

**Title:** Probationary Periods for Postgraduate Research Students  
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## Issue

At the Postgraduate Research Executive on 26 February 2014 the decision was taken that students intending to qualify with a PhD award from UEA registering from 1 October 2015 onwards should register on a PhD programme rather than on an MPhil programme with an expected transfer to the PhD programme within the first 18 months of full-time (or 42 months of part-time) study. It was also agreed that probationary periods should be introduced for all research degree students enrolled on the following programmes: Master of Philosophy (MPhil), Doctor of Philosophy (PhD / PhD Intg Studies), Doctor of Medicine (MD), Master of Arts by Research (MAR), Master of Science by Research (MScR) and Master of Laws by Research (LLMR).

The key drivers here are:

- to ensure that students who proceed beyond the first year of a research degree programme are of sufficient quality and sufficiently motivated to succeed in their research and study;
- to provide a structured and consistent approach to academic progress monitoring;
- to manage the risk associated with admitting weak candidates for research degrees so as to limit financial and time costs for both students and supervisors and potential funding implications;
- to provide the alternative to MPhil to PhD transfer processes for Schools required to move to direct PhD registration;
- to help improve the University's four-year (full-time)/seven-year (part-time) submission rates: students withdrawing in the first twelve months do not count for RCUK submission rate purposes.

This paper supersedes the similar paper submitted to the 26 February Postgraduate Research Executive, which proposed that probationary periods should be made compulsory for all new starters from 1 August 2014, but that paper should be consulted for further background.

## Recommendations (to take effect 1 August 2014)

1. That the regulations for the degrees of Master of Philosophy, Doctor of Philosophy, Doctor of Medicine, and Masters Degrees by Research should be updated as in the Appendix to introduce a probationary status for all candidates on these programmes with effect for students with date of initial registration on 1 October 2015 or later and a system of including a review of probationary status (confirmation review) at an annual review meeting within the first year of full-time study (or equivalent), and then agreeing an action plan and scheduling a continuation review meeting if progress is not judged to be satisfactory. If progress is also not satisfactory at the continuation review meeting the student's registration may be withdrawn.
2. That Schools and Institutes which wish to hold continuation review meetings for students with initial date of registration before 30 September 2015 can do so but will not be able to withdraw a student solely on the basis of them without also invoking other regulations (e.g. General Regulation 13).
3. That each student registering for the degrees above from 1 October 2015 onwards shall be assigned an Internal Assessor by the School, who should normally be appointed by or at the start of the candidate's programme and who will not be a member of the supervisory team. The Internal Assessor shall attend all annual progress review meetings for that student which contain the element of confirmation review and shall if possible attend any continuation review meetings.
4. That the Code of Practice will be revised during 2014-15 to include a section on probationary periods and Continuation Review Meetings, including guidance on when Schools should instead invoke Fitness to Study proceedings, typical expectations on students at this stage and normal expectations of timelines.

5. That the Code of Practice will be revised during 2014-15 to state that a Continuation Review Meeting must involve the student and should, where possible, involve all members of the student's supervisory team, the Internal Assessor and the School or Institute Director of Postgraduate Research (if different). As a minimum it must involve the student, at least one member of the student's supervisory team and a senior academic teacher within the University assigned by prior agreement with the Head of School (which may be the Internal Assessor). Where the student is unable or refuses to be present then this will be taken as an indication that Fitness to Study or Discipline procedures, as appropriate, should be considered as alternatives.
6. That the Concessions Guide will be revised during 2014-15 to include postponement of a Continuation Review by up to three/six months as a minor concession (for approval by School/Institute Director of Postgraduate Research) and longer postponements as a major concession.
7. That the Annual Review Progress form will be amended (from 1 April 2015) to include the confirmation review elements, to alert supervisors to the need to consider the consequences of the different types of recommendation on a student's probationary status and to direct them to the relevant section of the Code of Practice.
8. That individuals holding deferred offers to start on one of the degrees above from 1 October 2015 onwards should be written to by the Postgraduate Research Service explaining the proposed changes and requesting them to contact the Postgraduate Research Service if they have an objection. Any issues raised will be dealt with on a case-by-case basis.

### **Resource Implications**

Resource implications were initially considered by the June 2013 Postgraduate Research Programmes Policy Group as described in the February 2014 probationary periods paper. The main resource implication changed here is the requirement for each student to have an Internal Assessor. In most Schools this replaces the need for Schools to appoint a transfer panel and in these cases there is no increased resource requirement.

