

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

The following procedures cover recommendations for:

1. Termination as a result of a recommendation from a Progression Review (including from an Upgrade/Transfer or Confirmation Panel)
2. Termination outside of a Progression Review due to significant academic concerns (including Interim Progression Reviews)
3. Termination as a result of failure to undertake the expected responsibilities of a PGR student
4. Termination (deemed withdrawn) due to lack of contact
5. Termination (deemed withdrawn) as a result of failure to submit a thesis by the end of the maximum period of candidature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.

Appendix 1 contains a series of flowcharts outlining the main steps in each of the following procedures:

- 1 Termination as a result of a recommendation from a Progression Review (including from an Upgrade/Transfer or Confirmation Panel)**
  - 1.1 Students admitted to their programme of study after 1 August 2016 will be subject to three Progression Reviews during the course of their candidature. Every student is entitled to a second attempt at each Progression Review. A decision to terminate as a result of a recommendation from a Progression Review will always involve a panel including an individual who is independent of the supervisory team.
  - 1.2 Students who commenced their studies prior to 1 August 2016 may also be subject to 'formal progression reviews', held according to the timelines and formats decided by individual Faculties. The procedures for termination in this document may also be used for students who are terminated as a result of a 'formal progression review' providing that any decision for termination has included an individual who is independent of the supervisory team, and the student has had a second attempt at the review.
  - 1.3 If the review panel recommend, on the first attempt, that a Progression Review should lead to a re-assessment (i.e. that a student is offered a second attempt to satisfactorily pass the Progression Review), the student should be given written feedback and the DFGS should be notified within ten working days of the review. Written feedback should include the panel's judgement on the review, and guidance on actions to be taken to support progress ahead of the second attempt at the Progression Review. This process may occur via PGR Tracker.
  - 1.4 The DFGS may wish to establish at this point whether there are significant supervisory concerns, a lack of facilities or equipment, or disputes relating to line management or budgetary issues which may prevent a student's ability to demonstrate their progression to the satisfaction of the reviewers. If this is the case, the DFGS should discuss with the relevant individuals within the Faculty, taking into account any potential conflicting line-management issues concerning the

independent member of the review panel.

- 1.5 The review panel, supervisory team, and the DFGS should establish whether there are any mitigating circumstances which could be reviewed, which may be considered prior to a second attempt at the Progression Review.
- 1.6 The DFGS may choose to appoint an additional assessor to the second attempt of the Progression Review, which should be held within the timescales laid out in the [Code of Practice](#).

If the recommendation of the review panel at the second attempt of a Progression Review is that a candidate is terminated, the panel should make a formal recommendation to the Faculty Graduate School Directorate within ten working days of the review meeting. The student should be notified of the outcome of the panel, subject to approval at the Faculty Programmes Committee, in the same timescales. The note must also include the reasons leading to the decision, and the report from the first attempt at the Progression Review. This process may occur via PGR Tracker.

Before accepting the recommendation, the DFGS should establish, as far as possible, that the recommendation should not be modified by any mitigating circumstances. A student's failure to submit any new evidence of mitigating circumstances at this stage may be taken into account in any appeal.

- 1.7 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 reported to Senate.
- 1.8 The decision must be notified to the student in writing within ten 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 of a Progression Review due to significant academic concerns (including Interim Progression Reviews)**

- 2.1 It is the responsibility of the main supervisor to inform the doctoral student in writing of unsatisfactory progress as soon as this becomes apparent (paragraph 63 of the [Code of Practice for Research Candidature and Supervision](#)).
- 2.2 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. For part-time students who commenced their studies after 1 August 2016, these concerns may have been raised as a result of an Interim Progression Review, which should take place for all part-time students who have not undergone a Progression Review in the previous 12 months of candidature. More minor concerns are not part of this procedure and should be handled as part of the normal supervision process.
- 2.3 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 Director of the Faculty Graduate School, via the relevant Doctoral Programme Director, where appropriate.
- 2.4 The DFGS should then verify that there has indeed been a significant lack of progress (paragraph 63 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.

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.

- 2.5 The evaluation of this evidence by the DFGS should be completed within 10 working days.
- 2.6 If there are significant supervisory concerns, a lack of facilities or equipment, or disputes relating to line management or budgetary issues which may prevent a student's ability to demonstrate their progression to the satisfaction of the reviewers, the DFGS should discuss with the relevant individuals within the Faculty, taking into account any potential conflicting line-management issues concerning the independent member of the review panel.
- 2.7 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 up to the next scheduled Progression Review) 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.
- 2.8 Where the DFGS establishes there is no reasonable circumstance not previously taken into account that had significantly hampered the student's candidature, an Exceptional Progression Review may occur.
- 2.9 Exceptional Progression Reviews usually follow the procedures for confirmation. Membership of the Exceptional review panel is as follows:
- At least two members of staff who have had no direct involvement in the student's research and can take the role of independent 'assessors' 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 individuals 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 Independent 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 exceptional circumstances, the faculty may wish to appoint an independent note taker.

