

# Postgraduate Research 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 research 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 Termination (deemed withdrawn) due to lack of contact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 Termination (deemed withdrawn) as a result of failure to submit a thesis by the end of the maximum period of candidature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 Quality, Standards and Accreditation Team (email [gsa@soton.ac.uk](mailto:gsa@soton.ac.uk)).

Where there is a recommendation for termination to Senate, the Faculty will also record the reasons for the termination at the Faculty Education 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 research 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 Research students who enrolled on their doctoral studies after 1 August 2016 are required to undertake Progression Reviews as outlined in the Summary of timings of progression reviews table as set out in paragraph 65 of the [Code of Practice for Research Degree Candidature and Supervision](#). Two attempts at each Progression Review are permitted. A decision to terminate a research student's candidature as a result of failure to meet the criteria for a successful Progression Review will always involve a panel including an individual who is independent of the supervisory team.
- 1.2 Research 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 research students whose candidature is 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 research 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 research student is offered a second attempt to satisfactorily pass the Progression Review), the research student should be given written feedback and the Faculty Director of the Graduate School (FDoGS) 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 Faculty Director of the Graduate School 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 research student's ability to demonstrate their progression to the satisfaction of the reviewers. If this is the case, the Faculty Director of the Graduate School should discuss with the relevant individuals within the School, taking into account any potential conflicting line-management issues concerning the independent member of the review panel.
- 1.5 The Faculty Director of the Graduate School may choose to appoint an additional assessor to the second attempt of a Progression Review, which should be held within the timescales laid out in the [Code of Practice for Research Degree Candidature and Supervision](#).
- 1.6 If the recommendation of the review panel at the second attempt of a Progression Review is that the research student's candidature is terminated, the panel should make a formal recommendation to the Faculty Graduate School directorate within ten working days of the review meeting. The research student should be notified of the outcome of the panel, subject to approval at Faculty Education 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.
- 1.7 The decision must be notified to the research student in writing within ten working days of receipt of the documentation from the second review panel. The research 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 research student in writing of unsatisfactory progress as soon as this becomes apparent (paragraph 64 of the Code of Practice for Research Degree Candidature and Supervision).
- 2.2 The procedures outlined in this section refer to situations where the research 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 research 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 research 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 research student and appropriate members of the supervisory team fails to resolve the concerns, the matter should be referred to the Doctoral Programme Director (DPD). If the Doctoral Programme Director agrees that there is a significant concern, they should bring this to the attention of the Faculty Director of the Graduate School.
- 2.4 The Faculty Director of the Graduate School should then verify that there has indeed been a significant lack of progress (paragraph 64 of the [Code of Practice for Research Degree Candidature and Supervision](#)). If so, the Faculty Director of the Graduate School should establish, as far as possible at this early stage, whether any of the following has significantly affected the research student's progress:
  - Circumstances not previously taken into account which could be considered under the [Regulations Governing Special Considerations and Suspension of Candidature for Postgraduate Research Students](#) (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 Faculty Director of the Graduate School should seek separate evidence from:

- the research 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 research student to provide this written evidence (for example, a medical certificate). Failure to provide new written evidence at this stage to the Faculty Director of the Graduate School may be taken into account at any later appeal.

- 2.5 The evaluation of this evidence by the Faculty Director of the Graduate School 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 research student's ability to demonstrate their progression to the satisfaction of the reviewers, the Faculty Director of the Graduate School should discuss with the relevant individuals within the School, 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 their disposal, the Faculty Director of the Graduate School may consider that the issues identified in connection with progress are not of sufficient seriousness to invoke the full termination procedures. For example, the Faculty Director of the Graduate School may consider that the reasonable purchase of equipment, attendance at suitable training, and/or a change to the supervisory team may help the research student to resume satisfactory progress. In these circumstances, and if it is appropriate for the research 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 research student in moving forward. The action plan should be regularly reviewed by the supervisory team and the Faculty Director of the Graduate School, with actions taken and amendments made to the plan as required.
- 2.8 Where the Faculty Director of the Graduate School establishes there is no reasonable circumstance not previously taken into account that had significantly hampered the research 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 research student's research and can take the role of independent 'assessors' i.e., they must not have an individual relationship with the research student (e.g., through research collaboration, mentoring, or teaching activities) or have been in previous discussions with the research student about their case. The individuals should normally have supervised at least three postgraduate research students to completion in a related (but not necessarily overlapping) field of study.
  - A nominee of the Faculty Director of the Graduate School in the Faculty in which the research student is registered (who will act as the Independent Panel Chair). It is good practice for this person to be from outside the School/Institute in which the research 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 Faculty Director of the Graduate School should avoid any potential conflicting line-management issues.

- 2.10 The research student must submit, as a minimum, a written report which summarises progress made since the last progression review. The research student must also undergo a *viva* examination. The research student must be informed in writing at this stage that failure to: submit a written report; attend a *viva* examination; attend a follow-up meeting; or satisfy the review panel, may result in a recommendation for termination of the research student's candidature.

