

## Rescoping PhD projects in response to COVID-19 impact:

### Guidance for Supervisors in the Faculty of Humanities

#### Introduction

Supervisory teams should all be alert to the need to review doctoral projects with their PGRs, reflecting on the current impact of COVID-19 on the research and planning for any further impact that may result from restricted movements, social distancing and phased opening of the campus. Many teams have already worked closely with their PGRs to adapt their plans, whilst others are now moving to do so. This document sets out some principles to frame those discussions. This document should be read in conjunction with the MDC [Guidance for PGR Supervisors during the Coronavirus outbreak](#) published in April 2020, in particular the section on 'Researching Remotely'.

This applies not just to current PGRs but also to those due to start in 2020-21. Offer-holders may need guidance from their prospective supervisors on the viability of a September 2020 start or the need to redesign projects in the light of current and foreseeable constraints. In some parts of the Faculty there may be opportunities for projects to be redesigned to address specific challenges arising from the impact of COVID-19, and where appropriate this should be encouraged.

The extent to which it will be necessary to adapt research to complete the PhD thesis within the normal completion period will vary and be dependent on the stage of the PhD and the research methods used as well as the access to data sources. The guidance below therefore sets out a number of principles that should be considered when discussing contingency planning with your PGRs.

#### Principles and Assumptions

1. In the case of PGRs in their first two years (or part-time equivalent) it is important to work on the assumption that restrictions on research imposed by restricted travel and social distancing measures are likely to last in some form or other for the foreseeable future and to therefore adjust the project accordingly, rather than to assume that PGRs can defer key stages of their original research plans and subsequently rely on funded extensions. As far as possible, projects should be adjusted to enable them to be brought to completion in the changed circumstances.
2. Where significant rescoping is required, the process should be informed by the essential requirements for the award of the degree. The essential requirements of the PhD are defined both in the University of Manchester ordinances and in the QAA statement on the characteristics of the doctoral graduate (see Appendix for more detail). In particular, the ordinances require 'an original contribution and substantial addition to knowledge' embodied in a thesis that 'must contain material of a standard appropriate for peer-reviewed publication'. The QAA statement identifies specific intellectual and practical competencies that doctoral candidates are expected to be able to demonstrate. It is important to bear these requirements in mind. They define the *quality* of doctoral work rather than the *quantity* of research upon which it is based. It is well understood that examiners should judge quantity and scope in relation to what can reasonably be attained in the

course of the programme (in Humanities, usually three years full-time), and examiners likewise will be expected to take account of the constraints imposed by the current pandemic. **Manchester Doctoral College will be drawing up guidance to examiners on this point.** In short, there is no need to dilute our expectation of PhD quality, but we must all frame our research projects in such a way that they can be carried out in the circumstances we find ourselves.

3. Considerations that may require a change to the scope or design of the project most obviously include the need for overseas fieldwork; physical access to particular repositories or to collaborating organisations; feasibility of conducting interviews, participant observation, etc. in conditions of social distancing; but there may well be other aspects of research design that are now problematic due to unanticipated barriers linked to COVID-19 restrictions. All relate in different ways to the collection of data.

4. In these circumstances, options to be considered may include greater use of secondary data sources, and/or the methodological reframing of the project, including use of online/digital sources and methods. In some cases the journal format thesis is worth considering, since it potentially offers greater flexibility. The appropriate solution will depend on the extent of the data already collected and the length of time remaining on the project.

5. There may be some cases where PGR projects could potentially be reframed to address COVID-19 challenges linked to the PGR's area of research. Where this is feasible it should be encouraged.

6. The possible need for a new application for ethical approval will have to be considered in many cases.

7. Where rescoping of the project has been agreed, supervisory teams should make these changes very clear in the annual review notes so that any new scope is agreed upon in writing by everyone involved in the decision. This will help with any future requests for funded extensions for students in years 1 and 2.

### **Further support**

The Researcher Development team within the Faculty run 'Responsive Research' session entitled 'When and how to change your research'.

This will be aimed at both PhD and ECR. It is firstly to cover those who are going to have to change their research because of COVID but also it is an opportunity to address wider issues about resilience and topicality. It poses the question why and when you should adapt your research? The session also looks at rapid response when your research area suddenly becomes very pertinent.

The first session was held on 10 June 2020 with further sessions planned subject to demand. Please see [ProGRes](#) training hub for more information.

Methods North West also plans to hold a series of informal sessions on Zoom over the summer months focusing on different online methods and methods that can be adapted for use online.

The following resource may also be useful for PGRs working mainly with qualitative methods:

- 'Doing fieldwork in a pandemic' – crowdsourced document started by Deborah Lupton:

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1clGjGABB2h2qbduTgfqribHmog9B6P0NvMgVuiHZCl8/edit>

## Appendix: Key guidance on PhD standards

- a. [Ordinances](#) of the University of Manchester:

The Degree of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) is awarded by the University in recognition of the successful completion of a period of supervised research and training, the results of which show convincing evidence of the capacity of the candidate to pursue research and scholarship and make an original contribution and substantial addition to knowledge. The results of this research shall then be embodied in a thesis or other appropriate form and must contain material of a standard appropriate for peer-reviewed publication.

- b. QAA guidance on the minimum expectations of a PhD:

### QAA doctoral characteristics

[https://www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/quality-code/doctoral-degree-characteristics-statement-2020.pdf?sfvrsn=a3c5ca81\\_14](https://www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/quality-code/doctoral-degree-characteristics-statement-2020.pdf?sfvrsn=a3c5ca81_14)

- All UK doctorates, regardless of their form, continue to require the main focus of the candidate's work 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**
- Doctoral degrees are the most individually distinct of the academic qualifications available because of their roots in research and the pursuit of knowledge, and the requirement for the candidate to **produce work demonstrating original thought, based on independent study.**
- All doctoral graduates should be able to:
  - **search for, discover, access, retrieve, sift, interpret, analyse, evaluate, manage, conserve and communicate an ever-increasing volume of knowledge from a range of sources**
  - **think critically about problems to produce innovative solutions and create new knowledge; plan, manage and deliver projects, selecting and justifying appropriate methodological processes while recognising, evaluating and minimising the risks involved and impact on the environment**
  - exercise professional standards in research and research integrity, and engage in professional practice, including ethical, legal, and health and safety aspects, bringing enthusiasm, perseverance and integrity to bear on their work activities
  - support, collaborate with and lead colleagues, **using a range of teaching, communication and networking skills to influence practice and policy in diverse environments**
  - **appreciate the need to engage in research with impact and to be able to communicate it to diverse audiences, including the public**
  - build relationships with peers, senior colleagues, students and stakeholders with sensitivity to equality, diversity and cultural issues

- All doctoral graduates will have developed during the course of their research **additional specialist knowledge within their discipline**, while those who have studied a professional doctorate are likely to have been required to have **particular professional experience that informs the topic of their research studies**
- In the final part of the assessment, it is the intention that the candidate defends his or her research in the oral examination, and is expected to **demonstrate deep knowledge and understanding of the field of study and originality of thought, either in the creation of new knowledge or in the novel application of existing knowledge**