



'45 keys, 90 chars', Titus Nemeth,
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The Graduate School guide to...

Keeping on track:
how we monitor and assess
your progress

It is important for both you and the University that you complete your thesis in good time. Three years (or more if you are part-time) may seem like a long time when you first start your PhD programme but it is surprising how quickly the time can pass. To help you keep on track we have put in place a University-wide system for monitoring and assessing progress. The purpose of this guide is to explain how this system works and to enable you to fulfil your role in it more effectively.

This guide is part of a series produced by the Graduate School, which address in an informal way a number of the areas and processes central to your doctoral research studies. These guides are complementary to - and should be read in conjunction with - the University's formal policies and procedures, as listed on the Graduate School website.¹

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¹ <http://www.reading.ac.uk/gs-policies-and-procedures.aspx>

1. What exactly is monitored?

The purpose of monitoring and assessing progress is to ensure that you are making satisfactory progress with your research and that you are receiving appropriate levels of supervision, training and support. You will formally be asked about each of these aspects at least once per year.

2. When does it start?

During your first term you will start to develop a plan for your research studies and you will also carry out a Learning Needs Analysis to identify your training needs. As the year progresses, your supervisor(s) will keep a check on how you are progressing in relation to aspects at least once per year.

During your third term (whether you are a full-time or part-time student, or working away from the University) there will be a more formal evaluation of your progress. This will then be repeated each year for the remainder of your programme. Some Schools and Departments supplement this annual process with additional School-based assessments.

3. How will I know what will be required in my School or Department?

Most Schools/Departments have a research student handbook that will set out the procedures for monitoring and assessing progress. You should also be told about the process during your School/Department based induction at the start of your programme. If you are in any doubt about what will be required of you then you should ask your School/Department Director of Postgraduate Research Studies.

4. Will I have to write a formal report?

Each year, you will be asked to produce a written report outlining your progress since the start of your studies, if you are in your first year, or since your previous review. The exact nature and format of these varies across Schools but all reports should cover the following areas:

- Summary of work completed, including any written work;
- A plan for the following year, including plans for publication or other outputs;
- What subject-specific and generic research skills training has been undertaken;
- What demonstrating or other University-related work has been carried out.

You will be given a deadline for when the report has to be submitted and it is important that you meet this. You will find it helpful to discuss the content of your report with your supervisor(s) before submitting it, just to check that you have done what is required of you.

In addition to your report, you will also be asked to complete an evaluation of your supervisory arrangements, using a standard University-wide form. This will ask you about whether your supervision is working satisfactorily and whether you are receiving adequate support. This evaluation (unlike your report) is not shown to your supervisor or the staff who will assess your progress. It is sent to the School/Department Director of Postgraduate Research Studies who will treat your comments confidentially unless you agree for them to be discussed with others.

5. What happens if I do not complete and submit a report?

Unless you have been given a formal extension, if you do not submit a report you will receive a formal letter from your Head of School/Department two weeks after the date it should have been submitted. You will be warned that if you do not submit a satisfactory report within three weeks you will be subject to the University's formal procedures relating to academic engagement, which could result in your registration being terminated. Further details of these procedures can be found on the Graduate School's website.²

6. Who reads and assesses my report?

Your progress will normally be assessed by at least two members of staff who are 'independent', in that they are not closely involved in your supervision. A few Schools/Departments have a system where each student has a supervisory or advisory team rather than two or more specific supervisors. In this case, one member of the supervisory or advisory team might also be involved in the annual assessment of your progress. These members of staff are sometimes called 'monitors' when acting in this capacity.

7. Does my supervisor write a report on my progress?

Yes, each of your supervisors will also be required to write a report as part of the annual monitoring process. This may be a joint report or they may produce independent reports. Again, the precise format will vary across Schools/Departments, but your supervisors will be required to cover the following areas:

- whether your progress is deemed to be satisfactory and, if not, what actions could be taken to ensure that progress becomes satisfactory;
- the standard of any written work submitted;
- whether you have given an oral presentation of your work to an appropriate audience within your School/Department;

² <http://www.reading.ac.uk/gs-policies-and-procedures.aspx>

- the appropriateness of the training activities you have undertaken and how they have met your needs, as identified in your Learning Needs Analysis;
- your anticipated completion date.

