

# Research Degree Candidature: Procedures for Circumstances that may lead to Withdrawal or Termination

In the University Calendar Section V: Higher Degree Regulations, paragraph 16 of the [Regulations for the degrees of Master of Philosophy and Doctor of Philosophy](#) and paragraph 65 of the [Code of Practice for Research Candidature and Supervision](#) state that the Faculty Graduate School directorate may at any time review the progress of an individual research student. If progress is unsatisfactory and if, after due warning, there is insufficient improvement, the Faculty Programmes Committee/ERDC may recommend termination of candidature to Senate.

Recommendations for termination may be made at formal progress reviews (annual, upgrade/transfer etc.) or at any time during a student's candidature.

The following procedures cover recommendations for:

1. Termination as part of Formal Progression Reviews due to significant academic concerns
2. Termination outside Formal Progression Reviews due to significant academic concerns
3. Termination as a result of failure to engage with PGR Tracker
4. Termination as a result of failure to complete a Formal Progression Milestone in a timely manner
5. Termination (deemed withdrawn) due to lack of contact
6. Termination as a result of failure to submit a thesis by the end of the maximum period of candidature.

These are not meant to be exhaustive. Guidance in other circumstances may be sought from the central Quality, Standards and Accreditation Team.

Where there is a recommendation for termination to Senate, the Faculty will also record the reasons for the termination at the Faculty Programmes Committee.

Where there is a repeated record of recommendations for termination from the same supervisors or research groups, the Faculty should investigate the reasons and may take this into account when deciding on the composition of supervisory teams for future students.

## **1 Termination as part of Formal Progression Reviews due to significant academic concerns**

- 1.1 A 'formal progression review' will have an individual who is independent of the supervisory team present during the review. If a Faculty does not use such an individual at a progression review stage, they should follow the procedures set out in section 2 below ('Termination outside Formal Progression Reviews due to significant academic concerns').
- 1.2 The procedure followed should be as outlined by the steps shown in the flow chart (see Appendix 1).
- 1.3 The procedures outlined in this section refer to situations where the formal progression review gives significant cause for concern, to the extent that there are well-founded and demonstrable reasons to doubt the eventual submission of the doctoral thesis within the maximum period of candidature remaining.
- 1.4 More minor concerns (for example, requiring minor changes to be made to a progression report that would then lead to successful progression) are not part of this procedure and should be

handled as part of the normal progression review procedures.

- 1.5 Students are required to complete formal review milestones (annual or otherwise) as documented in the Faculty's Graduate School Student Handbook.
- 1.6 Upgrade/transfer reviews should normally consist (at least) of the submission of a report by the student on their activities and an oral examination involving a panel of least two people in accordance with paragraph 67 of the [Code of Practice for Research Candidature and Supervision](#). This review panel will normally consist of at least the main supervisor and a person who is not part of the supervisory team or otherwise involved in the research project.

### The formal progression review

- 1.7 If the review panel and the full supervisory team decide that there is a significant concern about the lack of progression, they should notify the student in writing, copying in the Director of the Faculty Graduate School (DFGS) within 5 working days of the review meeting. The note must also include the reasons leading to the decision. This process may occur via PGR Tracker.
- 1.8 The Director of the Faculty Graduate School should then verify that there has indeed been a significant lack of progress (as evidenced by the review panel's report). If so, the DFGS should establish, as far as possible at this early stage, whether any of the following has significantly affected the student's progress:
  - circumstances not previously taken into account (including, but not exclusively, illness);
  - a poor or problematic supervisory relationship with one or more members of the supervisory team;
  - lack of appropriate facilities or equipment to carry out the research project.

To ascertain if any (or potentially all) of the above has/have led to a significant lack of progress, the DFGS should seek separate evidence from:

