

PhD by Distance Learning Framework

1. Introduction and principles

- 1.1 This Framework sets out the requirements and expectations that should be met by a School if it wishes to set up a PhD by Distance Learning. The School will be required to demonstrate how these requirements and expectations will be achieved by completing the [PhD by Distance Learning: Evidence of Compliance form](#). The form is based on the PhD by Distance Learning Framework and should be completed, supported by the Faculty Director of the Graduate School, and considered by School Programmes Committee as evidence that all aspects of the Framework are being taken into account. The form should then be submitted to the PGR QME Subcommittee for approval. Any variation to the PhD by Distance Learning Framework will require University approval via the Academic Quality and Standards Subcommittee (AQSS) (see paragraph 2.1). Paragraphs 1.2 to 1.8 outline the main principles behind the Framework, and sections 2 to 13 provide further details of requirements in specific areas.
- 1.2 The PhD by Distance Learning is governed by the University's [Regulations for Research Degrees](#) and the [Code of Practice for Research Degree Candidature and Supervision](#). However, there are particular and specific considerations that must be addressed to ensure that research students studying off-site are able to pursue their course of study in such a way that they receive a comparable experience to those of their peers on the standard¹ PhD. This is of particular importance in terms of supervision and support, research environment, research skills and transferable skills training, the fulfilment of progression milestones, and the examination process.
- 1.3 Unlike the Split-Site PhD or a Joint PhD where formal agreements are signed between two educational institutions in a partnership, it should be noted that for a PhD by Distance Learning programme no formal agreement is signed with any institution, establishment or organisation where the research student may happen to be employed. It is therefore the School's full responsibility to ensure that supervisory input to the research student's programme of research will be provided by the supervisory team in accordance with the expectations of the [Code of Practice for Research Degree Candidature and Supervision](#). In some (but by no means all) cases there may be an additional local support contact who may be based at a research student's workplace but who is not a member of the formal supervisory team (see also paragraph 10.1 of this document).
- 1.4 It is possible that a School wishing to run a PhD by Distance Learning might recruit research students (either individuals or a group of research students) who are already based in an environment conducive to supporting their research. For example, the research student(s) may already be working in a research institute, laboratory, or educational establishment. In such cases the School should satisfy itself that both the environment and the location of the research student(s) is appropriate (see also paragraph 7). It should also satisfy itself that employers are supportive of the research student to the extent that the research student is able to undertake part-time study, and a letter to this effect should be obtained from the employer before an offer is made to the research student (see also paragraph 8.2).
- 1.5 It is expected that a PhD by Distance Learning will be offered on a part-time basis. If the School wishes to recruit individual research students who are not in employment and who may be in a position to study on a PhD by Distance Learning in full-time mode, particular importance must be placed on ensuring there is a research environment and a remote infrastructure for delivery of the programme (including research training and transferable skills training), as well as regular, planned periods of attendance at Southampton.

¹ Students on a 'standard' PhD are those studying at a University of Southampton campus

- 1.6 Schools should not underestimate the effort, time and costs involved in setting up a PhD by Distance Learning, especially if it is for one or two research students where the effort and costs may far outweigh any financial or other benefits to the School. The projected set up costs will need to be considered in detail, with appropriate input from the Faculty's Finance Team, and submitted as a business case to School Programmes Committee as part of the approval process (see section 2). Projected costs are likely to include further development of IT infrastructure and on-line learning resources, as well as video-conferencing and other electronic means for ensuring the research student has regular contact with their supervisory team, the PGR community, and other sources of learning and support.
- 1.7 As stated in paragraph 1.3 above, supervisory input to the research student's programme of research will be provided by the supervisory team in accordance with the [Code of Practice for Research Degree Candidature and Supervision](#). The main supervisor, and also normally the co-supervisor, will be Southampton-based and this means that the research student will be required to attend the University of Southampton at various points during their candidature. This is set out further in section 5 of this document.
- 1.8 In line with research students on the standard¹ PhD, all research students on a PhD by Distance Learning programme will be expected to access and use the University's PGR Tracker system (or equivalent system).
- 1.9 Sections 2 to 13 cover the above principles in more depth: they highlight important aspects and details that should be clearly thought through and planned in advance by Schools. These sections constitute the basis of the [PhD by Distance Learning: Evidence of Compliance form](#).

