

COVID-19 supporting resources

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Supporting the Assessment of Postgraduate Research Students

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has required institutions with research degree provision to consider the steps needed to continue supporting research students and to assure the quality and standards of research degrees. This paper is intended to offer an overview of the actions being taken by providers to support research students and supervisors, and to ensure the fair treatment of students who are being assessed.

Institutions are aspiring to offer students an opportunity to succeed despite the many challenges posed by the pandemic, while ensuring that academic standards are upheld, and the quality of provision is assured. Typically, in a large institution, this will require planned and careful coordination between central support services, academic staff and key senior staff, with a view to ensuring there is consistent and clear communication with students and a well-managed approach to implementing interventions.

QAA's [Advice and Guidance on Research Degrees](#) and, in particular, its 'Guiding Principles', continues to apply. This paper supplements that guidance by drawing attention to the ways in which some institutions have adapted their practices to ensure that the Guiding Principles continue to be met. Providers in England should also be aware that the Office for Students' [Guidance for providers about quality and standards during coronavirus \(COVID-19\) pandemic](#) includes information about reporting requirements for research degree provision.

How do institutions communicate with research students and staff?

Good, clear and frequent communication can help to develop a sense of community, reducing the possibility of feelings of isolation to which research students may be particularly at risk. It is important to give research students a sense that the institution recognises and is responding to the obstacles that the pandemic may present to the work and wellbeing of its research students. Institutions should clearly describe any mitigations they have taken in respect of, for instance, operational processes as well as financial and personal support, and should articulate changes which may affect students, their working environment and their support systems.

Interventions taken by institutions in order to create supportive and responsive channels of communication include the following:

- Offering 'Frequently Asked Questions' pages, designed specifically with research students in mind. If regularly updated, these can provide clear and concise ways of communicating vital information and providing pointers to sources of more specific or personalised information, for instance, regarding wellbeing support, financial

support or information about mitigations to processes for monitoring and assessment.

- Implementing steps to establish fully online/digital versions of support processes, with a view to ensuring availability and inclusivity for research students.
- Issuing regular (daily or weekly) 'drop-in sessions' for research students led by a senior member of staff, using video-conferencing software, enabling students to discuss and address issues as they arise.
- Providing step-by-step guidance specifically for research students on working effectively and healthily from home.
- Sharing prominent links to services supporting wellbeing, mental health and counselling.

How do institutions enable a supportive and inclusive research environment?

In altering support systems in response to the pandemic, institutions still follow the guiding principle of encouraging students to continue their studies - offering customised support and mitigation where it is possible and desirable to do so. While the 'no detriment' policies adopted by several institutions in respect of students on taught provision are not readily adaptable to the assessment processes typically in place for research degrees, some institutions have applied a 'no detriment' approach in adapting their support arrangements to suit the individual circumstances of research students while preserving consistency in the treatment of individual cases.

Depending on their circumstances, institutions have taken a variety of initiatives intended to reinforce their usual support systems including the following:

- Policies to alleviate financial hardship, supported by access to streamlined administrative processes.
- Policies to enable study extensions, with providers building some flexibility into the arrangements, although not specifically into the regulations specifying the minimum and maximum periods within which research students can complete. The [UK Council for Graduate Education \(UKCGE\)](#), in line with UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) policy, advocates that extensions for candidates in the later years of their doctorate and/or nearing completion should be fully funded.
- Assessments of risk level and likely impact level for each research student, in order to inform decisions in respect of mitigating actions.
- 'Viva survivor' workshops delivered online to help research students to prepare for their final assessments, as described in more detail below.
- An online lecture series on 'Researching in lockdown' in which academic staff discuss with research students approaches to adapting their research to mitigate the impact of lockdown. One institution has noted the additional benefit of its training programme in promoting a sense of online community among research students.

- Study breaks, leave of absence or temporary suspensions granted with reduced requirements for supporting evidence, or without the need for any evidence.
- Temporary changes of mode of study from full-time to part-time with reduced requirements for supporting evidence or without the need for any evidence.
- For the taught element of professional and taught doctorates, providers report that students are offered extensions to assessments, in line with the institutional policy pertaining to taught awards as adapted for the circumstances of the pandemic.

