty related to an underlying disability**, has returned to clinical service, or has worked in a voluntary capacity in testing or for a project other than the focus of their own DPhil research.
- (v) Finally, a brief summary (approximately 300 words) of the work planned when laboratory access is regained, in order of priority and taking account of possibly limited access times so that work needs to be more systematically planned around what needs to be conducted in person in a laboratory or facility and what such as data analysis can be conducted from home. This summary should seek to look 6 months ahead in the planning given.

The decision on whether to attempt Transfer rests ultimately with a student in consultation with their supervisors and DGS. Whether a student is transferring on their original timetable (e.g. for those starting in Michaelmas Term 2019 by the end of Michaelmas Term 2020) or after a deferral then the information outlined above should be provided as appropriate. On the GSO2.MSD form the student should note in their section the reasons they are applying to Transfer, which may reference information also provided at (i) and (ii) above for the Transfer report. The supervisor should indicate in their section the reasons for them supporting the Transfer application, in context. The student's DGS should discuss with them individually how they are approaching the Transfer process, the different outcomes available and what they will mean for the student.

Transfer assessors should conduct their assessment according to the standard guidelines (<https://canvas.ox.ac.uk/courses/22105/files/556420/download?wrap=1>) and in particular the four core points:

- (a) that there is a clear and defined project
- (b) that the student has devised an investigative strategy
- (c) that some initial progress has been made in terms of method development and acquisition of results
- (d) that there is a clear and timetabled path towards completion of the project.

But in this regard it is important to note that some of the evidence provided by the student at the front of their Transfer report, in the GSO2.MSD form, and as listed above will be relevant to assessment of these core points. For example, clarity in their hypotheses and understanding of the background of the project may satisfy point (a); a detailed protocol for experiments planned on the basis of a relatively small amount of data already collected by the student may indicate that point (b) and/or (c) is satisfied; clarity about how work will be conducted as laboratory access becomes available may help to demonstrate point (d).

Second and third years (full-time equivalent) of DPhil (up to Confirmation)

As for pre-Transfer students it may have been possible to absorb disruption by adjusting planned research (e.g. turning to data analysis, changing the order in which work is planned), or changing aspects of the programme of work – for example by a changed in emphasis or focus – while unable to access laboratory space. The disruption experienced may have been more significant than it would have been at an earlier stage in the project but this will vary quite considerably across the student body. In some disciplines or with some techniques it may have been possible to work in data analysis and interpretation without much disruption; for others their research work will have come to a full stop or been significantly affected by ill health. Confirmation will, as usual, provide an important opportunity to assess progress and map out the timeframe to DPhil completion.

Some students may have significantly altered their plans (e.g. onto Covid-19 related projects) and continued working in a lab. That work may be written up as one or more chapters in their eventual DPhil thesis if it can be placed there appropriately, and this will be relevant to the Confirmation process both in terms of the thesis outline given with their GSO14.MSD form and also at the Confirmation assessment meeting.

It is important to emphasise that a student's work may have been significantly disrupted and yet they do have sufficient data and analysis to report to satisfy their assessors that they are on course to submit within 3 terms (if full-time, 6 terms for part-time). Such students are strongly advised to attempt Confirmation by their original deadline of 9 terms from the start of their DPhil studies.

It is of course recognised that at later stages of a DPhil the possible routes to successful completion would usually become more limited as the research strategy is more fixed. This is likely to lead to a greater number of students wishing to make good on disrupted research rather than alter their plans. Against this will be balanced the recognition that DPhil theses are variable in contents and reach and that aspects of reagent or tool development, for example, represent valid focuses for thesis chapters in their own right.

Nevertheless, the standards for Confirmation remain unchanged and are as follows:

- (a) That a student can present a coherent account of their research and its significance to the field
- (b) That the work has novelty and originality
- (c) That the proposed thesis structure is appropriate as a presentation of the student's results
- (d) That the timetable for completion set out by the student is realistic and achievable.

See: <https://canvas.ox.ac.uk/courses/22105/files/372489/download?wrap=1>

It is also emphasised that the primary focus of assessment should be on the quality of the work completed rather than the amount – though obviously there needs to be sufficient to make the judgements at (a) and (b) immediately above.

Within the Progress report section of their GSO14.MSD form students should provide:

- (i) A brief summary (approximately 300 words) of the work they were planning to complete before university buildings were closed to non-Covid-19 research.
- (ii) A further statement (approximately 300 words) of the work they have been/were able to conduct while their laboratory space has been closed to them, if different from (i).
- (iii) If appropriate – for example if it demonstrates the feasibility and/or likely success of their research project – students may wish to include detailed plans/protocols for specific studies they were intending to conduct. These could then form a basis for discussion at the Confirmation assessment meeting and give assessors additional information as to the volume and standard of the work completed and planned on which to make a decision regarding the outcome of the Confirmation process.
- (iv) If appropriate, then brief excerpts or details from a student's Covid-19 log may be provided as well but this information may have been captured already in the two brief statements (i) and (ii), above. Examples where this might be appropriate include where the student has experienced changed personal circumstances (e.g. ill health or additional caring responsibilities), **has experienced additional difficulty related to an underlying disability**, has returned to clinical service, or has worked in a voluntary capacity in testing or for a project other than the focus of their own DPhil research. This information may also have a bearing on their plans for thesis completion, e.g. indicate continued disruption of some form or other to their work.
- (v) Finally, a brief summary (approximately 300 words) of the work planned towards completion of their DPhil thesis when laboratory access is regained, in order of priority and taking account of possibly limited access times so that work needs to be more systematically planned around what needs to be conducted in person in a laboratory or facility and what such as data analysis can be conducted from home. This information may allow the Confirmation assessors to provide advice on which components of work planned are essential to successful thesis defence and which are not.