It is helpful if your supervisors have seen a copy of your report in advance of writing their reports. You will also receive, for information, a copy of your supervisors' report(s). Your report and your supervisors' will be given to the two nominated 'assessors'.

8. Am I required to give an oral presentation or to meet with my assessors?

You will normally be expected to give at least two oral presentations of your work to an appropriate audience within your School/Department during the course of your programme. Your School/Department Director of Postgraduate Research Studies will provide you with further information about this.

In some Schools/Departments, assessors meet with each research student as part of the annual review process. Where this is the case, the assessors will want to reassure themselves that you can justify your approach to your studies and answer any queries they may have. All students are required to meet with their assessors when the review of progress forms part of the 'confirmation of registration' process (see section 11), unless there are exceptional reasons why this would not be appropriate or possible

9. What happens after the assessors have reviewed my work?

Your assessors will produce a joint written report based on reading your report and your supervisors' reports (and having met with you). The report will comment on your progress to date and your likelihood of completing on time. It will outline any concerns that they might have and, where appropriate, suggest actions that might be taken to alleviate these. The report will include a recommendation as to whether your registration should be continued and/or whether a change in registration is warranted. You will receive a copy of their report.

10. What happens if a negative recommendation is made?

If the assessors' report indicates unsatisfactory progress, you will normally be given advice on how to improve your performance and an opportunity to submit a revised report by a specified date. Very occasionally, this is not appropriate, or you may already have been given such an opportunity but your progress has remained unsatisfactory; in these cases, the School/Department Director of Postgraduate Research Studies will refer your case to your Head of School/Department. The assessors may have recommended that a change of registration to MPhil is appropriate, or that your registration should be discontinued. In the former case, if you agree with the recommendation then you and your supervisor will plan what you need to do to achieve the qualification. If you are unhappy with the recommendation, and you have not yet undergone confirmation of registration, you can remain registered for a PhD but should appreciate that you would

have to significantly improve your performance to be successful in the confirmation of registration assessment.

If the assessors recommend that your registration be discontinued, the Head of School will invoke formal University procedures that will involve your case being reviewed by a senior committee. Further details of this procedure are available on the Graduate School website.

11. What is 'confirmation of registration' and when does it occur?

Most students register for a PhD at the outset of their programme, and the vast majority are successful in attaining this award. However, for a few students, it becomes clear that their work is not of the required standard. The 'confirmation of registration' is a formal process which considers whether a student's work is of the required standard for successful completion of a PhD, or whether registration for an MPhil would be more appropriate (or, in rare cases, that registration should be terminated).

For full-time students, 'confirmation of registration' generally takes place in your second year before the end of your fifth term. By this point, there should be sufficient work to enable a sound judgement to be made. For part-time students, 'confirmation of registration' is normally carried out between 24 and 30 months from the start of your registration.

The actual process is very much like that followed in the annual review of progress exercise; with students, supervisors and assessors producing written reports. Many Schools/Departments require students to produce more detailed progress reports, and/or produce additional written material for confirmation of progress than for the first year annual review. Further information on what may be required is shown in Annex one at the end of this document.

As noted in section eight, unless there are exceptional reasons why this cannot be the case, you will be required to meet with the assessors in person once they have read your report and your supervisors' reports. The assessors will want to reassure themselves that your approach to your research is appropriate and that you can successfully complete a PhD in the expected time period. They will ask you about any obstacles you are facing and raise any points of concern. They will expect you to defend your approach and decisions to date, which is all good practice for your final viva.

Recommendations for confirmation or registration (or otherwise) are made on the basis of the following criteria.

- Is the work presented by the student such as might reasonably be expected as a result of their having studied for the equivalent of around 15-18 months full-time for a PhD?
- Has the student shown that he or she is able to exercise independent critical judgement?

- Has the student demonstrated that he/she understands how his/her research topic is related to a wider field of knowledge?
- Has the student demonstrated the ability to produce an original contribution to knowledge?
- Is the amount and nature of the subject-specific and generic research skills training that has been undertaken by the student appropriate to his/her needs, as identified through a Learning Needs Analysis or similar process?
- Is the student's work, and his/her understanding of it, of a standard that indicates that it will lead to the successful submission of a PhD thesis within three to four years full-time registration (or part-time equivalent)?