- 2.11 Following the *viva* examination, the panel will agree a written action plan, together with guidance to the research 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 research student.
- 2.12 This information will be sent to the research student in writing within 10 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 research student to assess the progress against the targets of the action plan. The panel may recommend that the research student can continue, or they may recommend termination of the research student's candidature to the Faculty.
- 2.14 The review panel must document the reasons for their decision and submit these to both the research student and to the Faculty Director of the Graduate School within ten working days of their decision. All documentation should be copied into the Faculty Graduate School Office (FGSO).
- 2.15 The recommendation to the Faculty should also explicitly indicate whether or not the research student submitted any further mitigating circumstances which were considered under the [Regulations Governing Special Considerations and Suspension of Candidature for Postgraduate Research Students](#).
- 2.16 If the decision is to allow the research student to continue, the review panel may also provide written guidance to the research student to help to guide their future work. A copy must be retained on the research student's file.
- 2.17 If the decision is to terminate the research student's candidature, this must be supported by the Faculty Director of the Graduate School and approved by the Chair of Faculty Education Committee and formally reported to the next meeting of that Committee. If a recommendation for termination is approved, this must be reported onwards to Senate.
- 2.18 The decision must be notified to the research student in writing within ten working days of receipt of the documentation from the review panel. The research student must also be informed of their right to appeal and of the [Regulations Governing Academic Appeals by Students](#).

### 3. Termination as a result of failure to undertake the expected responsibilities of a PGR student

- 3.1 Paragraph 49 of the [Code of Practice for Research Degree Candidature and Supervision](#) sets out a number of responsibilities of a research student. Research 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.

Research students who do not adequately undertake their responsibilities (as set out in the 'Responsibilities of the Research Student' within the [Code of Practice for Research Degree Candidature and Supervision](#)) 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 Faculty Graduate School Office.

- 3.2 The Faculty Director of the Graduate School, having first established that there are no known mitigating circumstances, will send a single formal warning to the research student, reminding the research student of the need to undertake their expected responsibilities and indicating clearly what the research student is required to do, and by when, to remedy the situation. This warning will consist of a letter signed by the Faculty Director of the Graduate School, sent to the University email account of the research student, copied to the research student's registered postal address by registered post and copied to the research student's supervisory team members.
- 3.3 If the research student then fails to undertake the required action within the set timescale, and the Faculty Director of the Graduate School has received no satisfactory mitigating information, a recommendation for termination may be made. The recommendation must be approved by the Chair of the Faculty Education Committee and formally reported to the next meeting of that

Committee. If a recommendation for termination is approved, this must be reported onwards to Senate.

- 3.4 If it transpires that the research student is unable to undertake their responsibilities due to a failure of one or more members of the supervisory team to encourage, the Faculty Director of the Graduate School may refer the names of the supervisors to their line manager, Head of School or, in the final event, to the Dean of the Faculty.
- 3.5 The decision must be notified to the research student in writing. The research student must also be informed of their right to appeal and of the [Regulations Governing Academic Appeals by Students](#).

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

- 4.1 Where a research student has not been in communication with their 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 Faculty Graduate School Office. The notification should include a list of ways in which the team has sought to communicate with the research student. A series of formal letters will then be set in train seeking contact with the research student and encouraging a response. This will normally consist of two letters sent at fortnightly intervals to the research student's University email account and by registered post to the postal address of the research 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 research 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 research students with Tier 4 visas, and this is further explained below.
- 4.2 A research 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 research students holding Tier 4 visas and is obliged to monitor attendance as part of its license. Tier 4 visa research 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 research students. Research 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 School 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 research 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

