



University of
St Andrews

Progress reviews and termination of studies for postgraduate research students

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Progress reviews and termination of studies for postgraduate research students

1. Progress Reviews

Principles

The QAA Quality Code for Research Postgraduate degrees stipulates that universities must “put in place clearly defined mechanisms for monitoring and supporting research student progress ..., including formal and explicit reviews of progress at different stages”.¹

Purpose

The annual progress review should:

- Ascertain whether the research student has progressed satisfactorily in their programme of study.
- Be a useful feedback exercise.
- Give the student formal practice in talking about their work (the subject of their dissertation, its importance to the field, and its methodological approach) to an interested audience that may include a non-specialist.
- Promote the timely and successful completion of postgraduate research degrees.
- Identify problems early, and help resolve problems where possible.
- Ascertain whether any decision is required concerning the re-registration of a student for a higher or a lower degree than the one for which they are registered, or concerning leave of absence, extension, withdrawal, or termination of studies.
- Serve as an opportunity for the student or supervisor to raise any concerns, and as a checkpoint to ensure school and supervisory provisions are satisfactory.

Procedure

Every postgraduate research student, including part-time students, will undergo a formal progress review at least once in each year of registration, normally by month nine. The school must make the requirements, timing, style, assessment criteria and potential outcomes of these reviews clear to students from the beginning of their programme.

For Masters by Research students (MSc(Res) or MSt(Res)), the first review should be completed by month five. Students interested in moving from the MSc(Res) or MSt(Res) to a higher research degree should receive a second review by the end of month nine to specifically address progression.

¹ [UK Quality Code for Higher Education, Advice and Guidance: Research Degrees. Guiding Principle 5](#)

Schools are responsible for assigning a review panel for each student. Review panels will normally include at least two members of the School designated by the Director of Postgraduate Studies (DoPG). If supervision duties for a student are shared between two schools, then both schools should normally be represented on the review panel. The panel should not include any member of the research student's academic supervisory team, but may include the mentor where the role is purely pastoral. In case of a re-review, at least one member of the review panel should be an experienced member of staff.

While each school is responsible for setting its own requirements for progress review submissions, the following documents *must* be included:

- A supervisor's report
- A student self-assessment form (including a detailed completion plan – compulsory from year two² onwards, recommended from year one)
- Reviewers' reports from any previous reviews.

Students are to be assessed on both the quality and quantity of their work. They should not be judged based on the review panel's own preferences in regards to topic, method or findings, so long as the work produced is of an appropriate level.

Each student's work will be classified according to one of four categories (see Appendix A for outcome descriptions):

- Green – Satisfactory
- Yellow – Satisfactory with minor concerns
- Amber – Satisfactory with major concerns
- Red – Unsatisfactory.

After the review meeting, the reviewers complete the feedback form in MMS and recommend one of the outcomes above. The DoPG is responsible for approving the feedback and submitting it to Registry, as well as to the student and the supervisor as appropriate. Students should always receive written feedback regarding the outcome of their review, preferably within one month of the review meeting. The DoPG may consult the Associate Provost Students on any reviews of particular concern.

In situations where a re-review is recommended, the DoPG is responsible for approving and overseeing the arrangements for the re-review. Reviewers' comments from the initial review must be made available for the re-review. Any re-reviews should normally take place between two and five months after an initial review. In a situation where an unsatisfactory progress review serves as the first indication of a possible termination of studies, the period between the initial review and the re-review must be at least two months. This will serve as the probationary warning period. If the student's progress is deemed to be unsatisfactory at the re-review, then their case will be referred to the Associate Provost Students to begin the termination of studies process, unless the student decides to withdraw from the programme. As an alternative

² A research plan with a timeline demonstrating the route to a timely completion should be included at the first review for Masters by Research students.

to termination of studies, re-registration to a lower degree may be recommended to the Associate Provost Students with the agreement of the supervisor(s) and the DoPG.

The first review is of particular importance, as it determines whether a student will be upgraded from probationary status to full status on the relevant research degree. If a review in the late stages of a student's degree raises significant doubts as to whether the student will be able to submit on time, a re-review should be scheduled to support successful completion. If students are within three months of the submission of their thesis, they may be excused from the review, provided they have the support of their supervisor. Students in an extension period should be regularly monitored and actively supported, but will not normally undergo a full review. Completion plans should include clear milestones with an indication of the quantity, nature and envisioned stage of readiness of work to be undertaken.

The DoPG should recuse themselves from any cases where they are also the supervisor and refer these back to the Head of School for approval and oversight.