The assessors will make a clear recommendation in their report, which you will receive. Where progress is deemed to be satisfactory, you will receive a letter from the Doctoral Research Office informing you that your registration has been confirmed at PhD status.

If the assessors' recommendation is that your progress is not sufficiently satisfactory, and you have not met one or more of the above criteria, you would normally be given advice on how to improve your performance and an opportunity to provide a further report and be re-interviewed (normally within three months). If your progress is still deemed to be unsatisfactory at this second attempt, the assessors will recommend that your registration should be changed to MPhil or (very occasionally) should not be continued.

If the assessors recommend a change of status to MPhil, you can either accept this recommendation and work with your supervisor to plan for a successful completion of this award or, if you do not accept the recommendation, you have a right to make an appeal through the University's formal appeals process (further details are available on the Graduate School website³). It is comparatively rare that this happens.

If the assessors recommend that your registration should not be continued, your Head of School will invoke formal University procedures that will involve your case being reviewed by a senior committee. Further details of this procedure are available on the Graduate School website.

12. How can I find out more about 'confirmation of registration'?

The University Code of Practice on Research Students⁴ sets out formally details of the entire process for monitoring and assessing progress.

The Reading Researcher Development Programme⁵ runs two sessions a year on confirmation of registration; one for students in the Sciences and Life Sciences and one

³ <http://www.reading.ac.uk/web/FILES/graduateschool/pgrconfirmationappeals.pdf>

⁴ Available at: http://www.reading.ac.uk/web/FILES/qualitysupport/cop_resstudents.pdf

⁵ A brochure setting out details of the Reading Researcher Development Programme is available http://www.reading.ac.uk/web/FILES/graduateschool/RRDP_brochure_2012-13.pdf

for those in the Arts, Humanities, Social Sciences and Business. Many Schools and Departments also provide additional briefings or guidance.

13. What happens if I fall behind with my studies due to ill health or personal or employment related reasons?

Many students experience short periods of ill health, or face other minor obstacles, during the course of their programme. However, for some students, their problems can be so significant that they substantially affect their rate of progress. If this happens to you, you should let your supervisor or School/Department Director of PGR Studies know as soon as possible. Alternatively, if you prefer, you can seek advice from experienced staff within the Doctoral Research Office in the Graduate School. We have in place systems for determining whether students would benefit from suspending their studies for an agreed period. There is also a range of support services provided by the wider University that can be called on in such circumstances⁶. The important thing is not to let time pass by without informing your School/Department (or the Doctoral Research Office) that you are experiencing difficulty and your progress is being affected by this.

14. What happens if I reach my maximum registration date and have not submitted?

You will receive an email from the Doctoral Research Office 12 months prior to your maximum registration date, reminding you of that date. If you have still not submitted 3 months before your maximum registration date, you will receive another email warning you that if you do not submit by this date, and you have not been granted an exceptional extension, your registration will be terminated. If you have still not submitted by the maximum registration date, you will be sent a letter informing you that your registration will be terminated within 14 days. You would also be informed about the Appeals process.

Professor Dianne Berry
Dean of Postgraduate Research Studies
August 2013

⁶ Further details can be accessed via the Graduate School website at: <http://www.reading.ac.uk/gs-university-services.aspx>

Annex one

Student reports for 'confirmation of registration'

Your School or Department will inform you about the required format, length and content of your report. Many Schools ask for reports to be around 4000–5000 words and to show that you have the following:

- a clear research topic and working title;
- a knowledge of the literature in your field and that you can use this to support your arguments;
- an understanding of the context/background of your research question(s);
- an understanding of, and justification for, your chosen approach or research method;
- an understanding of what source materials you will need to study to address your topic;
- an understanding of any data you have collected and analysed to date;
- a plan for how your research will progress for the remainder of your programme.

In many Schools/Departments in the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences, students are required to submit a thesis chapter or significant sample of written work with their overview report. You will be informed about this, in advance, if this is the case.

Tips for preparing your report

- Start well ahead of time.
- Allow time for your supervisor(s) to read and comment on your report, so you can make any necessary amendments before the submission date.
- Think about your audience – your assessors are unlikely to know as much about your topic as you and your supervisors do.
- Make sure you check that the length and format of your report is in line with any specific guidance you have been given by your School/Department.
- Write clearly and succinctly, using appropriate sub-headings.