  - the student;
  - the supervisory team.
- 1.9 The evidence may also take the form of existing written supervisory records on file, as well as new evidence submitted. If there have been difficult personal circumstances or illness not yet documented, it is the responsibility of the student to provide this written evidence (for example, a medical certificate). Failure to provide new written evidence to the DFGS at this stage may be taken into account at any later appeal.
- 1.10 The evaluation of this evidence should be completed within 10 working days of receipt of the report of the review panel's meeting.
- 1.11 **If there are significant supervisory concerns**, these must be discussed with the relevant Doctoral Programme Director and/or Head of the Academic Unit. The DFGS should take account of any potential conflicting line-management issues concerning the independent member of the review panel.
- 1.12 **If progress has been significantly hampered by a lack of facilities or equipment**, these must be discussed with the relevant Doctoral Programme Director, the relevant budget holder, and the supervisory team.
- 1.13 **Disputes relating to line management or budgetary issues** that cannot be resolved by the DFGS may be referred to the relevant Dean.
- 1.14 As a result of reviewing the information and evidence at his/her disposal, the DFGS may consider that the issues identified in connection with progress are not of sufficient seriousness to invoke the full termination procedures. For example, the DFGS may consider that the reasonable purchase of equipment, attendance at suitable training, and/or a change to the supervisory team may help the student to resume satisfactory progress. In these circumstances, and if it is appropriate for the student to continue, an action plan (with targets and timescales) should be agreed in order to

support the student in moving forward. The action plan should be regularly reviewed by the supervisory team and the DFGS, with actions taken and amendments made to the plan as required.

- 1.15 Where the DFGS establishes there was no reasonable circumstance not previously taken into account that had significantly hampered the progression, the DFGS will require the review panel to confirm in writing an action plan, together with guidance to the student appropriate to the stage of their candidature, and including targets and the deadline for improvement. The deadline for achievement of those targets should normally be 3 months from the date of the notification of this action plan to the student.
- 1.16 This information must be sent to the student in writing with a requirement to undergo a second review, normally with the same review panel. The student must satisfy the second review panel that they have met the targets set out in the action plan which may require the submission of a further written report. The student must also be informed at this stage in writing that failure to satisfy the second review panel concerning the progress made may result in a recommendation for termination.

## **The second review**

- 1.17 At the second review, normally the same review panel will assess the progress of the student against the action plan that had been given to the student. The review panel may recommend progression, or they may recommend termination to the Faculty Graduate School. The Faculty Graduate School should ensure there is an independent note-taker to document the second review.
- 1.18 The review panel must document the reasons for their decision and submit these to both the student and to the Faculty Graduate School Office within 5 working days of the second review.
- 1.19 The recommendation to the Faculty should also explicitly indicate whether or not the student submitted any mitigating circumstances, the evidence for these circumstances, and how the review panel took them into consideration. Failure to submit any new evidence of mitigating circumstances at this stage may be taken into account in any appeal.
- 1.20 If the decision is to allow progression, the review panel may also provide written guidance to the student to help guide their future work. A copy must be retained on the student's file.
- 1.21 The DFGS will review the recommendation. If the DFGS supports the recommendation, this must be approved by the Chair of Faculty Programmes Committee and formally reported to the next meeting of Faculty Programmes Committee. If the Faculty approves a recommendation for termination, this must be transmitted onwards to Senate.
- 1.22 The decision must be notified to the student in writing within 5 working days of receipt of the documentation from the second review panel. The student must also be informed of the appeal procedures.

## **2 Termination outside Formal Progression Reviews due to significant academic concerns**

- 2.1 It is the responsibility of the main supervisor to inform the doctoral student of unsatisfactory progress as soon as this becomes apparent (paragraph 65 of the [Code of Practice for Research Candidature and Supervision](#)).
- 2.2 The procedure followed should be as outlined by the steps shown in the flow chart (see Appendix 1).
- 2.3 The procedures outlined in this section refer to situations where the student's progression gives significant cause for concern, to the extent that there are well-founded and demonstrable reasons to doubt the eventual submission of the doctoral thesis within the maximum period of candidature remaining.
- 2.4 More minor concerns are not part of this procedure and should be handled as part of the normal supervision process.