2. Approval Process

- 2.1 The [PhD by Distance Learning: Evidence of Compliance form](#) must be completed by the member or members of staff proposing the PhD by Distance Learning to show how the requirements of the University Framework are being met. This should be done in consultation with all members of the Faculty Graduate School directorate. The form must be completed regardless of whether it is a group of research students or an individual research student being accepted onto the programme. The Faculty Director of the Graduate School should support the proposal (which will include the business case – see paragraph 1.5). The form must then be presented to School Programmes Committee for discussion and confirmation that the University Framework is being adhered to. Once considered by the School Programmes Committee, the form should be submitted to the PGR QME Subcommittee for approval at its next meeting. However, any variations to the Framework itself should be submitted to AQSS for full approval. If the School has already approved a PhD by Distance Learning in the academic discipline, there is no need to complete a new PhD by Distance Learning: Evidence of Compliance form: only the elements that sit outside the Framework will need AQSS approval.
- 2.2 In addition, each research student must sign an 'individual arrangements' document setting out all the arrangements covered by the Faculty-approved [PhD by Distance Learning: Evidence of Compliance form](#). The Faculty Director of the Graduate School must also sign each 'individual arrangements' document.

3. Award

- 3.1 Successful research students will receive an award from the University of Southampton.

4. Registration and Enrolment

- 4.1 Research students accepted to study for a PhD by Distance Learning will be registered on a separate programme code so they can be easily distinguished from research students on the standard¹ PhD programme. The PhD by Distance Learning is not merely a doctoral pathway or mode of study; it is sufficiently different in many practical aspects to warrant this separate identification. Faculty Curriculum and Quality Assurance Teams will need to request new programme codes through the normal Student and Academic Administration Registry process.
- 4.2 Schools should state whether the PhD by Distance Learning being offered can be studied full-time, part-time or both.

5. Residency requirements and periods to be spent at Southampton

- 5.1 The minimum residency requirement at Southampton for PhD by Distance Learning research students should cover the following:
- A period at the beginning of the degree (enrolment and induction) – this is likely to be at least two weeks so that induction and in-depth supervisory arrangements can be discussed and agreed (in writing)
 - Attendance at any research training or generic skills training events where these are not available by electronic means and where these have been identified as a requirement for the research student, or any compulsory training events
 - Confirmation of doctoral candidature
 - Final examination: the *viva voce*
- 5.2 In addition, Schools are strongly advised to require distance learning research students to spend at least two weeks per year of study in Southampton so they can meet supervisory team members face-to-face and, if appropriate, take part in an agreed PGR research student event. Ideally, a residency visit to Southampton would also provide an opportunity for a face-to-face formal progress review. In the event of exceptional circumstances (e.g. visa denial, illness, etc.), such reviews may be carried out via other means, for example videoconference or similar (see paragraph 11.2).
- 5.3 Where there is a group of research students based at one location, it may be practical for a member or members of the supervisory team(s) to visit the research students at their location rather than the research students attending Southampton for face-to-face meetings. Such arrangements must be fully described in the [PhD by Distance Learning: Evidence of Compliance form](#) and submitted to AQSS for approval (see paragraph 2.1).
- 5.4 It is expected that the research student will attend all periods of residency by their own arrangement and at their own expense. Residency visits are not covered by the fees for the programme, and this must be made clear in all programme information, and in communications to the research student. Schools should clearly communicate to research students the possible consequences of failing to attend for the stipulated periods of residency.
- 5.5 When setting residency requirements, Schools should take into account the position regarding visas for international research students, the terms of which may vary according to the country concerned. Full documentation will need to be supplied by the School for each application for a visa. Guidance must be sought from the [Visa and Immigration Student Advice Service](#) as part of the planning process for a PhD by Distance Learning.

6. Fees

- 6.1 Schools should set fees and communicate these to prospective applicants and to the Fees Office at the earliest opportunity. Fee levels will be determined by factors such as the set up costs incurred by Schools (for development of IT infrastructure, on-line resources etc.), and the extent to which research students will be using facilities and services at Southampton. Schools should also recognise that research students are normally expected to attend conferences during their period of candidature, and this should be taken into account when setting fee levels for a PhD by Distance Learning.