2. Termination of Studies

When serious problems regarding a student's progress are identified, it may prove necessary to terminate the student's studies or re-register the student for a different degree. The process for a contested re-registration (eg from PhD to MPhil where the student does not voluntarily elect to do so or accept a review committee's decision) will also follow the same pattern of procedures as that laid out below.

The need for termination of studies may be identified:

- A) Through the annual review process. Concerns about a student's progress should normally be identified and documented through the annual review process (see above). Students receiving an amber (satisfactory with major concerns) or red (unsatisfactory) outcome may be required to undergo a re-review. If their progress is deemed unsatisfactory at this subsequent re-review then the student may be put forward for termination of studies. Students at risk for termination of studies must always receive a written warning after the first review in accordance with section A below.
- B) Through a supervisor's observations and concerns at any time. Concerns about a student's progress may be identified and documented by a supervisor who, in their judgement, considers that the student's progress is unsatisfactory and/or that the student is failing to engage with normal attendance and supervision arrangements. Should they judge the lack of progress or engagement to be sufficiently serious, termination of studies may be recommended. 'Sufficient seriousness' in this case means that either:

- i. the supervisor considers that the quantity or quality of research output does not reach the required standard based on the student's work in relation to the stage of their studies;
- ii. that the student has failed to engage with three supervision appointments set by the supervisor and/or there has been no substantive contact with the supervisor for one month or longer, despite communication from the supervisor (see section A below); or
- iii. the student has failed to adequately engage with and respond to feedback from the supervisor or the annual review process.

C) In the event of non-submission of the thesis past the expected end date. A student is expected to submit their thesis on or before their expected end date as defined by the [Length of Study Policy](#). If the student and/or their supervisory team do not anticipate submission by this date, then an application for extension to study must be filed with the Associate Provost Students. If a student passes their expected end date, does not submit their thesis, nor make an application for extension, and this is not resolved within one calendar month, then the student will have their studies terminated (see section B below).

Uncontested re-registration for a different degree would normally be a matter for consideration by annual review committees, and managed within the relevant School wherever possible.

A. Procedure for termination of studies following initiation either by the annual review committee or by a supervisor

- 1) In the event of a student's progress being categorised as unsatisfactory or satisfactory with major concerns, the Director of Postgraduate Studies (DoPG) shall write to the student to explain the reasons for the recommendation and to warn them that termination of studies may be a consequence of an unsatisfactory outcome in the re-review. In addition, the written warning will include notification that discontinuation of studies will lead to:
 - the loss of any research stipend, from the university or external funding body;
 - an end to any visa sponsorship by the university;
 - the loss of any stipendiary or voluntary role within the university that requires the student to be in good standing.

The letter will be copied to the supervisor(s), Head of School, Associate Provost Students and Registry Student Support (Research Postgraduate). If the student's supervisor is the DoPG, the Head of School will have responsibility for communicating with the student.

- 2) If the problems have been resolved to the satisfaction of the principal supervisor and DoPG at the end of the probationary warning period and the re-review process, no termination of studies will be pursued.

- 3) If problems have not been resolved to the satisfaction of the principal supervisor and DoPG at the end of the probationary warning period and the re-review process, then the DoPG will recommend termination of studies in writing to the Associate Provost Students, copied to the student, supervisor(s), Head of School and Registry Student Support (Research Postgraduate). The final decision on termination of studies is taken by the Associate Provost Students.
- 4) Where the recommendation of termination of studies is upheld, the Associate Provost Students will write to the student to inform them, copied to: Registry Student Support (Research Postgraduate), Registry Awards, Head of School, DoPG and the Provost. The letter will include information on the university academic appeals process. Any research stipend received by the student, and any contingent voluntary or stipendiary officer's role fulfilled by them (see step 1 above) will cease once the Associate Provost Students has confirmed termination and after any appeals process has been concluded or the appeal deadline has passed without an appeal being raised by the student.
- 5) Where the recommendation of termination of studies is not upheld, the Associate Provost Students will write to the DoPG setting out the reasons and recommending an appropriate course of action. Such action may include: re-registration of the student for an alternative degree, where such an option is available and considered appropriate; returning to an earlier stage of this procedure; or the collation of additional documentation before termination can be finalised as described in 4.