- 2.5 If discussion between the doctoral student and appropriate members of the supervisory team fails to resolve the concerns, the matter should be referred to the relevant Doctoral Programme Director. If the relevant Doctoral Programme Director agrees that there is a significant concern, they should bring this to the attention of the Director of the Faculty Graduate School.
- 2.6 The Director of the Faculty Graduate School (DFGS) should then verify that there has indeed been a significant lack of progress (paragraph 65 of the [Code of Practice for Research Candidature and Supervision](#)). If so, the DFGS should establish, as far as possible at this early stage, whether any of the following has significantly affected the student's progress:
- circumstances not previously taken into account (including, but not exclusively, illness);
  - a poor or problematic supervisory relationship with one or more members of the supervisory team;
  - lack of appropriate facilities or equipment to carry out the research project.
- To ascertain if any (or potentially all) of the above has/have led to a significant lack of progress, the DFGS should seek separate evidence from:
- the student;
  - the supervisory team.
- 2.7 The evidence may also take the form of existing written supervisory records on file, as well as new evidence submitted. If there have been difficult personal circumstances or illness not yet documented, it is the responsibility of the student to provide this written evidence (for example, a medical certificate). Failure to provide new written evidence at this stage to the DFGS may be taken into account at any later appeal.
- 2.8 The evaluation of this evidence by the DFGS should be completed within 10 working days.
- 2.9 **If there are significant supervisory concerns**, these must be discussed with the relevant Doctoral Programme Director and/or Head of the Academic Unit.
- 2.10 **If progress has been significantly hampered by a lack of facilities or equipment**, these must be discussed with the relevant Doctoral Programme Director, the relevant budget holder and the supervisory team.
- 2.11 **Disputes relating to line management or budgetary issues** that cannot be resolved by the DFGS may be referred to the relevant Dean.
- 2.12 As a result of reviewing the information and evidence at his/her disposal, the DFGS may consider that the issues identified in connection with progress are not of sufficient seriousness to invoke the full termination procedures. For example, the DFGS may consider that the reasonable purchase of equipment, attendance at suitable training, and/or a change to the supervisory team may help the student to resume satisfactory progress. In these circumstances, and if it is appropriate for the student to continue, an action plan (with targets and timescales) should be agreed in order to support the student in moving forward. The action plan should be regularly reviewed by the supervisory team and the DFGS, with actions taken and amendments made to the plan as required.
- 2.13 Where the DFGS establishes there is no reasonable circumstance not previously taken into account that had significantly hampered the progression, a review panel will be formed.
- 2.14 Membership of the review panel is set out below. It should be constituted in a similar way to the panels used for formal progression stages, but with the addition of an independent Faculty nominee by the DFGS:
- the supervisory team
  - an individual who is independent of the research student, i.e., they must not have an individual relationship with the student (e.g., through research collaboration, mentoring, or teaching activities) or have been in previous discussions with the student about their case. The individual should normally have supervised at least three postgraduate students to completion in a related (but not necessarily overlapping) field of study.

- a nominee of the DFGS in the Faculty in which the student is registered (who will act as the Panel Chair). It is good practice for this person to be from outside the Academic Unit/Doctoral Programme in which the student is registered.

In choosing the non-supervisory members for the review panel, the DFGS should avoid any potential conflicting line-management issues.

- 2.15 The review panel will agree a written action plan, together with guidance to the student appropriate to the stage of their candidature, including targets and the deadline for improvement. The deadline for achievement of those targets should normally be 3 months from the date of the notification of this action plan to the student.
- 2.16 This information will be sent to the student in writing with a requirement to satisfy the targets set out in the action plan – normally this will involve some type of written work. The student may undergo a viva as required by the review panel or at the request of the student him or herself. The student must also be informed in writing at this stage that failure to satisfy the review panel may result in a recommendation for termination.
- 2.17 After the final deadline, the review panel will assess the progress of the student against the targets of the action plan. The panel may recommend progression, or they may recommend termination to the Faculty Graduate School. The Faculty Graduate School should ensure there is an independent note-taker to document this second review.
- 2.18 The review panel must document the reasons for their decision and submit these to both the student and to the Faculty Graduate School Office within 5 working days of their decision.
- 2.19 The recommendation to the Faculty should also explicitly indicate whether or not the student submitted any further mitigating circumstances, the evidence for these circumstances, and how the review panel took them into consideration. Failure to submit any new evidence of mitigating circumstances at this stage may be taken into account in any appeal.
- 2.20 If the decision is to allow progression, the review panel may also provide written guidance to the student to help to guide their future work. A copy must be retained on the student's file.
- 2.21 The DFGS will review the recommendation. If the DFGS supports the recommendation, this must be approved by the Chair of Faculty Programmes Committee and formally reported to the next meeting of Faculty Programmes Committee. If the Faculty approves a recommendation for termination, this must be transmitted onwards to Senate.
- 2.22 The decision must be notified to the student in writing within 5 working days of receipt of the documentation from the review panel. The student must also be informed of their right to appeal and of the [appeal procedures](#).

