

PhD by Distance Learning Policy

1. Scope and purpose

- 1.1 This Policy defines and outlines the key functions and activities associated with the development, management and operation of a University of Southampton research degree that is to be delivered by distance learning, either to a defined cohort (where all research projects share a common disciplinary interest which support the development of a cohort identity) or to an individual student.
- 1.2 This Policy should be read in conjunction with the [General Academic Regulations for Research Students](#) which govern all research degrees at the University of Southampton, specifically the [Regulations for Research Degrees](#) (the Regulations) and the [Code of Practice for Research Degree Candidature and Supervision](#) (the Code of Practice).
- 1.3 Delivering a research degree by distance learning requires a sustained commitment from the School and Faculty for the duration of the student's candidature. Evidence of this commitment will be a factor in deciding on approval. The approval process is explained within section 17 of this Policy.

2. Definition

- 2.1 Distance learning is a distinct mode of attendance which, for those unable to pursue a campus-based programme of study, offers the opportunity to study for a research degree entirely away from Southampton's campus, at a location that suits the student's circumstances, either in the UK or overseas. It offers a high level of flexibility to the student and the financial and practical implications of moving closer to Southampton's campus may make distance learning a more feasible option for the student to combine their studies with employment and family responsibilities. Similarly, the student's research project could be directly related to their employment or their

area of residence and moving closer to Southampton's campus would be detrimental to their capacity to effectively conduct their research.

2.2 Distance learning is separate and distinct to:

2.2.1 temporary periods of off-campus study where the student may need to be temporarily located at another higher education institution, organisation, or other location away from Southampton's campus to conduct research or to undertake fieldwork. Such activities may need to be undertaken in the UK or overseas, with the length of time, and the number of separate periods away from Southampton, defined according to the nature of the student's research project. Such arrangements are made on an individual basis between the student, their supervisory team, and the external institution or organisation.

2.2.2 the Split-Site PhD, the Joint PhD and the Double PhD, all of which involve a collaborative partner and which are described in the [Education Partnerships Policy](#).

3. The difference between distance learning and campus-based learning

3.1 The following table illustrates the difference between campus-based and distance learning and is intended to assist the School in deciding whether distance learning is feasible and appropriate for any or all its disciplines.

Distance Learning	Campus-Based Learning
The student's main place of residence is outside of Southampton, either in the UK or overseas.	The student's main place of residence is in the UK but may be outside of Southampton.
The progress and success of the student's research project is not dependent on regular and ongoing access to the University's campus-	The progress and success of the student's research project is dependent on or enriched by regular and ongoing access to the

based facilities, equipment and resources ¹ . The facilities, equipment, and resources essential to the progress and success of the research are provided by the student's employer, other organisation, or are available locally.	University's campus-based facilities, equipment, and resources ¹ .
Supervisory meetings, progression reviews and examinations are conducted solely through remote communication.	Supervisory meetings, progression reviews and examinations are conducted through a combination of in-person attendance and remote communication.

4. Eligibility

- 4.1 Distance learning may be appropriate as a mode of attendance where the student [or cohort] is based and/or employed in an environment that is relevant and conducive to their research, either in the UK or overseas, and there is regular, ongoing, and local access to the essential facilities and resources¹ needed to successfully complete the research. Access to Southampton's campus-based facilities and resources are not essential for successful completion of the research degree.
- 4.2 The significant factors in determining whether a research degree can be delivered by distance learning are:
- the research project is suitable for distance learning; such that it is not dependent on the University of Southampton's on-site facilities and resources but is instead enriched by those available to the student locally or online;

¹ [e.g. laboratories; high-power computer facilities/databases, experimental facilities, archives]

- the environment is conducive to the research and the applicant has local access to the essential facilities and resources¹ needed to successfully complete the research;
- the required academic supervision can be provided remotely;
- training and support is available to effectively support students working remotely. This training should also specifically address issues related to working at a distance, but should at a minimum be equivalent to that provided for campus-based students;
- Where there is a defined student cohort, all research projects share a common disciplinary interest which support the development of a cohort identity.

5. Exclusions

- 5.1 Distance learning is not permissible in circumstances where it would contravene the rules and regulations of the University of Southampton or external body (e.g. a funding body; UK Visas and Immigration (UKVI)) or where the research project would require an Academic Technology Approval Scheme (ATAS) certificate; or where an export control licence and/or a standard individual export licence is required.
- 5.2 Not all research degrees are suitable for distance learning. Although this mode of attendance offers a high level of flexibility for the student, it may not be feasible or desirable to offer distance learning for laboratory-based disciplines, or where regular and ongoing access to Southampton's on-site facilities and resources is essential to the progress and success of the research project. For this reason, research degrees which include elements of taught provision as standard (e.g. professional doctorates; integrated PhD programmes) will be deemed unsuitable for distance learning.

