

## Guidance for adapting and adjusting Postgraduate Research projects impacted by COVID-19

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is constantly changing and is likely to go on for some time. Supervisors and students must remain aware of the potential need to adapt projects. Thinking about how to progress with the project is likely to be ongoing rather than a one-off assessment, and supervisors and students should continually reflect on the current and potential future impact to identify any changes that may become necessary.

### Considerations for adapting and adjusting PGR projects

1. It's important to remember that it's not only current PGR projects that may be affected. New PGRs, those holding an offer to commence study at Manchester Met in the coming months, and applicants working on project proposals should be aware of the ongoing impact of the pandemic and the potential need to adapt plans for some time.
2. Every PGR project is different, and so the extent of any necessary changes will depend on a variety of factors. As well as any challenges unique to a particular project or area of research, other considerations might include:
  - The ability to conduct data collection and access data sources
  - The stage of the project and student journey
  - Access to equipment, labs and studio space
3. Wherever possible, projects should be adjusted to allow the student to complete as close as possible to the standard period of registration and by the end of their maximum period of registration, rather than seeking an extension to the submission deadline. For example, for full-time PhD students this means students should submit as close to month 36 as possible and no later than 48 months after registration. For information on the standard and maximum period of registration, see the [PGR regulations](#).
4. Decisions around adapting and adjusting PGR projects should carefully consider the degree outcomes, as detailed in the [QAA UK Quality Code for Higher Education](#). Students working on MPhil and Master's by Research should consider the level 7 outcomes, and doctoral students must meet the level 8 (doctoral) threshold descriptors.
5. Supervisors and students should keep in mind that the examiners will be assessing the quality, and not the quantity, of the student's work against the criteria for award of the degree. The maximum word limit for each degree (e.g. 80,000 words for the PhD) is not intended as a target which students must meet. A successful thesis is assessed on its quality in how it meets the requirements for the award.
6. The Quality Assurance Agency documents outline characteristics of a doctoral degree, and the required outcomes. [The Characteristics Statement: Doctoral Degrees](#) provides useful guidance on the need 'to demonstrate an original contribution to knowledge in their subject field or profession, through original research or the original application of existing knowledge or understanding (QAA 2020: 4). Further information on characteristics of doctoral graduates is available in section 1.4 on pages 4-5.
7. The Quality Assurance Agency [UK Quality Code for Higher Education: Part A Setting and Maintaining Academic Standards](#) outlines the descriptors required for degrees at all levels. Item 4.17 on pages 28-29 outlines the descriptors for Level 7 awards (MPhil and Master's by Research). Item 4.18 on page 30 outlines the descriptors which are required for doctoral degrees.

8. Suitable adjustments will vary from project to project and discipline to discipline. These could include a change in research methodology, or greater use of secondary and online data sources. Students with publication, or work which has been prepared for publication, could consider submitting a thesis in an alternative format (for more information see the [Guidance on Thesis Submission for Postgraduate Research Degrees](#)). It may be the case that the COVID-19 impact on the particular field of research presents a suitable opportunity for a revised project.
9. If a PGR project is adapted in any way, supervisors and students will need to consider whether a new ethical approval (EthOS) application is needed. For further information please see the [Research Ethics and Governance webpages](#).
10. Additionally, a new Academic Technology Approval Scheme (ATAS) certificate may be needed. If in doubt, check with the [International Office](#).
11. Where a student is funded by external agencies, you will need to speak to the relevant funders to make sure that any substantial adaptations are approved and you are able to carry on with your research according to your contract.
12. Agreement to any adjustments to the project must be recorded by the student and supervisors in a formal supervisory meeting record (RD9) on SkillsForge.
13. Milestone dates (i.e. initial, annual reviews and check-ins) for students will remain the same to support students towards timely submission. Milestones are an assessment of the current status of a student's progress, rather than something that can only be undertaken once the student has completed a certain amount of work or achieved a certain objective. Students can use these opportunities to discuss their PGR journey and get independent feedback on their research.
14. Adjustments to a PGR project does not mean that the maximum period of registration will be extended.

The Quality Assurance Agency [UK Quality Code for Higher Education: Part A Setting and Maintaining Academic Standards](#)

## **QAA Doctoral Descriptors**

### **Descriptor for a higher education qualification at level 8 on the FHEQ and SCQF level 12 on the FQHEIS: doctoral degree**

The descriptor provided for this level of the framework is for any doctoral degree that should meet the descriptor in full. This qualification descriptor should also be used as a reference point for other level 8/level 12 qualifications.

#### **Doctoral degrees are awarded to students who have demonstrated:**

- The creation and interpretation of new knowledge, through original research or other advanced scholarship, of a quality to satisfy peer review, extend the forefront of the discipline, and merit publication
- Systematic acquisition and understanding of a substantial body of knowledge which is at the forefront of an academic discipline or area of professional practice
- The general ability to conceptualise, design and implement a project for the generation of new knowledge, applications or understanding at the forefront of the discipline, and to adjust the project design in the light of unforeseen problems
- A detailed understanding of applicable techniques for research and advanced academic enquiry.

#### **Typically, holders of the qualification will be able to:**

- Make informed judgements on complex issues in specialist fields, often in the absence of complete data, and be able to communicate their ideas and conclusions clearly and effectively to specialist and non-specialist audiences
- Continue to undertake pure and/or applied research and development at an advanced level, contributing substantially to the development of new techniques, ideas or approaches.

#### **And holders will have:**

- The qualities and transferable skills necessary for employment requiring the exercise of personal responsibility and largely autonomous initiative in complex and unpredictable situations, in professional or equivalent environments.

4.18.1 Doctoral degrees are awarded for the creation and interpretation, construction and/or exposition of knowledge which extends the forefront of a discipline, usually through original research.

4.18.2 Holders of doctoral degrees are able to conceptualise, design and implement projects for the generation of significant new knowledge and/or understanding. Holders of doctoral degrees have the qualities needed for employment that require both the ability to make informed judgements on complex issues in specialist fields and an innovative approach to tackling and solving problems.

4.18.3 Doctoral programmes that may have a substantial taught element in addition to the research component (for example, professional doctorates), lead usually to awards which include the name of the discipline in their title (for example, EdD for Doctor of Education or DClInPsy for Doctor of Clinical Psychology). Professional doctorates aim to develop an individual's professional practice and to support them in producing a contribution to (professional) knowledge.

4.18.4 The titles PhD and DPhil are commonly used for doctoral degrees awarded on the basis of original research.

4.18.5 Achievement of outcomes consistent with the qualification descriptor for the doctoral degree normally requires study equivalent to three full-time calendar years.

4.18.6 Higher doctorates may be awarded in recognition of a substantial body of original research undertaken over the course of many years. Typically a portfolio of work that has been previously published in a peer-refereed context is submitted for assessment. Most degree awarding bodies restrict candidacy to graduates or their own academic staff of several years' standing.