

COVID-19. CONSIDERATIONS FOR DOCTORAL DEGREES

A UKCGE Guidance Note



UK Council for
Graduate Education

Doctoral degrees and the potential impact of Covid-19 on current postgraduate researchers: what are the significant considerations?

Overview

The UK Council for Graduate Education has produced this guidance to set out the key issues that all stakeholders will need to consider as they seek to maintain the quality and standards of postgraduate research degrees across the UK during the pandemic.

It is the responsibility of autonomous higher education providers to consider the issues set out here and formulate their own responses.

This guidance is part of a suite of resources that has been developed by the UKCGE for members in support of postgraduate provision during the Covid-19 pandemic; this is available at:

<http://www.ukcge.ac.uk/article/supporting-members-during-covid-19-coronavirus-pandemic-454.aspx>

Diversity of Postgraduate Researcher Population

Doctoral candidates are not a homogenous group and each candidate will be affected by the pandemic in a different way and with more or less severity. Institutional support must therefore account for the different impacts of the pandemic in relation to: discipline; nature of doctorate; mode and year of study; funding source; personal background and ethnicity; life stage; carer responsibilities; increased or diminished professional commitments; and career plans. The individual and heterogeneous nature of research degree provision will require some flexibility and variability in institutional support. Institutions should ensure they take care of any outliers in their mitigation strategies.

What Institutional Support for Doctoral Candidates Must Achieve

The primary consideration is how to support the doctoral candidate to ensure:

- The quality of their research and the standard required for the research degree to be awarded.
- Their mental health and wellbeing is protected.
- Their funding source is not compromised.
- The likelihood of timely completion and successful assessment.
- Their future ambitions are not impaired by Covid-19.

If any of these objectives should prove impossible to achieve, other possibilities to discuss with the candidate (and in some cases their sponsor, or other stakeholders) include:

- Extension of studies for candidates in the later years of their doctorate and / or nearing completion, with a co-requisite extension of funding period. In line with UKRI policy, the UKCGE advocates that all extensions should be fully funded. Where extensions are to be allocated on a case-by-case basis, the criteria used should be published and applied consistently, and any application process should minimize the administrative burden on students. (See appendix for suggested criteria for extensions).
- Suspension of studies, or change of mode, for 6 months or longer, if practically possible and if this would enable the candidate to resume or reframe their studies without affecting the quality and timeliness of their research. Such a solution might be more helpful for part-time candidates and those studying alongside work and/or caring responsibilities.
- International doctoral candidates studying in the UK under a Tier 4 visa would also need to be aware that any suspension of studies would most likely impact their visa status. In such situations it is likely that that candidate would have to apply for a new visa upon being reinstated as a doctoral candidate. Immigration rules may change during the pandemic, and it is essential that all non-UK domiciled doctoral candidates receive accurate information from a designated official provider at their institution.

Possible Impacts and Mitigation Strategies at Different Stages of the PGR Lifecycle

1) In the early stages of the doctoral degree:

- Has the doctoral candidate had an effective induction setting out generic requirements regarding, e.g., research ethics, integrity, data storage and management? Has the student received a full introduction to student support services and Learning Contract mechanisms? Has the candidate begun their training (research methods and professional and personal skills) and are they able to complete it? If not, how will this affect their ability to make progress with their research?
- Does the institution/school/department have virtual support available to bridge any gaps and to encourage motivation? What creative solutions can be found to enable the candidate to continue to make progress? Would there be benefit in setting specific group activities or challenge-based work at this time that is relevant to the area of the research degree project? Are mechanisms and encouragements in place to facilitate group-building or social engagements?
- Might it be possible to focus on activities that can be more easily undertaken during lockdown, for example focussing on a literature review or writing sections of draft text? Would it be appropriate to review the research project methodology in light of anticipated pandemic restrictions and ask the candidate to produce a revised proposal?
- For candidates in experimental or practice-based subjects: are there any alternative options for gaining relevant practical skills or experience which can compensate, at least in part, for lack of access?
- How can research degree supervision most effectively be carried out online? Do all supervisory teams and candidates have access to the necessary tools for this? Are there specific considerations for any candidates that are overseas at this time? Is there a requirement for enhanced monitoring or oversight of supervision at this time, particularly given the possibility of absence of key participants through illness? Might it be appropriate to introduce temporary policies until lockdown is over? For example, should supervisions (or intermediate meetings) be augmented by contributions from group members or others (for example, industrial supervisors)?
- Are they part of a cohort group (DTP, CDT, CTD etc.) that is making arrangements to provide mutual virtual support and if so, is the candidate able to benefit from those? For multi-site, multi-institution centres or programmes: are you confident that the arrangements encompass all students and that all have access?

- What online tools are available which can be used to maintain a virtual research culture approximating to the experience offered before the pandemic? How should the approach to research culture be changed to reflect the current lockdown situation?
- What additional support structures might be required at this time to address wellbeing demands? Have you considered which groups (institution, faculty, schools, departments, research groups, supervisors, peers, professional support services) would be best placed to provide this? Are you confident that all candidates know where to go in the current circumstances should they wish to raise a concern?
- If good progress is being made, can the any 'upgrade' procedures take place in a virtual setting? If so, how can the candidate be prepared for this important step? Is there a need to develop additional guidance for progressions or upgrade reviews to be effectively conducted online? Is there a role for additional independent chairing at this time?