6. In-person attendance

- 6.1 The distance learning mode of attendance expects the student to have regular and ongoing access to the facilities and resources¹ essential for

their research either through their employer, other organisation, or locally.

- 6.2 The student would not normally be expected to attend Southampton's campus in-person. Where the School requires in-person attendance for any activities which cannot be delivered remotely and which are essential to the success of the research project and/or deemed necessary for progression or assessment purposes, this should be kept to a minimum and the specific requirements and responsibility for costs must be clearly defined and communicated by the School to the applicant during the recruitment, selection and admission process and confirmed to the student within the [Individual Doctoral Agreement](#) (section 16 of this Policy).
- 6.3 During required periods of in-person attendance, the School is responsible for ensuring that the student has access to an appropriate place to work and to the facilities, equipment and resources needed.
- 6.4 The student may need to secure a standard visitor visa for each period of in-person attendance to Southampton's campus. The student is solely responsible for meeting the conditions of their visa and the School should refer the student to the [VISAS Team](#) for advice and guidance.

7. Facilities, equipment, and resources

- 7.1 General expectations regarding the provision of facilities, equipment and resources to support students' research are set down in the [Code of Practice](#).
- 7.2 The distance learning mode of attendance will require additional and specific arrangements to be made for the student. The School must seek advice and guidance from relevant Professional Services' colleagues to ensure its understanding of its obligations to the student and of what expectations may be reasonably placed upon the student. Legislative requirements (e.g. matters relating to health and safety (including the assessment of risk); insurance; confidentiality; intellectual property; research integrity) must be given detailed consideration by the

School and all relevant information clearly communicated to the student in writing.

- 7.3 The School is responsible for ensuring that the facilities, equipment, and resources available to the student during their candidature continue to be adequate. Should availability change, the School must work with the student to identify alternative provision so that their potential to complete their research degree is not jeopardised.
- 7.4 Consideration of what constitutes appropriate space to work will be informed by the student's local environment and whether they will be primarily based at the premises of their employer (or other organisation).
- 7.5 Computer hardware will be provided in line with the University's [hardware provision policy](#) but shipping and recovery costs will result in an uplift cost to the School. The School must implement appropriate mitigation measures where essential access to the electronic information systems of the University is restricted (e.g. for licensing or territorial (legal) reasons). The School should ensure that students on distance learning programmes will have access to a stable internet connection suitable to access University of Southampton (and other project-related) systems prior to starting their project.

8. Tuition fees and additional costs

Tuition fees

- 8.1 This Policy expects that the tuition fee for a research degree with a distance learning mode of attendance will be the same as that charged for campus-based learning unless, and informed by evidenced research, a differential pricing model is deemed appropriate. Where variation is proposed, the School must seek guidance from its Head of Faculty Finance and from the Director of the Doctoral College; and the decision and proposed fee evidenced within the approval process (section 17 of this Policy).

Additional costs

- 8.2 Additional costs may be sometimes be incurred by the student during the course of their research degree; examples are published in the [Fees, Charges and Expenses Regulations](#).
- 8.3 Costs associated with required periods of in-person attendance are not included in the tuition fee and these costs (e.g. visa; travel; accommodation) are solely the responsibility of the student.

9. Recruitment, selection, and admission

- 9.1 The requirements set out in the [Regulations](#) and the [Code of Practice](#) apply to the recruitment, selection and admission of applicants to all research degrees which lead to a University of Southampton award (including those which are to be delivered by distance learning). Only suitably qualified and prepared applicants will be admitted to a research degree that is to be delivered by distance learning.
- 9.2 The School must provide clear and realistic advice to the applicant on the expectations of a distance learning research degree. It must be satisfied that the applicant understands the challenges of this mode of attendance and the level of self-motivation that will be required of the applicant in working autonomously and away from in-person interaction with their supervisory team, their peers, and other researchers.
- 9.3 During the selection process, the School is required to use the interview and selection criteria and guidance as defined in the [Regulations](#) and the [Code of Practice](#). The School must also satisfy itself that:
- the applicant's proposed research project is suitable for a distance learning mode of attendance and is not dependent on access to the University of Southampton's on-site facilities and resources;
 - the applicant's local environment is conducive to their research and they have regular and ongoing access to any facilities, equipment, and resources¹ essential for their research.
 - the applicant has access to an electronic device with internet access and videoconference capabilities and the technology to enable remote contact and access to the University's systems so

that they can participate fully in remote meetings and online activities.

