

Guidance for PGR Supervisors during the Coronavirus outbreak – Last Updated 2 February 2021

The Manchester Doctoral College recognises that PGR Supervisors may have concerns and questions about their role due to the ongoing coronavirus outbreak. This document contains guidance and advice for the University's PGR Supervisor community at this uncertain and difficult time.

Regularly updated [FAQs for PGRs](#) and [FAQs for Research](#) are available on the University [coronavirus](#) website and are being used to provide answers, updates and guidance for PGRs/Researchers. The information in this guidance is aimed at supervisors, members of supervisory teams and their PS colleagues and is organised into the following sections:

[Supervising Remotely](#)

[Researching Remotely](#)

[Support and Wellbeing](#)

[Progression and Assessment](#)

[IT and Equipment](#)

[Returning to Campus](#)

PGR Supervisors can also refer to the [Postgraduate Researcher Supervisor Toolkit](#) and the UKCGE [Guide to Online Research Supervision](#).

If you have any questions or concerns which are not covered here or in the [FAQ for PGRs](#) and [FAQ for Research](#) please contact your Faculty Associate Dean and/or Faculty PGR Manager (or, in Humanities, School PGR Director/Manager) and they will endeavour to answer them.

Supervising Remotely

Is there any guidance on how to supervise remotely?

As PGRs attempt to continue with their research whilst adjusting to working remotely and balancing caring or volunteering responsibilities, supervisors have a crucial role to play in supporting them during this uncertain and difficult time. The supervisory skills of developing positive working relationships, supporting PGRs, providing timely feedback still apply but may have to be adapted as channels of communication are narrower and for some are limited. Consider the following:

- **Following the introduction of a new national lockdown on 4th January 2021 it is the University's position that all PGR and supervisor/advisor meetings must be held remotely until further notice.**
- You will have already agreed expectations with your PGR in terms of frequency and format of meetings and how you will communicate between meetings. Revisit those expectations to take account of the changed situation for both you and your PGR, for example PGRs may now have additional responsibilities and may not be able to work the same hours they have previously.
- Whilst resetting expectations agree the best platform for regular virtual meetings for both of you, preferably Zoom or Skype. A video platform is usually preferable to telephone calls. You may find that meetings need to be more frequent. You may want to make brief notes of what was discussed and any decisions made.

- Schedule meetings rather than take a wait and see approach. However, be flexible and recognise that the frequency and timing of meetings may need to change.
- It may be useful for PGR or supervisor to send points for discussion before your virtual meeting. Whilst sharing screens is an option it can also be distracting and is not always easy to read.
- At the start of each virtual meeting take the time to ask your PGR how they really are. Discuss what concerns they have and be aware that they may be caring for children or family, they may not have a quiet place to work or they may be working and living alone and you may be their only social contact that day, take the time to ask them how they are.
- Catch ups do not have to be limited to the virtual meetings. Informal catch ups in the corridor, meeting rooms or labs can be replaced by email and other informal instant messaging tools.
- In this period of uncertainty and worry it is important to be mindful about the language that is used when giving feedback and how it might be perceived. Consider using a [coaching style approach](#) to feedback.
- If your situation changes or if you are unwell or taking leave please let your PGR know and ensure there is someone else in the supervisory team for them to contact.
- You may find these [good practice guidelines](#) developed by academics help you to make online interactions easier, more accessible and more inclusive.
- Use online tools such as Slack and Zoom to retain a sense of community, these tools can be used to host virtual coffee mornings and online research seminars.
- For further guidance please see the [UKCGE Webinar: Effective Practices in Doctoral Supervision at a Distance](#) (see 31:19 for Dr. Sam Oakley's presentation on 'Supervising Remotely During the Coronavirus Crisis') and the [bibliography](#), curated by Prof Stan Taylor for the UKCGE, of literature relating to Research Supervision at a Distance.

Researching Remotely

How can I support my PGR in adapting their research plan/project if needed?

It is very likely that you have already begun the conversation about whether your PGR's research plan or project may need to change. This will be especially true for PGRs conducting lab-based research.