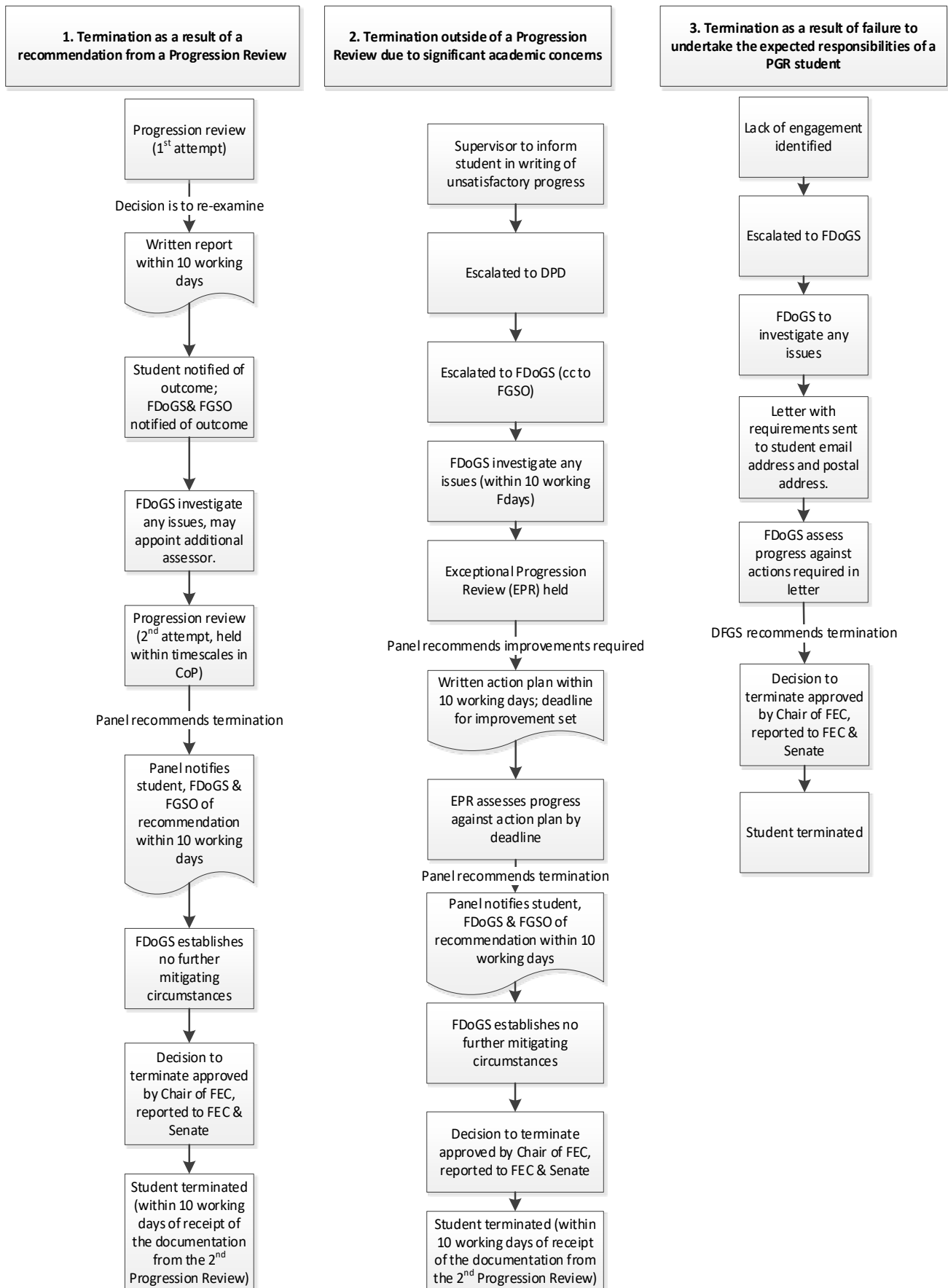
- 5.1 In line with paragraph 20 of the [Regulations for Research Degrees](#), a research student who fails to submit a thesis by the end of the maximum period of candidature will be deemed to have withdrawn from the degree.
- 5.2 Under the [Regulations Governing Special Considerations and Suspension of Candidature for Postgraduate Research Students](#), research students may apply for an extension of candidature. A request 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 research 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 research student being deemed withdrawn unless a further period of extension is requested and granted.

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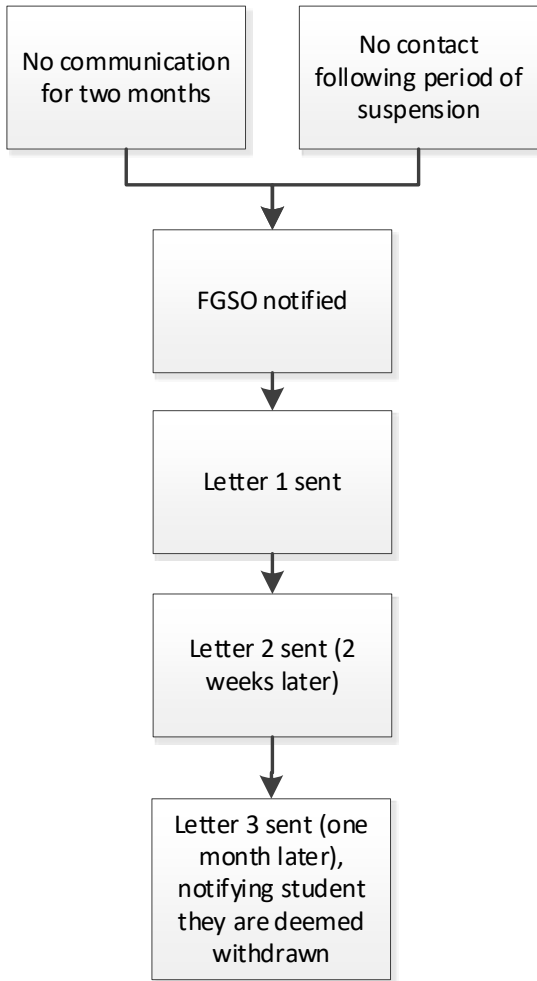
<sup>1</sup> Home Office policies are subject to change. For further guidance, please contact the University's Visa and Immigration Student Advice Service ([visa@soton.ac.uk](mailto:visa@soton.ac.uk))

- 5.3 Under the [Regulations Governing Special Considerations and Suspension of Candidature for Postgraduate Research Students](#), research students may apply for a period of suspension from their studies. It should be noted that, unlike periods of extension, suspension does not increase the maximum period of candidature.

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