Typically, and regardless of the model of research degree, providers emphasise their concern to fully consider students' individual research and personal circumstances on a case-by-case basis, in consistently implementing any revised policy.

While acknowledging the challenge of enabling continuing access to the specialised research facilities required by some students, institutions are typically able to provide such access only within limitations imposed by institutional policy and national guidance.

Institutions should ensure that supervisors and directors of studies are informed about changes to support arrangements and are able to contribute appropriately to relevant decision making. Some institutions have established online support for supervisors via regular discussion fora or by means of 'question and answer' sessions with the relevant senior manager, enabling them to communicate effectively with students.

Interventions in respect of the professional development of research students during the current circumstances have been to convert developmental resources to enable online/digital delivery. For instance, sessions on academic writing, oral presentations, using document preparation systems and the use of software for statistical analysis, have been adapted for delivery through video-conferencing technology.

How can progression monitoring be adapted to support research students?

The rapid move to online supervision and assessment does not change the main aim of monitoring which is to help maximise the likelihood of the research student completing the research programme successfully within an appropriate timescale. It will also need to enable staff to ascertain when a research student's progress is not satisfactory and identify support to be given to help the research student make improvements. It is evident that most providers are encouraging students, wherever possible, to continue, including through the use of progression monitoring milestones. In one example, a university is encouraging all its research students to reflexively report on the impact of the pandemic on the design and conduct of their research.

In other cases, providers are introducing greater flexibility in progression milestones by shifting the deadlines for progression meetings. Several providers have described the importance of capturing extenuating circumstances emerging from the impact of the pandemic, to embrace personal and financial factors as well as the specific character of the research being undertaken. Wherever possible, these procedures are rooted in the routine structured conversations between supervisors and students, and academic leaders of postgraduate research study. One provider has employed an 'impact matrix' which, on the basis of discussion between students and their supervisors, aims to capture the ways in which academic and personal circumstances have affected progress. Different categories of research project - for example, laboratory-based, fieldwork, performance, desk-based and clinical - are assessed in terms of likely impact on a scale of high, medium, low and none.

The intention is to record the effects being experienced currently, thereby collecting evidence which may need to be considered in the future, for example, at annual progress reviews, when extensions are requested. Another provider has adopted a risk assessment for progression decisions but has sought to emphasise it as supportive of the student rather than regulatory.

What choices and guidance are research students being offered for assessment?

Providers still need to adhere to the principle that all research students should be provided with an assessment experience that enables them fully to demonstrate their academic achievements. In this context, many providers already had academic regulations enabling vivas to be conducted remotely and online/digitally - previously developed for students with exceptional circumstances and now modified to address current circumstances. In other cases, regulations have been drafted and then approved since the social distancing measures were enforced. More practically, some institutions were able to utilise existing learning platforms which already allowed for conducting online vivas with the required levels of security and functionality, while others are at an earlier stage of innovation.

It is evident that some providers are offering research students a choice of whether or not they wish to undertake their viva online. There are many reasons why students might choose not to have their viva conducted remotely, and these include inadequate technology in the home environment, underdeveloped technological skills, and some disabilities - particularly where competencies may be disproportionately affected in an online/digital context. There is evidence to suggest that for art, design and other creative areas, there may be practical or material aspects of their research - for example, performance - which are very challenging (if not impossible) to assess other than in person and this may explain why some students are opting to defer until restrictions are lifted, a decision academic staff are supporting.

Where students choose to defer their examination until a future date, providers are emphasising that there will be 'no detriment'. In one case, students about to submit have been given some flexibility through the provision of funding for short-term extensions of one or two months when they will have continuation fees waived. Equally, providers should be aware of any consequent effects of delay, such as students becoming slightly distanced from their research.

Providers have reported their attentiveness to ensuring that the decision to continue or defer the viva is approved by the examination panel and the relevant academic authority - for example, the institutional research committee. Approval of a remote viva needs to ensure that there is appropriate, reliable and effective technology which has been tested, as well as the existence of contingency plans for technological failure.

