

Policy to Minimise the impact of Covid-19 on Postgraduate Research Degrees (Version January 2021)

1. MINIMISING DISRUPTION CAUSED BY COVID-19

1.1 PGR students each work on individual projects and so for this reason, establishing blanket mitigation policies due to COVID-19 disruptions is not feasible. Instead, most situations will need to be assessed on a case by case basis and students will have been affected in a number of different ways. However, the University has made a number of changes to minimise the impact of COVID -19. This document provides more detail on these and more information can be found in the [Frequently Asked Questions \(FAQs\)](#).

1.2 The success of our PhD students is critical to the University, and so we are committed to encouraging and supporting students to continue and complete their doctoral research. As part of our commitment to supporting doctoral research, the University's intention is to minimise the disruption caused by COVID-19 to ensure students can progress or complete their doctoral research within appropriate timescales. Our guiding principles, drawn from the UK Research and Innovation (UKRI), are to provide support for students to complete their research projects to a doctoral level and in identifying appropriate support, students will be treated fairly, inclusively and consideration of personal circumstances will be made.

1.3 The University campus closed on 20 March 2020 and all non-essential (as defined by the Scottish Government), lab-, field- and archival-based research has stopped. Since this time, there has been limited and tightly regulated access to research facilities. The following procedures apply from the period of 23 March 2020.

1.4 The University has a series of [regulations governing research degrees](#) and these remain in place during this time. Policies and processes which underpin the regulations have been amended to minimise the impact of COVID-19 and form the basis of this policy. This minimizing impact policy for PGR students provides assurances that there will be no impact on a student's ability to:

- (i) complete their research to an appropriate standard including access to facilities and resources and with enough time to do so.
- (ii) submit their thesis electronically and with exceptional extension requests
- (iii) have their thesis examined in a viva voce by videoconference
- (iv) have their degree awarded following required extensions

2.0 EXTENSIONS TO STUDY

2.1 **Exceptional Unfunded Extensions:** There may be students affected by the COVID-19 situation who require a period of extension to their submission date, for some this will take them beyond the 60 months maximum extension period permitted by the University. Exceptional extension requests to extend the submission date beyond 60 months (96 months part-time), as direct result of Covid-19, will be automatically approved. Requests beyond 72 months (108 months part-time) must be approved by the Dean for Postgraduate Research. UKRI will not penalise PGR students going beyond 48 months or part time equivalent. Students in receipt of UKRI funding will not be penalised for extensions beyond 48 months. Exceptional extensions should be requested in the normal way via an [extension form](#) and will be assessed, as normal by Postgraduate Research Officers. In recognition that many PGRs will have had some disruption during this period, the

2.2 **Funded Extensions:** The University recognises that in some circumstances, PhD projects will have been disrupted to a significant extent. In some exceptional cases, completion of the thesis to a doctoral standard within the original supervised period will not be possible. To mitigate against such circumstances, the University has developed a process to capture the impact of COVID-19 on individual research projects and to provide funded extensions to submission deadlines where this is absolutely required. The over-riding principle is that any funded extension should only be used to allow students to complete their research project and thesis to the required doctoral standard while considering the following questions:

- Is it possible to modify the research question, research direction and/or methodology while maintaining doctoral level quality?
- Can the thesis scope be adjusted, whilst maintaining doctoral level intellectual independence of thought and delivers an original contribution to knowledge?
- What progress was made during the covid-19 disruption? If no progress was made, why was this the case?

Applications for funded extensions are not open to PhD students in receipt of UKRI funding (those associated with a Doctoral Training Partnership or a stand-alone UKRI award), as they will have access to funding extensions through their UKRI research organisation or training programme. In addition, PhD students supported by other funding bodies offering funded extensions will also not be eligible.

The University will only provide financial support for extensions in **exceptional circumstances** (eg caring responsibilities, insurmountable disruptions to data collection/access to research facilities or sources). Requests for extensions must be fully justified and evidenced with respect to the scope of the research required and the time needed to complete the thesis. This will be assessed on a case by case basis. Any extension awarded will commence at the end of the student's current period of supervised study. Any funding awarded will be in line with UKRI stipend rates.

2.3 Survey 1 (closed in July 2020) for PGRs with supervised period ending **after 31st March 2021**. Over 80 PGRs were provided with additional stipend.

Survey 2 (closed 17th Jan 2021) for PGRs with supervised period **between 1st April 2021 and 30th Sept 2021**. Applications will be assessed by the end of Feb 2021. UKRI survey 2 will be launched very soon.

Survey 3 (opening summer 2021) for PGRs with original supervised period ending **between 1st Oct 2021 and 30th Sept 2022**.

3.0 **THESIS SUBMISSION**

3.1 *Submission of thesis for examination:* Doctoral students in a position to submit their thesis for examination are permitted to submit an electronic copy only, there is no requirement for a soft bound copy to be submitted.

3.2 *Submission of thesis for Degree award:* Following examination of a thesis by *viva voce* there is no requirement for submission of a hard-bound copy of the final thesis, an electronic version is sufficient at this time for degree award.

4.0 EXAMINATION OF DOCTORAL AWARDS

4.1 *Viva Voce*: PhD viva examinations will continue as scheduled (where all parties are in agreement to do so) using this [guidance document](#). With immediate effect, these will be conducted by videoconference (using suitable technology eg Microsoft Teams, Skype). If students do not have access to IT equipment to attend a *viva voce* examination digitally, alternative arrangements, including timescales should be discussed with the internal examiner to agree a suitable plan.

4.2 The *viva voce* is used to confirm that the thesis makes a distinct contribution to knowledge and affords evidence of originality as shown by the exercise of independent critical powers allows doctoral candidates to explain, expand, and justify their thesis, in response to examiners' questions. Examiners and ultimately the *Senatus Academics* must be assured that a sustained thesis meets required doctoral standard.

4.3 There may be circumstances where a thesis meets doctoral standard for examination but its scope has been narrowed as a result of COVID-19 disruption. In such cases, if the University is satisfied that the narrowed scope will not fundamentally change, undermine or invalidate the argument, the thesis may be submitted for examination with agreement from the student and supervisory team. In these exceptional cases, an appropriate explanation by the student, of the disruption caused by COVID-19, can be submitted to examiners. This should take the form of a short report (no more than 1000 words) but will not form part of the final thesis, unless expressly required to be incorporated in the thesis by the examiners. This report would be ratified by the supervisory team and an independent moderator.

5.0 AWARDING of DOCTORAL RESEARCH DEGREES

5.1 *Extensions to correction timeframes*: No student will be unfairly disadvantaged from making necessary adjustments or corrections to an examined thesis as a direct result of COVID-19 preventing action within normal timeframes.

5.2 If a thesis is sustained subject to minor corrections, the internal examiner is granted discretion to allow a longer timeframe for their completion (up to 6 months) as a direct result of COVID-19.

5.3 If an examined thesis required major re-working or major re-interpretation of the intellectual content, the University will give consideration to appropriate timeframes for resubmission on a case by case basis.

6.0 FURTHER INFORMATION

6.1 Further information on the Policy to Minimise the Impact of COVID-19 on Research Degrees is available in the [FAQs](#) . If you have any questions regarding the procedures, please contact pgrs-covid@abdn.ac.uk