7. Research environment

- 7.1 It is crucial that an appropriate research environment is made available for all research students on a PhD by Distance Learning. The [Code of Practice for Research Degree Candidature and Supervision](#) describes the range of support and opportunities for participation and interaction that form a robust environment within which research students can progress their research studies. A research student may be based at a research institute or place of work that can help provide this environment, but this will not always be the case. However, where this is the case, Schools should seek advice from the University's [Research and Innovation Services](#) (RIS) regarding any potential Intellectual Property issues. Although it is accepted that a distance-learning research student cannot have the same experience of the PGR community as they would if they were on the standard¹ PhD programme at Southampton, Schools will need to consider in

depth how each research student can access a suitable research environment that offers a comparable experience, including opportunities to interact with, and discuss research with, their peers.

- 7.2 On-line aspects of delivery for this type of programme will be significant. These will help create the research environment. Schools must consider how they will ensure that a sound and reliable IT base with on-line and interactive functionality is made available to research students, irrespective of whether they are located in the UK or abroad. Arrangements will also need to be put in place to enable research students to receive appropriate and timely IT training and support if and when needed.

8. Facilities

- 8.1 The [Code of Practice for Research Degree Candidature and Supervision](#) sets out the University's requirements regarding the provision of facilities and equipment for research students.
- 8.2 If distance-learning research students require particular facilities in order to conduct their research, consideration should be given to this at a very early stage. Moreover, Schools may determine that there are certain academic disciplines that are not suited to the PhD by Distance Learning model, for example subjects requiring specialist scientific or laboratory facilities. However, where it is envisaged that the facilities at a research student's place of work are suited to the research project, it must be established and confirmed in writing (before an offer is made to the research student) that these facilities are at the research student's disposal and arrangements for their use are acceptable.
- 8.3 Paragraph 7.2 refers to the importance of IT and on-line resources for research students studying on a PhD by Distance Learning programme. Research students should be informed clearly and in writing about the resources that will be available to them and the IT equipment they will be expected to provide for themselves in order to access the resources on offer. Any constraints on accessing electronic information systems (including the Library) should be explained. It is possible that some electronic resources may only be accessible from University-based systems (e.g. for licensing or territorial (legal) reasons). In these circumstances research students who require access to these geographically-constrained resources should be informed, and it may be they can be asked to access them during their residency periods in Southampton. Information about IT helplines, support, and training should also be clear and comprehensive, with as much IT information and practical help as possible being given to research students whilst in Southampton at the time of their induction.
- 8.4 During periods of residence at Southampton, access to appropriate space to work and to equipment should be made available in line with the School's policy and the research student's academic needs.

9. Research training and transferable skills training

- 9.1 All research students undergo an academic needs analysis at the beginning of their candidature. The [Code of Practice for Research Degree Candidature and Supervision](#) provides further details. Once the research student's training needs (research skills, transferable skills, subject-specific knowledge) and any additional learning needs including English language support have been identified, it must be clearly set out in writing how these needs will be met and where and when any training will take place. This should include whether the training will be delivered on-line or if the research student will physically attend a course during a period of residency at Southampton. Particular attention should be paid to any compulsory training courses, and to opportunities for distance-learning research students to practice skills learnt, for example presenting their research.

10. Supervision

- 10.1 As stated in paragraphs 1.6 and 1.7, a supervisory team will be assigned to a research student on a PhD by Distance Learning programme in accordance with the expectations of the [Code of Practice for Research Degree Candidature and Supervision](#). However, depending on the student's research project, and if the research student is based in an organisation where it is appropriate and feasible, arrangements may be made by a member of the supervisory team (usually the main supervisor) for a local support contact to be available for the research student.

If this is the case, it should be made clear to all parties that this is an informal arrangement and the local support contact is not a member of the supervisory team.

- 10.2 The workload of individual supervisors should always be taken into account and should not exceed the limits set out in the [Code of Practice for Research Degree Candidature and Supervision](#). This is particularly significant when assigning supervisors to research students on a PhD by Distance Learning programme. A School must satisfy itself that in allocating a research student on the PhD by Distance Learning programme to a particular supervisory team, the School's policy on supervisor workload is adhered to for each member of the team, particularly the main supervisor.
- 10.3 The responsibilities of the supervisory team are set out in the [Code of Practice for Research Degree Candidature and Supervision](#). Supervision arrangements for distance-learning research students, including the frequency and type/mode of supervision meeting must be discussed and agreed with the research student at the outset. The arrangements should be formally documented. Regular supervisory meetings should take place face-to-face during periods of residency, and by email, telephone, or videoconference when the research student is not at Southampton. Wherever possible, the timing of, and arrangements for, any supervisory visit(s) to the research student must be agreed in writing at the start of the research student's programme. The distance learning research student should see their main supervisor face-to-face at least once in any 12-month period, and more often in the first year whilst the research student's work programme is being established.
- 10.4 The School is advised to give consideration to the requirements of the [Code of Practice for Research Degree Candidature and Supervision](#) (*Responsibilities of the Supervisory Team: Ongoing responsibilities*) in the context of distance learning; specifically, what constitutes 'to be accessible at other reasonable times when advice is needed, keeping in mind the needs of the individual research student' if a research student requires advice and input outside pre-arranged supervisory meetings. This has a bearing on supervisor workload (see paragraph 10.2).
- 10.5 The member of the supervisory team who is the Co-ordinating supervisor is responsible for ensuring that the administrative processes are completed in a timely manner throughout the research student's candidature. The Co-ordinating supervisor, in conjunction with the Faculty Graduate School directorate, should consider whether any administrative arrangements or adjustments may be required, specific to a research student on a PhD by Distance Learning programme. For example, this may include greater frequency and type of communication with the research student.

