

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

*This document provides guidance for students, supervisors, Transfer/Confirmation assessors and Examiners for DPhil and MSc by Research degrees. It deals with DPhil and MSc by Research Transfer processes separately starting on pages 1 and 3 respectively, then considers the Confirmation process applying to DPhil students only from page 5, and finally provides guidance on the final examination process for each degree from page 8.*

### **Early stages of DPhil (up to Transfer of Status)**

Some 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 was initially planned). Others may have changed aspects of their programme of work – for example changing research emphasis or focus – or could have focused on other approaches such as literature/systematic reviews, while unable to access laboratories or offices. Most students will have experienced some significant disruption in the progress of their research.

At the front of their Transfer report students whose work has been disrupted 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 able to conduct while their laboratory and/or office 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, 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 (but are not limited to) 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/workplace access is regained, in order of priority and seeking to look 6 months ahead. In doing this students should take 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 away from the workplace.

The statements provided under (i) to (v) above at the front of the Transfer report are not included within its 5,000-word limit<sup>1</sup>. They should be submitted as a supplementary PDF

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<sup>1</sup> [https://canvas.ox.ac.uk/courses/22105/pages/transfer-of-status-dphil?module\\_item\\_id=213356](https://canvas.ox.ac.uk/courses/22105/pages/transfer-of-status-dphil?module_item_id=213356)

document alongside the student's GSO.2 MSD<sup>2</sup> for the information of the DGS and Transfer assessors.

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 on a departmental DPhil programme, by the end of Michaelmas Term 2020) or after a deferral then the information outlined above should be provided as appropriate. Note that while there will be additional funding available for stipend extensions and other forms of financial support, this will be awarded on the basis of individual student need and cannot be guaranteed, and students are encouraged to attempt Transfer as soon as seems reasonable to them and their supervisors.

***Specific guidance for DPhil Transfer assessors:***

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 that:

- (a) there is a clear and defined project
- (b) the student has devised an investigative strategy
- (c) some initial progress has been made in terms of method development and acquisition of results
- (d) 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 (at (i)-(v) above) by the student at the front of their Transfer report and alongside the GSO.2 MSD form 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/workplace access becomes available may help to demonstrate point (d).

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.ox.ac.uk/sites/files/oxford/GSO.2.MSD%20%282%29%20Updated%20Feb%202020%20TQ.docx>

### **Initial stage of MSc by Research (up to Transfer of Status)**

Some 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 was initially planned). Others may have changed aspects of their programme of work – for example changing research emphasis or focus – or could have focused on other approaches such as literature/systematic reviews, while unable to access laboratories or offices. Most students will have experienced some significant disruption in the progress of their research.

In addition to the 500 word project outline submitted as normal<sup>3</sup> students should submit alongside their GSO.2 MSD form<sup>4</sup>:

- (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 able to conduct while their laboratory and/or office 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, 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 (but are not limited to) 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 MSc research.
- (v) Finally, a brief summary (approximately 300 words) of the work planned when laboratory/workplace access is regained, in order of priority and seeking to look 6 months ahead. In doing this, students should take 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 away from the workplace.

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 or after a deferral then the information outlined above should be provided as appropriate. Note that while there will be additional funding available for stipend extensions and other forms of financial support, this will be awarded on the basis of individual student need and cannot be guaranteed, and students are encouraged to attempt Transfer as soon as seems reasonable to them and their supervisors.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://canvas.ox.ac.uk/courses/22105/pages/transfer-of-status-msc-by-research>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.ox.ac.uk/sites/files/oxford/GSO.2.MSD%20%282%29%20Updated%20Feb%202020%20TQ.docx>

***Specific guidance for MSc by Research Transfer assessors:***

As with DPhil Transfer assessment it will be helpful for the MSc by Research Transfer assessors to conduct their assessment according to the four core points that:

- (a) there is a clear and defined project
- (b) the student has devised an investigative strategy
- (c) some initial progress has been made in terms of method development and acquisition of results
- (d) 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 information (at (i)-(v) above) provided by the student alongside their 500-word project outline 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/workplace access becomes available may help to demonstrate point (d).