B. Procedure for termination of studies following non-submission of thesis or failure to apply for an extension to study by the expected end date

- 1) Students who do not submit their thesis by their expected end date will receive an email alert 14 days following their expected end date, outlining that they have not submitted their thesis and must either submit this as soon as possible to Registry, or apply for an extension to study.
- 2) If the student does not submit their thesis, nor apply for an extension to study, 21 days after their expected end date, a final e-mail will be sent outlining that they will be required to apply for an extension to study, and if an application is not received within 7 days, their studies will be terminated by the Associate Provost Students.
- 3) If the student has not applied for an extension to study, or contacted the Associate Provost Students to discuss the circumstances surrounding their non-submission 28 days after their expected end date has passed, the Associate Provost Students will write to the student to inform them that their studies have been terminated, copied to: Registry Student Support (Research Postgraduate), Registry Awards, Head of School, DoPG and the Provost and indicate the route of appeal.
- 4) International students who have their studies terminated will be reported to UKVI as no longer fulfilling the sponsorship criteria, after any appeals

process has been concluded or the appeal deadline has passed without an appeal being raised by the student.

APPENDIX A: PROGRESS REVIEW OUTCOME CODES:

Colour coding	Review Outcome	Description	Resulting actions
<i>Green</i>	Satisfactory.	The student demonstrates a clear understanding of the context and aims of the project, and has demonstrated a capacity to complete it in a timely fashion. In a first year review they can describe an achievable concrete goal, situate the work in the context of previous literature, and have produced work that displays the skills necessary to complete the relevant research degree in their discipline. Where relevant they will have clearly established research questions and begun to develop an appropriate methodology. Where required, they have also completed taught courses as required in their department. In later-year reviews they have completed work over the preceding year that is proportional with timely completion. Their plans for completion are practical and well thought-out. Where relevant they will have a developed and nuanced sense of the argument or arguments of their thesis. This category does not preclude reviewers from having advice or suggestions which may aid the student.	The result of the review, including any suggestions for improvement from the reviewers, is to be shared with the student and their supervisor.
<i>Yellow</i>	Satisfactory with minor concerns.	The project is realistic and the student has demonstrated that they have the capacity to complete it. However, the reviewers have noted some areas of potential improvement which might further enable timely completion. For example, they may have failed to complete required taught courses, or their research questions may be either too broad or too narrow. This category may also be used in cases where the reviewers think that the student would benefit significantly from further skills training, reviewing further literature, developing their analysis more deeply, considering alternative methodologies, or undertaking further practice in presenting their work.	A re-review is unlikely. The DoPG will, at their discretion, correspond with the student and/or their supervisor regarding the recommendations made by the review panel, and any specific actions the student may need to take.
<i>Amber</i>	Satisfactory with major concerns.	The reviewers have concerns regarding the viability of the project and/or of the student's ability to complete on time. In a first-year review, they may lack important skills, demonstrate poor understanding of the context of their work, or have a limited view of the direction of the research. Research questions may be ill-defined. The piece of work produced for review is incomplete or does not demonstrate the level of skills necessary to the relevant research degree in their discipline. In a later-year review the quantity of work completed over the preceding year does not seem to be in line with timely completion, and they have no clear sense of the argument or purpose of their research. Their plans for completion may also be impractical or unrealistic.	A re-review is likely, with the possibility of a re-registration to a lower degree path should problems continue to be evident. Even if a full re-review (including interview) is not scheduled, a new submission by the student is required, which needs to be assessed by both the supervisor and the initial reviewer team. If an amber outcome is returned regarding a student in the late stages of their degree, a re-review

			should be scheduled to support successful completion.
<i>Red</i>	Unsatisfactory.	The reviewers have significant doubts regarding the project and/or the student's ability to complete it. In a first-year review, expected aspects (basic research skills, understanding of context and a sense of direction) may be lacking entirely. The piece of work produced for review is partial and demonstrates none or few of the skills necessary to complete the relevant research degree in their discipline. In a later-year review the student appears to have done little work over the preceding year, and plans for completion are either vague or highly unrealistic.	Pending approval from the DoPG, a re-review is scheduled, with the possibility either of re-registration to a lower degree path or termination of studies should the result be unsuccessful.

Version number	Purpose / changes	Document status	Author of changes, role and school / unit	Date
1.0	New policy		Emily Feamster, Academic Policy Officer, Principal's Office	01/06/2016
2.0	Added section on termination of studies and updated title to reflect inclusion of termination		Emily Feamster, Academic Policy Officer, Principal's Office	01/06/2017
2.1	Update procedure to allow option for re-registration		Emily Feamster, Academic Policy Officer, Principal's Office	01/07/2018
2.2	Amended to include regulations for MSc(Res) and MSt(Res) students		Emily Feamster, Academic Policy Officer, Principal's Office	18/06/2019
2.3	Changes to Associate Provost titles	Approved	Emily Feamster, Academic Policy Officer, Principal's Office	03/08/2021