### **Risk Implications**

These changes attempt to manage the risk associated with admitting weak candidates to research degrees by providing a structured and consistent approach to academic progress monitoring.

### **Equality and Diversity**

It will be worth monitoring in future how the introduction of Continuation Review Meetings and Probationary Periods affects students according to mode of assessment (full-time/part-time) and other characteristics and if there are any particular measures needed to support some students relating to protected characteristics. The Postgraduate Research Executive should review this over the first few years of this policy.

### **Timing of decisions**

A decision is required at the May 2014 Postgraduate Research Executive and to be noted at the May 2014 Learning and Teaching Committee to allow approval of regulatory changes by the June 2014 Senate which will take effect from 1 August 2014.

### **Further Information**

Contact Vivien Easson, x1835 [v.easson@uea.ac.uk](mailto:v.easson@uea.ac.uk) for enquiries about the content of the paper.

Further information about the types of information that might be considered at a Continuation Review Meeting is contained in paper PGR/12/D018, which was included with the February 2014 PGR Executive papers for the Continuation Review and Probationary Periods item for ease of reference.

### **Appendix: detailed changes to regulations**

1. Changes to regulations for Master of Philosophy (MPhil)
2. Changes to regulations for Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)
3. Changes to regulations for Doctor of Medicine (MD)
4. Changes to regulations for Master of Research (MA by Research, MSc by Research etc.)

## 1 Changes to regulations for Master of Philosophy (MPhil)

Section 5 (Progress) currently reads:

“(5) There shall be an annual review of the progress of each candidate in each year of the candidate's period of advanced study and research, and total period of registration undertaken by the candidate and supervisory team and monitored by or on behalf of the School Board. The supervisory team shall also report to the Board at any time when the candidate appears not to be making satisfactory progress, is otherwise not fulfilling the conditions that have been laid down or appears unlikely to reach the standard of the degree.”

This shall be replaced by the following text; section numbering may also be altered for ease of reference.

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### **New text:**

There shall be an annual review of the progress of each candidate in each year of the candidate's period of study and/or registration undertaken by the candidate and supervisory team and monitored by or on behalf of the Head of School or nominee. During their first year of registration, the status of MPhil students as Master's candidates is probationary and their annual review includes the confirmation review of their status.

Confirmation review requires the involvement of an Internal Assessor who is not a member of the candidate's supervisory team. As part of confirmation review, the Internal Assessor should agree a joint recommendation with the supervisory team on the candidate's probationary status.

If the candidate is not making satisfactory progress at a confirmation review, they will be warned promptly in a formal letter from the Head of School or nominee that they may be asked to withdraw from the University. The candidate will be set a clear list of measurable goals to be achieved and the timescale for achieving these. They will also be required to attend a Continuation Review Meeting at which the Internal Assessor should agree a further joint recommendation with the supervisory team on the candidate's probationary status. A student not making satisfactory progress at a Continuation Review Meeting will normally be required to withdraw from the programme.

The supervisory team shall also report to the Head of School or nominee at any time when the candidate appears not to be making satisfactory progress, is otherwise not fulfilling the conditions that have been laid down or appears unlikely to reach the standard of the degree.

## 2 Changes to regulations for Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)

Section 5 (Progress) currently reads:

“(5) There shall be an annual review of the progress of each candidate in each year of the candidate's period of advanced study and research, and total period of registration undertaken by the candidate and supervisory team and monitored by or on behalf of the School Board. The supervisory team shall also report to the Board at any time when the candidate appears not to be making satisfactory progress, is otherwise not fulfilling the conditions that have been laid down or appears unlikely to reach the standard of the degree.”

This shall be replaced by the following text; section numbering may also be altered for ease of reference.

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### **New text:**

There shall be an annual review of the progress of each candidate in each year of the candidate's period of study and/or registration undertaken by the candidate and supervisory team and monitored by or on behalf of the Head of School or nominee. During their first year of registration, the status of PhD students as doctoral candidates is probationary and their annual review includes the confirmation review of their status.

Confirmation review requires the involvement of an Internal Assessor who is not a member of the candidate's supervisory team. As part of confirmation review, the Internal Assessor should agree a joint recommendation with the supervisory team on the candidate's probationary status.