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

- 2.10 The student must submit, as a minimum, a written report which summarises progress made since the last progression review. The student must also undergo a viva. The student must be informed in writing at this stage that failure to: submit a written report; attend a viva; attend a follow-up meeting; or satisfy the review panel, may result in a recommendation for termination.
- 2.11 Following the viva, the 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 no more than 3 months from the date of the notification of this action plan to the student.
- 2.12 This information will be sent to the student in writing within ten working days of the panel, with a requirement to satisfy the targets set out in the action plan. Normally this will involve some type of

written work.

- 2.13 After the final deadline, the review panel will meet with the student to assess the progress against the targets of the action plan. The panel may recommend that the student can continue, or they may recommend termination to the Faculty Graduate School.
- 2.14 The review panel must document the reasons for their decision and submit these to both the student and to the DFGS within ten working days of their decision. All documentation should be copied into the Faculty Graduate School.
- 2.15 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.
- 2.16 If the decision is to allow the student to continue, 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.
- 2.17 If the decision is to terminate the student's candidature, this must be supported by the DFGS and 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 reported onwards to Senate.
- 2.18 The decision must be notified to the student in writing within ten 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 undertake the expected responsibilities of a PGR student**

- 3.1 The University's [Code of Practice on Research Candidature and Supervision](#) sets out a number of responsibilities of a research student. Students who are making good academic progress but nevertheless are failing to undertake other expected responsibilities (such as failing to engage with PGR tracker where applicable, or failing to complete a formal required activity in a timely manner), may have their candidature terminated.

Students who do not adequately undertake their responsibilities (as set out in the 'Responsibilities of the Research Student' within the [Code of Practice](#)) may be identified by their supervisory team, the chair of a Progression Review Panel (including Confirmation Panel), or by routine screening of the use of PGR tracker where applicable, by the Graduate School Office.

- 3.2 The DFGS, having first established that there are no known mitigating circumstances, will send a single formal warning to the student, reminding the student of the need to undertake their expected responsibilities and indicating clearly what the student is required to do, and by when, to remedy the situation. This warning will consist of a letter signed by the DFGS, sent to the university email account of the student, copied to the student's registered postal address by registered post and copied to the student's supervisory team members.
- 3.3 If the student then fails to undertake the required action within the set timescale, and the DFGS has received no satisfactory mitigating information, a recommendation for termination may be made. The recommendation must be approved by the Chair of the 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 reported onwards to Senate.
- 3.4 If it transpires that the student is unable to undertake their responsibilities due to a failure of one or members of the supervisory team to encourage, 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.
- 3.5 The decision must be notified to the student in writing. The student must also be informed of their right to appeal and of the [appeal procedures](#).