### **3 Termination as a result of failure to engage with PGR Tracker**

- 3.1 Students who fail to engage with PGR Tracker (where it is rolled out within the Faculty in which a student is registered) will receive a single formal warning from the DFGS. This warning will consist of a letter signed by the DFGS, sent to the university email accounts of the student and supervisory team, copied to the student's registered postal address by registered post. If after one month of this warning being sent, the student has still not engaged with PGR Tracker in a meaningful way, the Faculty Graduate School Directorate may issue a recommendation for termination.
- 3.2 Where the failure of a student to engage with the PGR Tracker (where that system is rolled out within the Faculty in which a student is registered) is due to the apparent inaction of the supervisory team to encourage engagement, the DFGS may refer the names of the supervisors to their line manager, Head of Academic Unit or, in the final event, to the relevant Dean.

#### **4 Termination as a result of failure to complete a Formal Progression Milestone in a timely manner**

- 4.1 Failure of a student to complete a formal progression milestone (annual or otherwise) by the final deadline specified in the Faculty Graduate School Student Handbook may lead to termination. If there are no known mitigating circumstances, the DFGS will send a letter, to the University email account of the student, copied to the academic supervisors, reminding the student of the need to complete the task or face a recommendation for termination. If the student then fails to complete the milestone within one month of the email being sent, and the DFGS has received no satisfactory mitigating information, a recommendation for termination may be made.

#### **5 Termination (deemed withdrawn) due to lack of contact**

- 5.1 Towards the end of an approved period of suspension, a student is expected to contact the Faculty Graduate School Office to confirm their intention to return to study or, exceptionally, to request a further period of suspension. Failure to contact the Faculty, and/or failure to return by the agreed date will result in the student being deemed withdrawn.
- 5.2 Where a student has not been in communication with his/her supervisory team or the University for a period of time that exceeds two months (excluding periods of external internships or suspensions formally approved by the Faculty) the supervisory team must notify the Graduate School Office. The notification should include a list of ways in which the team has sought to communicate with the student. A series of formal letters will then be set in train seeking contact with the student and encouraging a response. This will normally consist of two letters sent at fortnightly intervals to the student's university email account and by registered post to the postal address of the student registered with the University. If no response is received within one month of the sending of the second letter, a third letter will be sent informing the student that they have been deemed to have withdrawn. This action is in accordance with paragraph 5 of the Regulations governing Transfer, Suspension, Withdrawal and Termination in Section IV of the Calendar. Non-engagement has additional significance in the case of international students with Tier 4 visas, and this is further explained below.
- 5.3 The University is a sponsor for international students holding Tier 4 visas and is obliged to monitor attendance as part of its license. Tier 4 visa students also have certain responsibilities regarding attendance and engagement to enable them to comply with UKVI regulations. The University has a monitoring system (SUMMS) that will show engagement by Tier 4 students over an approximate 7–8 week period\*. Towards the end of this period, if the monitoring system indicates that a Tier 4 student has not shown any engagement, both the student and their Faculty will be notified. Failure to show evidence of attendance and engagement may result in the removal of sponsorship and the requirement for the international student to return home or else risk becoming an immigration offender.

*\*UKVI arrangements are subject to confirmation. For further guidance please contact the SAA Registry.*

#### **6 Termination as a result of failure to submit a thesis by the end of the maximum period of candidature**

- 6.1 In line with paragraph 18 of the Regulations for the degrees of Master of Philosophy and Doctor of Philosophy, a research student who fails to submit a thesis by the end of the maximum period of candidature will be deemed to have withdrawn from their studies.
- 6.2 In certain circumstances, students may apply for an extension of candidature beyond the maximum period. As stated in paragraphs 25 and 26 of the Regulations for the degrees of Master of Philosophy and Doctor of Philosophy, extensions will be granted only where there is good cause and where the case is supported by the supervisory team. An application for extension must be made before candidature is due to expire. It should be noted that the maximum period of candidature is increased if an extension is granted. The student's revised submission date will therefore be correspondingly later than the original submission date. Failure to submit by the

revised submission date will result in the student being deemed withdrawn unless a further (exceptional) period of extension is applied for and granted.

- 6.3 In extenuating circumstances, students may apply for a period of suspension from their studies (paragraphs 23 and 24 of the Regulations for the degrees of Master of Philosophy and Doctor of Philosophy). It should be noted that, unlike periods of extension, suspension does not increase the maximum period of candidature.

*Appendix 1 – Flowchart*

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## APPENDIX 1 – Procedures Flowchart