In setting out their thesis contents and timeline to completion students should indicate clearly where they are including any Covid-19-related research which they have been conducting in place of what was previously planned. They should include a brief statement of how this Covid-19 work relates to their overall thesis. Examples could be that technology they developed, or techniques which they have mastered, or a general set of research questions on which they are engaged, have relevance to understanding, controlling or treating Covid-19 infection and disease. If in doubt on this point students should consult their supervisor and their DGS.

At the Confirmation meeting assessors should decide whether, in their judgement and taking contextual data into account, the student has met the academic standards set out at (a) to (d) immediately above. But in doing this they should allow for the following:

1. Ways in which the work students have been able to undertake during lab closure have helped them advance their study in a different form to what previously was planned.
2. That their detailed plans demonstrate work which may add further to their study but which are not essential at this time to conclude that a successful DPhil thesis will be submitted on the timeframe envisaged.
3. That their intended thesis contents should be achievable given ongoing impacts of Covid-19 on a student's capacity to work, e.g. restrictions to laboratory access, caring responsibilities.
4. Which work planned when laboratory access is regained is necessary to a successful thesis, and whether the order of priority given by the student seems correct.
5. That the thesis may contain material on both the original questions being addressed by the student and on Covid-19 research. Allowing for this might be based on the judgement that the Covid-19 work has enabled the student to apply approaches they previously developed for another purpose, or demonstrate further expertise and understanding alongside that shown using similar approaches but for another research focus.

Post-Confirmation (up to and including Submission of Thesis)

The timing of the closure of University facilities to non-Covid-19 research meant that most such students will have been within a few months of completing their DPhil thesis research, and some will have already stopped practical work or have been in a position to do so and write up and defend a successful DPhil thesis. Students in this last category have been strongly encouraged to write up during the shutdown period, but all post-Confirmation students should be in a position to do a significant amount of thesis writing.

As with Transfer reports (see above), students submitting their DPhil thesis should include the following statements at the front:

- (i) A brief summary (approximately 300 words) of the work they were planning to complete before university buildings were closed to non-Covid-19 research.
- (ii) If appropriate – for example if it helps demonstrate the significance of the findings they report in their thesis – students may wish to include detailed plans/protocols for specific studies they were intending to conduct, and if appropriate include a priority order which may also be relevant to the Examination. This information could then form a basis for discussion at the DPhil viva Examination and give Examiners additional means to assess the volume and standard of the work completed.
- (iii) If appropriate, then brief excerpts or details from a student's Covid-19 log may be provided as well but this information may have been captured already at (i), above. Examples where this might be appropriate include where the student has experienced changed personal circumstances (e.g. ill health or additional caring responsibilities), **has experienced additional difficulty related to an underlying disability**, has returned to clinical service, or has worked in a voluntary capacity in testing or for a project other than the focus of their own DPhil research. These data could contextualise the judgement made by Examiners as to the most appropriate outcome.

- (iv) If a student has included Covid-19-related research, then they should include a brief statement of how it relates to their overall thesis. Examples could be that technology they developed, or techniques which they have mastered, or a general set of research questions on which they are engaged, have relevance to understanding, controlling or treating Covid-19 infection and disease. If in doubt on this point students should consult their supervisor and their DGS.

Examiners should assess the thesis and the student at the viva Examination using the criteria on academic quality and standards set out in General Regulations for DPhils at Clause 7.6:

“In making this recommendation (for award of a DPhil), the examiners must include in their report statements that:

- the student possesses a good general knowledge of the particular field of learning within which the subject of the thesis falls;
- the student has made a significant and substantial contribution in the particular field of learning within which the subject of the thesis falls;
- the thesis is presented in a lucid and scholarly manner;
- in their opinion the thesis merits the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy;
- the student has presented a satisfactory abstract of the thesis.”

In doing this Examiners will take account of the fact that DPhil theses are variable in contents and reach and that aspects of reagent or tool development, for example, represent valid focuses for thesis chapters in their own right. They will also take into account, and in the context of the coronavirus pandemic, the General Regulations provision that:

“Examiners shall bear in mind that their judgement of the substantial significance of the work should take into account what may reasonably be expected of a capable and diligent student after three or at most four years of full-time study in the case of a full-time student, or eight years in the case of a part-time student.”

The Examiners will use their academic judgement on these points, and should at base ask themselves whether the core academic requirements for a DPhil have been met.

Conclusion

It is intended that this guidance and mode of documenting the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on DPhil student progress at points of assessment and examination should apply to all students currently on course, irrespective of any extensions (funded or otherwise) which may be granted.