



University of
St Andrews

Assessment of Covid-19 impacted research degrees

Document type	Guidance
Scope (applies to)	PGR only
Applicability date	18/05/2021
Review / Expiry date	30/08/2028
Approved date	29/03/2023
Approver	Proctor's Office
Document owner	Deputy Head / Academic Policy Officer
School / unit	Education and Student Experience
Document status	Published
Information classification	Public
Equality impact assessment	None
Key terms	Academic policies/Assessment, examination and award/Assessment of PGRs
Purpose	This document provides guidance on the assessment of research theses that have been impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Version number	Purpose / changes	Document status	Author of changes, role and school / unit	Date
1.1	Updating expiration date	Approved	Emily Feamster, Academic Policy Officer, Principal's Office	29 March 2023

St Andrews Guidance on Assessment of Covid-19 Impacted Research Degrees

The purpose of this document is to support a shared understanding of the specific implications of the pandemic for St Andrews research students, the mitigations and support provided by the University, and the further modifications we have encouraged our students to make to allow them to complete their projects. This document applies to research theses or portfolios impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic and is in force for submissions (or resubmissions) made on or after 19 May 2021 until 31st December 2022. The University may decide to extend this period, and this document may be added to or amended, depending on circumstances of the ongoing pandemic.

Timeline of Covid-19 in St Andrews

Restrictions and timelines differed around world, and in different areas of the United Kingdom. Below is an overview of the timeline of restrictions in St Andrews. Students located elsewhere during the pandemic may have experienced different or additional limitations.

- **17 March 2020** – All teaching and supervision was moved online. Students were advised to leave St Andrews and return home if possible. Academic buildings, libraries, and public spaces were closed. University staff began working remotely. Remote access to e-resources via the Library maintained as much as possible.
- **24 March 2020** – UK entered a national lockdown.
- **July 2020** – Some easing of laboratory and travel restrictions initiated for ‘Essential’ research, but physical distancing requirements and severe travel restrictions remain.
- **July 2020** – Access to physical resources and study space in the Library re-opened on a limited basis.
- **15 July 2020** – Childcare facilities reopened
- **11 August 2020** – Schools reopened
- **26 December 2020** – Scotland re-entered lockdown. The majority of lab-based research students (but not other students) were classified as “Essential” and research continued with physical distancing measures in place.
- **January 2021** – Library offers Click & Collect and Scan & Deliver services. Special Collections items digitised for research.
- **April 2021** – Postal loan service launched for PG students. Bookable study spaces reopened.
- **May 2021** – Full inter-library loan service resumes.

Support provided by the University

Discounted time – this is a process whereby the end of a student’s study date was extended by 3 or 6 months. All funded students continued to receive their stipend during the pandemic and almost all students had their funding extended to match their extended end date.

Student discretionary fund – this is a fund which any student can apply to for financial support. The process is means tested, administered by Student Services and is available to all students regardless of domicile and/or degree programme.

Support for travel - Central support for fieldwork and research travel has been developed, with a dedicated email account, webpages, and information sessions for research students to help with safe planning of travel where possible and necessary.

Requirements of the degree

The University awards research degrees on the basis of an original contribution to knowledge consistent with what may reasonably be expected of a diligent student after 1-year of full time research for MSc(Res), MSt(Res), MFA and MPhil with taught component, 2 years for MPhil by Research, and 3 years for doctoral degrees.

Additionally, the Quality Assurance Agency sets out national requirements for research degrees¹. The standards for a doctoral degree require students to:

Demonstrate:

- the creation and interpretation of new knowledge, through original research or other advanced scholarship, of a quality to satisfy peer review, extend the forefront of the discipline, and merit publication
- a systematic acquisition and understanding of a substantial body of knowledge which is at the forefront of an academic discipline or area of professional practice
- the general ability to conceptualise, design and implement a project for the generation of new knowledge, applications or understanding at the forefront of the discipline, and to adjust the project design in the light of unforeseen problems
- a detailed understanding of applicable techniques for research and advanced academic enquiry.

Be able to:

- make informed judgements on complex issues in specialist fields, often in the absence of complete data, and be able to communicate their ideas and conclusions clearly and effectively to specialist and non-specialist audiences
- continue to undertake pure and/or applied research and development at an advanced level, contributing substantially to the development of new techniques, ideas or approaches.

Have:

- the qualities and transferable skills necessary for employment requiring the exercise of personal responsibility and largely autonomous initiative in complex and unpredictable situations, in professional or equivalent environments

Acceptable accommodations

The quality threshold for research degrees remains unchanged, despite the pandemic. Examiners are, however, asked to consider what is reasonable for candidates to have achieved in the context of the global pandemic.

Students were encouraged to modify their projects in the following ways to allow them to complete their degrees in a timely fashion despite the setbacks resulting from the pandemic:

¹ UK Quality Code for Higher Education Part A: Setting and Maintaining Academic Standards
<https://www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/quality-code/qualifications-frameworks.pdf>

- adjust the scale or scope of their project, while maintaining a quality of research appropriate to the intended degree
- alter the breadth or depth of their intended research to work within the confines imposed by the pandemic
- employ alternate methodologies, or use a mix of methodologies
- use different, or smaller, datasets
- investigate different outputs

Students are also encouraged to discuss how their project was negatively impacted by the pandemic, and how they mitigated the setbacks, within the body of their thesis. This should not be seen as compromising the integrity of the research, and indeed may demonstrate how the student meets the other requirements of their degree.

Where the necessary quality is maintained, and a significant contribution to knowledge is made, the University supports the intended degree being awarded even if the quantity or direction of the research was negatively impacted by the pandemic.

Version number	Purpose / changes	Document status	Author of changes, role and school / unit	Date
1.0	New guidance	Approved	Emily Feamster, Academic Policy Officer, Principal's Office	18 May 2021
1.1	Updating expiration date	Approved	Emily Feamster, Academic Policy Officer, Principal's Office	29 March 2023