If the candidate is not making satisfactory progress at a confirmation review, they will be warned promptly in a formal letter from the Head of School or nominee that they may be asked to withdraw from the University. The candidate will be set a clear list of measurable goals to be achieved and the timescale for achieving these. They will also be required to attend a Continuation Review Meeting at which the Internal Assessor should agree a further joint recommendation with the supervisory team on the candidate's probationary status. A student not making satisfactory progress at a Continuation Review Meeting will normally be required to withdraw from the programme.

The supervisory team shall also report to the Head of School or nominee at any time when the candidate appears not to be making satisfactory progress, is otherwise not fulfilling the conditions that have been laid down or appears unlikely to reach the standard of the degree.

### 3 Changes to regulations for Doctor of Medicine (MD)

Section 6 currently reads:

6 (1) For a candidate submitting a thesis, there shall be an annual review of the progress of each candidate in each year of the candidate's period of advanced study and research, undertaken by the candidate and supervisory team and monitored by or on behalf of the School Board;

(2) For a candidate submitting a body of published work, there shall be a review of progress in the third and ninth month of the candidate's period of advanced study and research and every six months thereafter undertaken by the candidate and supervisory team and monitored by or on behalf of the School Board.

This shall be replaced by the following text; section numbering may also be altered for ease of reference.

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#### **New text:**

There shall be an annual review of the progress of each candidate in each year of the candidate's period of study and/or registration undertaken by the candidate and supervisory team and monitored by or on behalf of the Head of School or nominee. During their first year of registration, the status of MD students as doctoral candidates is probationary and their annual review includes the confirmation review of their status.

Confirmation review requires the involvement of an Internal Assessor who is not a member of the candidate's supervisory team. As part of confirmation review, the Internal Assessor should agree a joint recommendation with the supervisory team on the candidate's probationary status.

If the candidate is not making satisfactory progress at a confirmation review, they will be warned promptly in a formal letter from the Head of School or nominee that they may be asked to withdraw from the University. The candidate will be set a clear list of measurable goals to be achieved and the timescale for achieving these. They will also be required to attend a Continuation Review Meeting at which the Internal Assessor should agree a further joint recommendation with the supervisory team on the candidate's probationary status. A student not making satisfactory progress at a Continuation Review Meeting will normally be required to withdraw from the programme.

The supervisory team shall also report to the Head of School or nominee at any time when the candidate appears not to be making satisfactory progress, is otherwise not fulfilling the conditions that have been laid down or appears unlikely to reach the standard of the degree.

**Note:** further details will be included in the Code of Practice for Research Degrees.

## 4 Changes to regulations for Masters by Research

Section 4 (Progress) currently reads:

### “4 (1) Full-time candidates

There shall be a review of the progress of each candidate on three occasions during the first year of the candidate's period of advanced study and research (one of these being the annual review), and thereafter with the same frequency during the period of registration, undertaken by the candidate and supervisory team and monitored by or on behalf of the School Board.

### (2) Part-time candidates

There shall be one review of progress and one annual review of progress of each candidate in each year of the candidate's period of advanced study and research and during the period of registration, undertaken by the candidate and supervisory team and monitored by or on behalf of the School Board.

The supervisory team shall also report to the Board at any time when the candidate appears not to be making satisfactory progress, is otherwise not fulfilling the conditions that have been laid down or appears unlikely to reach the standard of the degree.”

This shall be replaced by the following text; section numbering may also be altered for ease of reference.

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### **New text:**

There shall be an annual review of the progress of each candidate in each year of the candidate's period of study and/or registration undertaken by the candidate and supervisory team and monitored by or on behalf of the Head of School or nominee. During their first year of registration, the status of Masters by Research students as Master's candidates is probationary and their annual review includes the confirmation review of their status.

Confirmation review requires the involvement of an Internal Assessor who is not a member of the candidate's supervisory team. As part of confirmation review, the Internal Assessor should agree a joint recommendation with the supervisory team on the candidate's probationary status.

If the candidate is not making satisfactory progress at a confirmation review, they will be warned promptly in a formal letter from the Head of School or nominee that they may be asked to withdraw from the University. The candidate will be set a clear list of measurable goals to be achieved and the timescale for achieving these. They will also be required to attend a Continuation Review Meeting at which the Internal Assessor should agree a further joint recommendation with the supervisory team on the candidate's probationary status. A student not making satisfactory progress at a Continuation Review Meeting will normally be required to withdraw from the programme.

The supervisory team shall also report to the Head of School or nominee at any time when the candidate appears not to be making satisfactory progress, is otherwise not fulfilling the conditions that have been laid down or appears unlikely to reach the standard of the degree.