PGRs and Supervisors should bear in mind the intellectual and practical competencies expected of doctoral candidates, as set out by the [QAA doctoral characteristics document](#), which emphasise that **doctoral degrees should be awarded based on the quality of the work rather than the quantity of the research undertaken**. In some cases PGRs close to submission may have already met the required doctoral standard without having to complete all of the work originally planned. Alternatively, these competencies could be met by adjusting the original research question or by re-scoping the project in order to address the topic by undertaking research remotely.

When thinking about adapting a research plan or project bear in mind:

- The need to adapt and change programmes of work will vary greatly. This may be the biggest cause of worry and anxiety for your PGR.
- Take the time to discuss with your PGR and the wider supervisory team and consider the extent to which the project can be continued and/or how it can be adapted.
- Consider whether other research activities can be brought forward. Although not all ideas will be relevant to all disciplines you could do this [infographic](#) (for lab-based subjects) and this [infographic](#) (for non lab-based researchers).
- Even where PGRs are able to make progress they will need to be supported to develop a revised plan that is realistic and achievable.

- Recognise that there will be [difficulties](#) in terms of the research project. Whilst progress is never straight line, this is truer than ever and PGRs need to be given space to adjust.

For further guidance please see the guidance on [Rescoping PGR Projects in Response to COVID](#).

Support and Wellbeing

How can I support my supervisee's wellbeing during remote working?

It is important to recognise that this is an incredibly difficult, uncertain and worrying time for PGRs. It is difficult to read and interpret body language via virtual meetings and you will not have informal opportunities to check in on someone by popping into the lab or meeting rooms. Therefore, it is important to check in regularly with your PGRs, ask questions, listen and signpost to further support.

- Listen to this short [video](#) on how to recognise the symptoms of stress in your postgraduate researchers and how to support them.
 - Start a dialogue with your PGR to try and ascertain how they are feeling. Use this infographic to help. You may find you have to ask more specific questions, for example, how are coping with being at home, do you have a suitable space to work.
 - If your PGR is feeling isolated, help them to establish a peer support mechanism. You can encourage all the supervisees in your wider supervisory team to set up video conferences to socialise.
 - Many PGRs will have already established groups and connections, if you are aware of these groups ask if they are open for other PGRs to join in.
 - The PGR Life spotlight on coronavirus and wellbeing refers to resources and advice on how to look after your wellbeing.
 - Let your PGR know that Student Support Services (Counselling and Mental Health Service, Disability Advisory and Support Service) are there for PGRs and can be accessed at this time.
 - The routes to via help in a crisis remain the same.
 - Everyone's wellbeing is impacted at this time, take the time to consider and look after your own wellbeing using the University wellbeing pages for ideas.
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Progression and Assessment

My PGR has requested an interruption/extension what should I advise?

The University has allocated funds to support PGRs with a funding end date between 1 March 2020 and 31 March 2021; full details are provided in the [PGR FAQs](#). This also includes information for all other PGRs.

Should we still be completing PGR attendance milestones in eProg?

If PGRs are able to work remotely and are engaging with supervisors then their attendance should be completed and a note should be added in the free text indicating that they are working remotely due to Covid-19 related university closure. In addition, keep a log of any meeting that is held online and it is good practice for the PGR to record the outcomes of the meeting via the additional meeting forms in eProg. It is critical for supervisors to continue to complete the eProg monthly milestone reports to ensure compliance with visa monitoring requirements.

What is expected in terms of progression and annual reviews?

Progress reviews, including annual reviews, should go ahead remotely at the normal time but, due to the ongoing disruption, they can be regarded as providing formative feedback rather than a summative judgement on the PGR's progress.

Review meetings should go ahead using appropriate technologies e.g. Zoom or Skype (please see the next question on viva examinations for further guidance on the use of these technologies for formal reviews) and it should be expected that, in some cases, a PGR will submit a lighter version of their continuation/progress report or piece of work required for the review.

Supervisors and reviewers should take the extent of any disruption caused to the PGR's planned programme of work into account and ensure that the PGR is able to move forward with their studies.

Where there are progression issues unrelated to the Covid-19, normal policy should be followed - whereby the PGR is asked to resubmit for their annual review up to 10 weeks following the initial review to complete the remedial work.

Can viva examinations still go ahead?

