

GUIDANCE FOR CONSIDERATION OF DISRUPTION TO RESEARCH FOR PGR STUDENTS IN ASSESSMENTS: HUMANITIES DIVISION

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. 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.
3. 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. 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.

Early stages of DPhil (up to Transfer)

4. 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.
5. 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.

[At the front of their Transfer report 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 and/or access to resources was no longer possible;](#)
- (ii) [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 brief statement above. Examples where this might be appropriate include where the student has experienced changed personal circumstances \(such as ill health or additional caring responsibilities or availability of supervision.](#)
- (iii) [Finally, a brief summary \(no more than 300 words\) of the work planned when access is regained. 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 supervisor(s) and DGS. Whether a student is transferring on their original timetable or after a deferral then the information outlined above should be provided as appropriate. On the GSO2 form the student should note in their section the reasons they are applying to Transfer, which may reference information also provided at (i) 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. Some of the evidence provided by the student at the front of their Transfer report, in the GSO2 form, and as listed above will be relevant to the assessment.

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

6. 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.
7. 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.

As for pre-Transfer students it may have been possible to absorb disruption by adjusting planned research. 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 it may have been possible to work 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.

It is important to emphasise that a student's work may have been significantly disrupted and yet they do have material 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.

The standards for Confirmation remain unchanged. The primary focus of assessment should be on the quality of the work completed rather than the amount. Within the progress report section of their GSO14 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 and/or access to resources was no longer possible;
- (ii) 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 brief statement above. Examples where this might be appropriate include where the student has experienced changed personal circumstances (such as ill health or additional caring responsibilities or availability of supervision). 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.

- (iii) Finally, a brief summary (no more than 300 words) of the work planned when access is regained. 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.

At the Confirmation meeting assessors should decide whether, in their judgement and taking contextual data into account, the student has met the academic standards required for Confirmation of Status. But in doing this they should allow for the following:

1. Ways in which the work students have been able to undertake 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 access, caring responsibilities.
4. Which work planned when access to resources is regained is necessary to a successful thesis.

Post Confirmation (up to and including Submission of Thesis)

8. 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.
9. As at Confirmation, examiners will need to determine 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 faculty regulations.

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 and/or access to resources was no longer possible;
- (ii) 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 brief statement above. Examples where this might be appropriate include where the student has experienced changed personal circumstances (such as ill health or additional caring responsibilities or availability of supervision. These data could contextualise the judgement made by Examiners as to the most appropriate outcome.

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. They will also take into account, and in the context of the coronavirus pandemic, the provision in the General Regulations 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.