SOCIAL SCIENCES DIVISION

Additional Academic Support for Postgraduate Research Students

Introduction

The following guidelines have been prepared as a guide for departments, supervisors, students and assessors. The Covid-19 pandemic has had, and will continue to have, a substantial impact on the research of many students. The aim of these guidelines is to enable the disruption to planned research for postgraduate research (PGR) students to be taken into account at transfer, confirmation and viva examinations. It is based on the following principles:

a. Where possible, plans for work and research should be adapted to accommodate the disruption caused by the pandemic. The process outlined below 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.

It is intended to support students whose research has been disrupted by the pandemic to complete their milestone or viva examinations on time, provided they have met the standards of intellectual rigour and original research required of a research degree, as set out in local regulations.

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.

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 research facilities or resources, or undertake fieldwork. Many 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, and/or before continuing with fieldwork became impossible.

(ii) A further statement (no more than 300 words) of the work they have been/were able to conduct while research facilities/resources or fieldwork were unavailable 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 or supervision report 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).

(v)   Finally, a brief summary (no more than 300 words) of the work planned when access to research facilities and/or resources is regained, or fieldwork is again possible, in order of priority. The summary should take account of ongoing building closures and/or restrictions on travel. It should also set out the work which could be conducted from home. This summary should seek to look 6 months ahead.

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 GSO.2 form the student should note in their section the reasons for their application 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 their support of the Transfer application, in context. The student's supervisor 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 procedures and assessment criteria published in departmental student handbooks.

It is important to note that some of the evidence provided by the student at the front of their Transfer report, in the GSO.2 form, and as listed above, will be relevant to assessment of the application against published assessment criteria.

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 change in emphasis or focus – while unable to access research resources, or undertake fieldwork. 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 on data analysis and interpretation, or study online resources and secondary literature without much disruption; for others their research work may have been significantly affected through the inability to proceed with fieldwork, or have 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 are able to present sufficient data and analysis 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 (or as defined by local regulations if progressing to the DPhil from an MPhil).

It is 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 content and reach.

Nevertheless, the standards for Confirmation remain unchanged and are as set out in departmental student handbooks.

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 based on the published assessment criteria.

Within the Progress report section of their GSO.14 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 before fieldwork was no longer possible.

(ii) A further statement (no more than 300 words) of the work they have been/were able to conduct while their research resources and/or fieldwork have been unavailable 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 or supervision report 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). 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 (no more than 300 words) of the work planned when access to research facilities and/or resources is regained, or fieldwork is again possible, in order of priority. The summary should take account of ongoing building closures and/or restrictions on travel. It should also set out the work which could 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.

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 in the published assessment criteria. But in doing this they should allow for the following:

1. Ways in which the work students have been able to undertake during building closure, or in the absence of fieldwork, have helped them advance their study in a different form to the original plan.
2. 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 to buildings, facilities or fieldwork, caring responsibilities.

3. That the plan of work when access to resources is regained is necessary to a successful thesis, and whether the order of priority given by the student seems appropriate.

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

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

(i) A brief summary (no more than 300 words) of the work they were planning to complete before university buildings were closed to non-Covid-19 research and/or fieldwork became impossible.

(ii) A brief summary (of no more than 300 words) of the way, if at all, COVID-19 impacted on the final preparation of the thesis. 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, brief excerpts or details from a student's Covid-19 log or supervision reports 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). 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, 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 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.

<u>Conclusion</u>

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.