Now that the University has moved to a position of remote working and until further notice, all vivas should either be conducted remotely or postponed to a later date. If vivas go ahead remotely, internal examiners should record that all participants are happy to proceed remotely and it is strongly advised that an independent chair be appointed. The normal policy on applying for permission to conduct the viva remotely will be waived during this period. Given the current circumstances, please use the technology that most suits the participants of the viva (e.g. Zoom). When you are using Zoom you are advised to set a password. Please refer to the interim guidance on remote vivas.

If you are carrying out vivas remotely please be mindful that disabled postgraduate researchers (e.g. those with an Autistic Spectrum Condition or anxiety) may have specific needs to enable them to complete the viva in this way. In advance of the remote viva please ask postgraduate researchers if they have any disability-related difficulties with completing the viva in this way and if necessary discuss their needs with the Disability Advisory Support Service who can be contacted at dass@manchester.ac.uk.

When selecting external examiners, it is recommended that you consider their ability to conduct a fair examination of a thesis performed in the constrained circumstances presented by COVID-19.

Are Right to Work (RTW) checks still required for overseas External Examiners when conducting remote vivas? [Progression and Assessment]

As long as the work by the examiner is wholly undertaken overseas then there is no need for us to perform a right to work check. However if they have used a PPE visa to travel to the UK, and then are doing the viva remotely within the UK, there will need to be a RTW check.

Any enquiries can be directed to sarah.kakanskas@manchester.ac.uk in HR.

IT and Equipment

My PGR has requested additional specialist equipment to complete their research? [IT]

If your PGR makes a request for specialist software or additional equipment please be aware that all additional purchases need to follow the new approved process and will require approval by a member

of the Senior Leadership Team. In advance of making any request, you are advised to consider the following:

- If the new equipment is needed to allow PGRs to adapt and complete a revised programme of work, please add this as a justification and explanation in your request.
 - If you are able to use external funds from a research project or grant to fund the purchase, do not assume this gives you permission but do indicate this in your request.
 - Check first if software is available via the University software centre.
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Returning to Campus: Guidance for PGR Supervisors

We expect the majority of PGRs will continue to work from home, but where PGRs are returning to a specialist research facility, they and their supervisor must have already completed all the necessary risk assessments. These, along with more detailed information, can be found on our [‘Return to Campus’](#) website.

Please note that even though under the national restrictions introduced on the 4th January 2021 some PGRs may still be permitted to conduct research on campus it is the University’s position that all PGR and supervisor/advisor meetings must be held remotely until further notice.

Supervisors may find that some PGRs have concerns and are uncertain about returning and the aim of this short note is to support supervisors address these potential concerns. Some PGRs may be anxious at the prospect of returning to campus and supervisors may want to ask during supervision meetings if there are any current challenges that their PGR may face with returning. The different challenges your PGR may experience include:

- **Childcare and carer responsibilities:** PGRs may be unable to return to campus due to childcare/carer responsibilities. Not all PGRs will want to place their child(ren) back into school settings at present and it should not be insisted that they do so. In these circumstances, PGRs should be supported to continue to research remotely.
- **Living with someone who is shielding:** If a PGR lives with someone who is shielding (extremely vulnerable) or who is considered vulnerable then at present they should be supported to continue to research remotely to minimise the risk to the shielding individual. This approach should also be taken if a PGR has chosen to create a ‘social bubble’ with a single-family member or friend, who may be considered vulnerable.
- **Clinically Vulnerable or Vulnerable PGRs:** Some PGRs may be classed as extremely clinically vulnerable or vulnerable and at present, these PGRs should continue to be supported to carry out their research remotely. See [guidance](#) on the definitions of extremely clinically vulnerable and vulnerable.
- **Public Transport Concerns:** In situations where it is not possible to walk, cycle or drive to campus then PGRs will likely have no other option but to use public transport and some PGRs may be apprehensive about using public transport, especially if it becomes difficult to adequately social distance from other passengers. In these cases, PGRs should be encouraged to avoid ‘peak’ travel times.

Further support: If your PGR is displaying signs of anxiety, please sign post them to the wellbeing support available on [PGR Life](#) and the online workshops delivered by the [Counselling Service](#).