For professional and taught doctorates, as with progression decisions, providers continue to assess taught and research elements separately with the former being considered at the relevant taught assessment board. Where professional doctorates are professionally accredited, there is a need to consult the relevant professional, statutory and regulatory body (PSRB) for advice and guidance on any implications for students' accreditation or registration. QAA's [COVID-19: Thematic Guidance - Securing Academic Standards and Supporting Student Achievement](#) offers further guidance on assessment of provision accredited by PSRBs.

How do vivas work for students in the current context?

Providers remain mindful of the need to ensure that research students are provided with any required information prior to the viva so that they have a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities. But there is also a concomitant attention to the **experience** of the viva which can be very stressful for students under 'normal' circumstances, and even more so in the unusual circumstances created by the pandemic. Research managers, supervisors, quality assurance staff and students have all drawn attention to the particular challenge of vivas for students who are working remotely, perhaps in isolation, and therefore possibly going through a profound and stressful experience. Contributors to this document have described the need for viva chairs, and also examiners and supervisors, to be mindful of the wellbeing of all participants, and particularly students, as they, for example, wait for the examiners' decision alone in their own home. As well as being attentive to communication within the viva, chairs should consider introducing regular breaks to alleviate any stress. Also, reports of the viva might need to ensure that the chair records any ways in which the remote context might have affected the students' performance.

The [Advice and Guidance for Research Degrees](#) proposes that 'Providers offer practical advice, training or support to research students to prepare for submission of their thesis, for example, on the required presentation of the work, and viva.' In response to the current situation, one provider has scheduled regular online 'Viva Survivor' workshops for doctoral researchers who are close to submitting their thesis. The webinar seeks to help students to prepare effectively for their viva - whether it is to be conducted remotely or in person - and includes practical steps to take before submission, as well as strategies to use during preparation and on the day of the viva. Another institution routinely holds mock vivas, which offer the opportunity not only to test the technology and timing of any presentation, but also give students online experience of robust questioning and feedback.

Several providers voiced support for a 'blended' approach based on recognising a need for further support for students. For example, the chair and the student could meet face-to-face (with physical distancing) where students are receiving the outcome of their viva, or the supervisor could be in attendance with the student.

How can chairs and examiners be supported with online vivas?

Where it does not currently exist, there would be benefit in providers compiling guidance for chairs and examiners which sets out how online/digital vivas are expected to operate, and sources of advice and help, including support with technology and communication. In one institution, research staff have worked with their human resources department to develop a policy to help guide remote postgraduate research examinations, the aim being to promote consistency and support for participants. Other examples of good practice in response to remote working include:

- conducting a pilot the day before
- advising that chairs should telephone candidates after the examination to check on their wellbeing - rather than communicating about wellbeing via the platform used for the viva
- monitoring all examiners' reports to identify any emerging issues or examples of good practice which will inform future practice.

Another example involves the provider recording vivas to ensure that they are being conducted consistently. The information gathered constitutes valuable training material for chairs (usage of the footage requires student and examiner permission) but can also provide evidence for potential appeals. If staff or students object to the viva being recorded, it can be

deferred and carried out in person at a later date. Several providers are ensuring that research officers attend all remote vivas to promote consistency.

Some providers have reported that, in the context of a significant institutional change, there has been some initial resistance from academic staff, but this has been followed by staff becoming convinced of the benefits of remote vivas in allowing students to achieve their award in a timely and appropriate manner. Several institutions have emphasised that there has been positive student and supervisor feedback.

The key message emerging from providers is the need to manage the care of all participants working remotely, including students, examiners, chairs and supervisors. [UKCGE](#) has published guidance for doctoral supervisors and staff on *Conducting Vivas Online: A Guide for Institutions and Candidates*.

Additional resources

[COVID-19 - Considerations for doctoral degrees - guidance note](#) - UK Council for Graduate Education (UKCGE)

[Advice and Guidance on Research Degrees](#) - Quality Assurance Agency

[COVID-19: Thematic Guidance - Securing Academic Standards and Supporting Student Achievement](#), Quality Assurance Agency

[Guidance for providers about quality and standards during coronavirus \(COVID-19\) pandemic](#), Office for Students

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