

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.

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.
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.

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Updated September 2020 to remove Annex A (Medical Sciences Division guidance) and references to this annex. The Medical Sciences Division guidance is now provided as a separate document at <https://academic.admin.ox.ac.uk/research-degrees>.