11. Monitoring and review

- 11.1 The supervisory team is responsible for ensuring that research student progress is monitored throughout candidature, both formally and informally in accordance with the expectations of the [Code of Practice for Research Degree Candidature and Supervision](#). Arrangements for progress monitoring and formal progress reviews must be agreed at the outset in writing with each distance learning research student, including requirements for attendance at Southampton (see paragraphs 11.2 and 5.1).
- 11.2 Research students undertaking a PhD by Distance Learning will normally be in attendance at Southampton for all formal progression reviews (see paragraph 5.1). It is recommended that formal progress reviews take place face-to-face in Southampton (see paragraph 5.1). However, such reviews may be carried out via other means, (e.g. videoconference).
- 11.3 Supervisory teams and research students should establish a mutually agreed series of meetings, both formal and informal, to discuss progress and any problems arising. Due to the nature of distance learning, with the remote location of the research student necessitating contact mainly via electronic means, it is imperative that progress and the direction of the research student's studies are kept under review, with appropriate support identified and provided where needed. Supervisory meetings must be fully documented, and should involve appropriate communication between members of the supervisory team, so that all parties are able to identify if there are any issues arising, and any actions to be taken. Regular supervisory meetings will also contribute to the record of the research student's progress, whether face-to-face or by email, telephone, videoconference, etc. PGR Tracker is an important mechanism for recording supervisory meetings and informal progress reviews, as well as recording formal progression reviews (see paragraph 11.2).

12. Confirmation of doctoral candidature

- 12.1 Confirmation of doctoral candidature is a formal milestone and will require attendance at Southampton by the research student (see paragraph 5.1). The standard¹ confirmation process should be followed as specified in the [Code of Practice for Research Degree Candidature and Supervision](#). The requirement to be at Southampton for the confirmation stage (see paragraph 5.1) should be made clear in any promotion of the programme, as well as to applicants, and to research students at the commencement of their studies; this is because the research student is expected to bear the costs of periods of residence at Southampton.

13. The PhD examination

- 13.1 Schools should ensure that research students are made aware of all relevant training, information and guidance on the preparation of a thesis. Consideration should also be given to the practical arrangements for submission of the two soft-bound copies of the thesis for examination purposes (bearing in mind that it is possible for research students to order bound copies electronically directly from the Print Centre).
- 13.2 Arrangements for the examination are set out in the [Code of Practice for Research Degree Candidature and Supervision](#). The *viva voce* for a research student on a PhD by Distance Learning programme will normally take place at Southampton (see paragraph 5.1), and be in accordance with the expectations of the [Code of Practice for Research Degree Candidature and Supervision](#). The research student should be informed well in advance of the date to enable travel and residency arrangements to be made. Again, as with other milestones, the requirement to be at Southampton for the examination should be made clear in any promotion of the programme, as well as to applicants, and to research students at the commencement of their studies. Training for the *viva voce* should also be made available and easily-accessible to the research student.
- 13.3 The School should be clear about the process for submitting the final version of the thesis after the examination (and following approval of any amendments made at the request of the examiners). Research students on a PhD by Distance Learning programme should be given guidance and information about submitting the hard copy of the final version of the thesis (soft-bound), the *Permission to Deposit Thesis* form, and the electronic version of the thesis for ePrints.

Document Information	
Author	Quality Standards and Accreditation Team
Owner (committee)	Academic Quality and Standards Subcommittee
Approved Date	March 2014
Last Revision	September 2023
Type of Document	Framework