## **Second and third year students (full-time equivalent) of DPhil only (up to Confirmation of Status)**

As for pre-Transfer DPhil students it may have been possible to absorb disruption by adjusting planned research (e.g. turning to data analysis, changing the order in which research work was planned), or changing aspects of the programme of work – for example by a change in emphasis or focus of research – while unable to access laboratory or office space. The disruption experienced will vary quite considerably across the student body. In some disciplines or with some techniques it may have been possible to work on data analysis and interpretation without much disruption; for others their research work will have come to a complete stop or been significantly affected by ill health/caring responsibilities. 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 GSO.14 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<sup>5</sup>. Note that while there will be additional funding available for stipend extensions and other forms of financial support, this will be awarded on the basis of individual student need and cannot be guaranteed, and students are encouraged to attempt Confirmation as soon as seems reasonable to them and their supervisors.

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. That:

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

See: [https://canvas.ox.ac.uk/courses/22105/pages/confirmation-of-dphil-status?module\\_item\\_id=217806](https://canvas.ox.ac.uk/courses/22105/pages/confirmation-of-dphil-status?module_item_id=217806)

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.

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<sup>5</sup> For the Medical Sciences Doctoral Training Centre's structured (Wellcome and BHF) programmes the milestone deadlines are different, see: [https://canvas.ox.ac.uk/courses/22105/pages/confirmation-of-dphil-status?module\\_item\\_id=217806](https://canvas.ox.ac.uk/courses/22105/pages/confirmation-of-dphil-status?module_item_id=217806)

Within the Progress report section of their GSO.14 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 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, 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 (but are not limited to) 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/workplace 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.

***Specific guidance for DPhil Confirmation assessors:***

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 the student has been able to undertake during lab closure has 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 do not need to have been completed to conclude that a successful DPhil thesis will be submitted on the timeframe set out by the student.
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/office 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.

### **Final stages of DPhil/MSc by Research up to and including Submission of Thesis**

The timing of the closure of University facilities to non-Covid-19 research meant that most students in their final year of study were close to completing their DPhil/MSc research. Of these, some may have already stopped practical work or have been in a position to do so, enabling them to write up and defend a successful DPhil/MSc thesis. Any student who can has been strongly encouraged to write up during the shutdown period, but all post-Confirmation DPhil students should be in a position to do a significant amount of thesis writing. Note that while there will be additional funding available for stipend extensions and other forms of financial support, this will be awarded on the basis of individual student need and cannot be guaranteed.

Students submitting their DPhil/MSc by Research 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/MSc by Research viva Examination and give Examiners additional means to assess the volume and standard of the work completed.
- (iii) If appropriate, 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 (but are not limited to) 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/MSc by 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.

The statements provided under (i) to (iv) above at the front of the thesis should be emailed also to the DGS, for information.

***Specific guidance for DPhil examiners:***

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<sup>6</sup> and provided within form GSO.5<sup>7</sup>:

“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 ask themselves whether the core academic requirements for a DPhil have been met.

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/examregs/2019-20/grftdodoctofphil/>

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[https://www.ox.ac.uk/sites/files/oxford/GSO\\_5%20Memorandum%20of%20Guidance%20for%20DPhil%20Examiners%20October%202019.pdf](https://www.ox.ac.uk/sites/files/oxford/GSO_5%20Memorandum%20of%20Guidance%20for%20DPhil%20Examiners%20October%202019.pdf)

***Specific guidance for MSc by Research examiners:***

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 MSc by Research degrees at Clause 6.6<sup>8</sup> and provided within form GSO.7a<sup>9</sup>:

- the candidate possesses a good general knowledge of the field of learning within which the subject of the thesis falls;
- that the candidate has shown competence in investigating the chosen topic;
- that the candidate has made a worthwhile contribution to knowledge or understanding in the field of learning within which the subject of the thesis falls;
- that the thesis is presented in a lucid and scholarly manner;
- that it merits of the award of the Degree of Master of Science.

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 extent of the candidate's contribution to knowledge or understanding of the relevant field of learning shall take into account what may reasonably be expected of a capable and diligent student after two years of full-time study in the case of a full-time student, or twelve terms in the case of a part-time student.”

The Examiners will use their academic judgement on these points, and should ask themselves whether the core academic requirements for an MSc by Research have been met.

**Conclusion**

It is intended that this guidance and mode of documenting the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on DPhil/MSc by Research 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.

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/examregs/2019-20/grftdomosciebyrese/>

<sup>9</sup> [https://www.ox.ac.uk/sites/files/oxford/GSO\\_7a%20Memorandum%20of%20Guidance%20for%20MSc%20Examiners%20October%202019.pdf](https://www.ox.ac.uk/sites/files/oxford/GSO_7a%20Memorandum%20of%20Guidance%20for%20MSc%20Examiners%20October%202019.pdf)