#### 4 Termination (deemed withdrawn) due to lack of contact

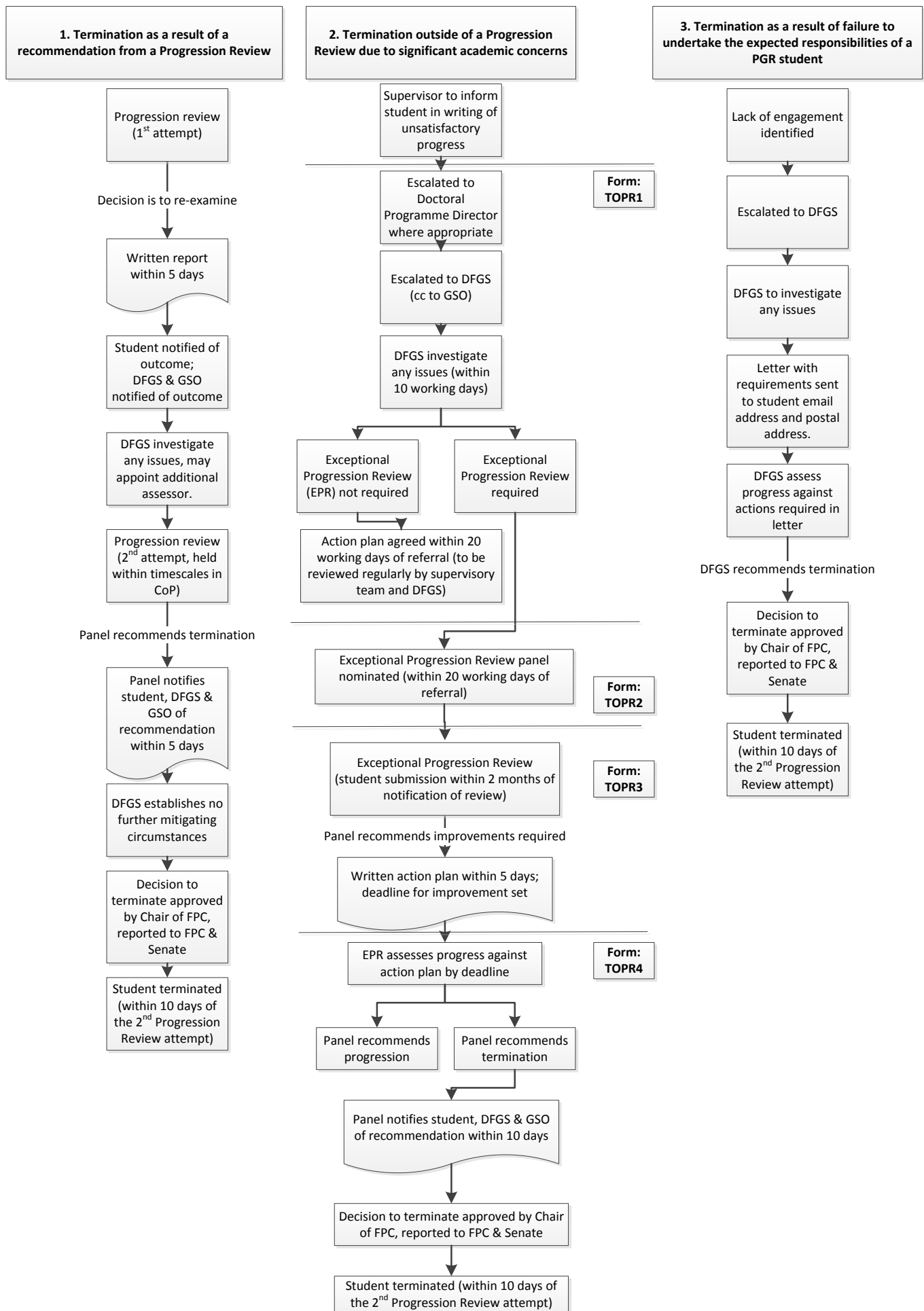
- 4.1 Where a student has not been in communication with his/her supervisory team or the University for a period of time that exceeds two months (excluding periods of external internships or suspensions formally approved by the Faculty) the supervisory team must notify the Graduate School Office. The 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.
- 4.2 A student who is towards the end of an approved period of suspension 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 trigger the sending of letters (as detailed in 4.1).
- 4.3 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 Home Office<sup>1</sup> regulations. The University has a monitoring system that will show engagement by Tier 4 students. Students not attending satisfactorily will initially receive a warning regarding their poor attendance and the impact of this on their right to remain in the UK. Their Faculty will also be notified. If attendance does not improve to an acceptable level the University will be required to withdraw visa sponsorship which in turn will necessitate the student having to return home in order to avoid becoming an over stayer under the immigration legislation.

#### 5 Termination (deemed withdrawn) as a result of failure to submit a thesis by the end of the maximum period of candidature

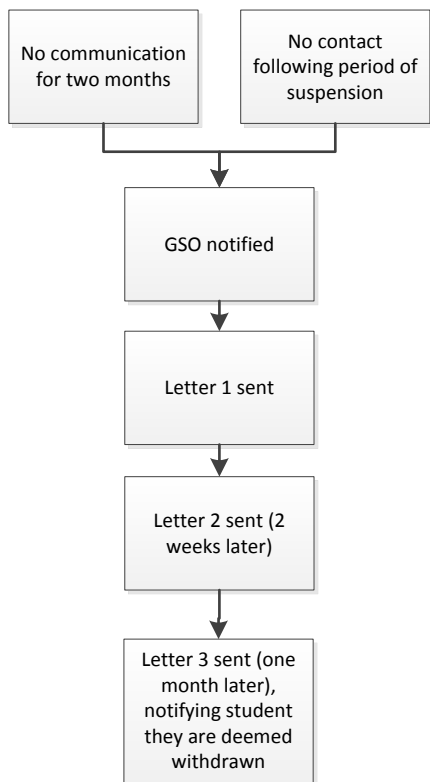
- 5.1 In line with paragraph 18 of the Regulations for the degrees of Master of Philosophy and Doctor of Philosophy, a research student who fails to submit a thesis by the end of the maximum period of candidature will be deemed to have withdrawn from their studies.
- 5.2 In certain circumstances, students 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. 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.
- 5.3 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.

| Document Information |  |
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| Author               | Quality Standards and Accreditation Team |
| Owner (committee)    | AQSC                                     |
| Approved Date        | February 2014                            |
| Last Revision        | January 2017                             |
| Type of Document     | Procedures                               |

<sup>1</sup> Home Office policies are subject to change. For further guidance, please contact the University's Visa and Immigration Student Advice Service ([visa@soton.ac.uk](mailto:visa@soton.ac.uk))



**4. Termination (deemed withdrawn) due to lack of contact**



**5. Termination (deemed with drawn) as a result of failure to submit a thesis by the end of the maximum period of candidature**