2) Part way through the degree (having completed most, if not all, methodological training)

- To what extent is a candidate's ability to continue conducting their research compromised by the Covid-19 restrictions? Are they in an area that will allow them to make some progress, even if not as much as intended? Is there scope for reordering tasks within the project methodology to permit as much progress as possible? Could using alternative data collection methods work more effectively? Can open data principles allow collected data to be shared in order that PhD work can continue through a wider variety of methodological approaches on the same dataset? Can PGR-collected data be accessible to PGT project students?
- Can the extent of their progress be assessed virtually? What mechanisms and what frequency are most appropriate for monitoring progress?
- Is it appropriate to review the project as a whole at this time? If deemed necessary what aspects of the project should be reviewed: methodology, scope of data to be collected, extent of sources to be considered, data analysis, or adjusting overall project aims and methodology? What safeguards are in place to ensure that the overall quality and standards of the award are maintained when considering any changes? How will any approvals (e.g. ethics) be handled?
- How will any lack of progress affect time to completion, if at all? Has this been discussed openly and honestly with candidates and supervisory teams? Is there a record of this should you need evidence of this? Have the views of the candidate fed directly into any discussions and or responses?
- Is there a need to discuss the candidate's situation with relevant external stakeholders such as their funder, industrial partner, project partner, NGO etc., or encourage them to do so? If such discussions have taken place, is there a record of this?

3) In the period leading to the final examination

- If the candidate is close to submitting, do they have sufficient support in the final stages of thesis preparation to ensure it is of a high quality? If this appears not to be the case, how can you help them to secure enough of the necessary support?
- Has the candidate already submitted their thesis (or equivalent) and have examiners already been appointed? How will the examination process continue from this point?
- If examiners have been appointed, are they aware of institutional arrangements for online vivas? Do all examiners have the necessary access to these? Is there a need to consider additional guidance or training for online vivas? For guidance see UKCGE's **Conducting Vivas Online: A Guide for Institutions and Candidates**:
<http://www.ukcge.ac.uk/media/download.aspx?MediaId=2252>
- Are arrangements in place in your institution to conduct online vivas and is the candidate aware of this and in agreement with having a virtual viva? Are you confident that the online tools will work as expected?
- Virtually, how can you help the candidate prepare for the viva? Can you make arrangements to conduct a mock viva online?
- What are the arrangements for the candidate to be informed of the outcome of the viva? How will any required changes be submitted and considered? What are the arrangements in place to support a candidate making any revisions required by the examiners?
- How might you virtually celebrate a successful completion?

Considerations for Institutional Support at all Stages

- How will any disruption to their studies affect their ability to progress and eventually to complete the degree? How will this be decided and by whom? How will this be discussed with, and communicated to the candidate?
- Is the pandemic causing, or likely to cause, financial hardship for the candidate and if so, what support is available, either from funders (including institutions with respect to university scholarships), or other sources?
- If the candidate is working, whether or not part-time, if they are self-funding, how will their ability to pay fees and to meet living expenses be affected by the pandemic. Do they have other sources of support and advice to turn to?
- Is the pandemic situation causing the individual to suffer from related mental health or wellbeing issues, and if so, do they have access to adequate and appropriate support, and do they have individual coping strategies?
- What are the institutional communication channels for research degree students? Who is communicating the messages? What are these messages, and what do they convey about the overall institutional approach and the priority of research degree candidates?

Using this Guidance to inform decision making

The questions in this guidance note are not exhaustive, but illustrate the kinds of considerations all institutions must resolve to support doctoral candidates during the pandemic.

Institutions should make every effort to ensure that no group, particularly under-represented groups, is disadvantaged by any actions. This can be a challenge where one group of doctoral candidates is treated differently from others, for example the recent announcement of UKRI to provide a 6-month funded extension for their students scheduled to complete between 01/03/2020 and 31/02/2021¹. Where this might cause concerns of inequity amongst the research community, institutions should carefully consider how to respond, what institutional messages are required, and what additional support may be necessary.

Institutions have considerable flexibility in how they respond to the current Covid-19 pandemic. Given the heterogeneous nature of research degree provision there is considerable scope for innovative approaches. Institutions should be aware of their obligations as autonomous independent providers of higher education with degree awarding powers. Any actions should obviously not compromise their normal academic standards, although approaches for maintaining the quality of provision may be

¹ <https://www.ukri.org/news/coronavirus-impact-on-ukri-supported-research/>

legitimately varied at this time. Whatever approach is taken, it should be motivated by a desire to ensure that all candidates successfully reach the standard required to complete their award with as little disruption as is possible.

The UKCGE is pleased to offer his guidance to the UK higher education sector and welcomes any comments or examples of good practice that can be shared.

Appendix A: Possible criteria for allowing extensions in relation to the pandemic

- An impact on the supervisory team that has affected your supervision or progress of either research or writing, such as illness.
- Redeployment to work on Covid-19 related research or other action but only where the redeployment time has not already been accommodated under other policies.
- Postponement of critical activities (including fieldwork or placements) where alternatives are not available, and impact cannot be mitigated.
- Caring responsibilities.
- Specific impact resulting from remote working as a result of a disability or being at higher risk of coronavirus.
- Lack of Access to mental health support if needed.
- Financial impacts, either personal or on the research activity.
- Impacts related to any protected characteristics.
- Other considerations that can be specifically attributed to COVID19 and evidenced in the case.

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