- 9.4 During the selection process, the School and the applicant will provisionally agree the study plan. Any in-person attendance requirements and additional costs (reference sections 6 and 8 of this Policy) must be clearly defined and communicated by the School to the applicant during the recruitment, selection, and admission process.

10. Candidature

- 10.1 The duration of candidature for the **PhD – Standard Route** (as set down in the [Regulations](#)) applies to a research degree that is delivered by distance learning.
- 10.2 Candidature may be **full-time or part-time**. The student may transfer between full-time and part-time candidature, subject to the conditions set down in the [Code of Practice](#) (paragraph 9.2, Mode of candidature).

Transfer between distance-learning and campus-based learning

- 10.3 In exceptional circumstances (e.g. a change to family or employment circumstances) the student may request a transfer in their mode of attendance. Where a transfer from campus-based learning to distance learning is requested, the School must satisfy itself that the applicant can satisfy the additional criteria set down in section 9 of this Policy. This should include completion of an [Individual Doctoral Agreement](#) for the distance learning element of the programme.
- 10.4 Where a student wishes to transfer from distance-learning to campus based learning, exclusions may apply and, the School should refer the student to the [VISAS Team](#) for advice in advance of making a formal transfer request in cases where they are subject to visa conditions to study in the UK.
- 10.5 Where the student transfers from campus-based learning to distance learning, the University's sponsorship of any existing student visa will be withdrawn, and the student will then become dependent on securing

a standard visitor visa for any required periods of in-person attendance to Southampton's campus.

10.6 Where a student transfers their mode of study to distance learning part way through their programme any associated changes in tuition fees, access to facilities and resources, supervision arrangements etc should be communicated to the student in writing prior to the final decision being approved.

10.7 The Faculty Director of the Graduate School is responsible for approving all transfer requests.

11. Supervision

11.1 The time and commitment required to supervise a distance learning student will be no less, and may be more, than for a campus-based student. As such, the School must give careful consideration to the constitution of the supervisory team and to supervisory loading to ensure that the student receives an equivalent level of support to that provided to a campus-based student.

11.2 Where the student is primarily based at the premises of their employer (or other organisation), the supervisory team may find it beneficial to arrange for a local contact to be available. Any such arrangement will be informal in nature and the local contact will not be considered a member of the student's supervisory team. Should there be an expectation that the local contact will provide specialist expertise to the student, they must be formally nominated and appointed as an external adviser.

11.3 The frequency and method of supervisory team contact and communication will be discussed during the recruitment, selection and admissions process and the student's first meeting with their supervisory team. These arrangements will be set down within the [Individual Doctoral Agreement](#).

11.4 There should also be a clear understanding between all parties as to what constitutes reasonable access to the supervisory team if the student requires advice outside of scheduled supervisory meetings. This

is particularly important when the student is based in a location that has a different time zone to the UK.

12. Training and professional development

12.1 In accordance with the expectations of the [Code of Practice](#), every student must have access to a suitable programme of research and transferrable skills training, and it is expected that a distance learning student will be provided with remote access to a comparable level of training and professional development as that available to a campus-based student and training and professional development needs recorded in, and regularly assessed, through the Academic Needs Analysis. Any activities which are essential to the success of the research project and/or deemed necessary for progression or assessment purposes which cannot be delivered remotely will require in-person attendance.

13. The research community

13.1 Opportunities for all students to develop peer support networks and interact with others to discuss research and exchange ideas is an important aspect of study. Such engagement supports students' personal development and their connection to the School's research community.

13.2 The School must consider how best to support and integrate the distance learning student into the research community, both within the School's larger student cohort and/or that of the Faculty, and also with its other distance learning students. Practical advice and guidance should be communicated to the student within the [Individual Doctoral Agreement](#).

14. Student support and wellbeing

14.1 It is expected that the distance learning student will have remote access to the same student support services as that which are available to the campus-based student.

14.2 The distance learning mode of attendance can sometimes be quite isolating and the School should encourage the student to proactively seek out connections from within relevant research communities. Supervisory teams and programme teams should actively support students in network building.

14.3 The supervisory team should be alert to the challenges of distance learning as a mode of attendance and the needs of the individual student and should signpost to relevant services where necessary. Faculties, Schools and Programme Teams should consider what support and training is required by supervisory teams supporting distance learning students.

15. Student representation

15.1 All students, irrespective of their mode of attendance, are included in the University's student representation system.

15.2 The School must ensure that the distance learning student has opportunities to engage with Student-Staff Liaison Committee meetings, either through their Faculty representative or through the provision of online or hybrid meetings.

16. The individual doctoral agreement

16.1 The provisional study plan agreed between the School and the applicant during the recruitment, selection, and admissions process (reference section 9 of this Policy) will be further discussed and confirmed during the student's first meeting with their supervisory team.

16.2 The study plan will inform the [Individual Doctoral Agreement](#). This is individual to the student and sets down the arrangements which are specific to the distance learning mode of attendance and which are considered necessary to support the student during their candidature.

16.3 The [Individual Doctoral Agreement](#) will be finalised by the student and their supervisory team and submitted for approval to the Faculty Director of the Graduate School. A copy of the approved agreement will be provided to the student and to their supervisory team and uploaded

to PGR Manager by the student. A copy will be retained on the student's file by the Doctoral College (Faculty) Team.

- 16.4 Via discussion between the student and their supervisory team, the [Individual Doctoral Agreement](#) should be reviewed annually, modifications agreed by all parties, and recorded in the agreement which should then be submitted for approval to the Faculty Director of the Graduate School. A copy of the approved agreement will be provided to the student and to their supervisory team and uploaded to PGR Manager by the student. A copy will be retained on the student's file by the Doctoral College (Faculty) Team.

17. Approval process

Development stage

- 17.1 The School is not permitted to issue any applicant with an offer to study a research degree by distance learning until the approval process detailed in section 17 of this Policy has been fully completed.
- 17.2 The School should not under-estimate the effort and time involved in the development, management and operation of research degree that is to be delivered by distance learning. It is a distinct model which requires a significant commitment from the School and, where it intends to offer distance learning as a mode of attendance only for one of two students, the costs may far outweigh any financial or other benefits to the School.
- 17.3 The School must discuss its initial proposal with the Doctoral Programme Director, the Faculty Director of the Graduate School, the Head of Faculty Finance and the Student Experience Directorate's Visa Operations and Compliance Manager so that the viability of the proposal can be assessed. Development costs and those associated with delivering the programme must be balanced against projected income.

Associated processes

- 17.4 Education partnership is when the University works in partnership with other organisations to deliver aspects of teaching, learning, assessment, or student support, leading to a University of Southampton award.
- 17.5 A partnership agreement will be required in circumstances where the success of the research project is **dependent** on an employer or other organisation's research environment, facilities, equipment and/or resources. The agreement may be limited to covering the dependent use of facilities or data and (depending on the nature of the University's relationship with the employer or other organisation), any intellectual property issues. An enhanced approval route will be required, including due diligence consideration through the [Education Partnerships Policy](#), which must be completed before any formal agreement is confirmed.
- 17.6 Where the research environment is provided by an employer or other organisation but the success of the research project is **not dependent** on the provision of its facilities, equipment and/or resources a partnership agreement will not be required. However, the School must obtain a written commitment from the employer or organisation to confirm its broad support before any offer is made to the applicant.

Submission and approval of the proposal

- 17.7 Once the development stage has been completed, the proposer should complete the [Evidence of Compliance Form](#) which should demonstrate how the proposal will adhere to the expectations of this Policy.
- 17.8 Any proposed variation to the expectations of this Policy must be clearly documented within the [Evidence of Compliance Form](#). In such cases, additional approval from the Academic Quality and Standards Subcommittee (AQSS) will be required.
- 17.9 The support of the Head of Faculty Finance, the Doctoral Programme Director, the Faculty Director of the Graduate School, and the Director of the Doctoral College must be recorded on the Form prior to it being submitted to School Programmes Committee (SPC) for endorsement,

and then to the Postgraduate Research Quality Monitoring and Enhancement (PGR QME) Subcommittee for approval.

Completion and reporting

17.10 PGR QME Subcommittee will record its approval of the proposal and the Chair will include it in their regular reporting to the Doctoral College Committee and to AQSS.

17.11 The secretary to PGR QME Subcommittee will notify the approval to:

- the Proposer
- the Faculty Director of the Graduate School
- the Head of Faculty Finance
- the Secretary to School Programmes Committee
- The Head of Doctoral College Administration
- the Doctoral College (Faculty) Team
- the Faculty Curriculum and Quality Assurance (CQA) Team

17.12 A unique programme code must be created to clearly distinguish the research degree's mode of attendance as distance learning; not doing so will result in serious implications for students who require a standard visitor visa to enter the UK for periods of in-person attendance. The CQA Team is responsible for administering the process of programme creation in conjunction with the Curriculum and Timetabling Team and for notifying relevant parties once the process has been completed.

Monitoring and review

17.13 Schools and Faculties are specifically required to reflect on the progress and outcomes of distance learning students through the University's postgraduate research annual monitoring and periodic review processes.

Document Information	
Author	Quality Standards and Accreditation Team
Owner (committee)	(via PGR QME Subcommittee) Academic Quality and Standards Subcommittee

Approved Date	June 2025
Last Revision	N/A
Type of Document	Policy