

# Covid-19 Impact on **Assessment of Research Degrees**

UK Council for Graduate Education



UK Council for  
Graduate Education

# Foreword

Since developing several reference documents for our members in 2020<sup>1</sup> relevant to the changing circumstances for doctoral degrees and candidates during the pandemic, we have become aware that an additional resource may be helpful, concerning the impact of Covid-19 on doctoral research and any consequential impact on the final examination.

Some universities have already developed statements concerning potential adjustments to research projects as a result of restricted access to data or other limitations such as the need to re-design experiments or adopt different methodology, and the related implications for assessment.

We thought it would nonetheless be useful to develop this statement as a reference point, setting out approaches likely to be adopted by member institutions, and raising considerations for universities, supervisory teams, candidates and examiners. Our aim is to support all those involved, and to help raise awareness of the main issues for standards and degree outcomes.

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<sup>1</sup> Supporting Our Members During the COVID-19 Coronavirus Pandemic - <http://www.ukcge.ac.uk/article/supporting-members-during-covid-19-coronavirus-pandemic-454.aspx>  
Doctoral Degrees and the Potential Impact of Covid-19 on Current Postgraduate Researchers: What are the Significant Considerations? - <http://www.ukcge.ac.uk/article/covid-19-doctoral-considerations-guidance-note-456.aspx>

# Introduction

This document is provided by UK Council for Graduate Education (UKCGE) to support our membership in adapting procedures for assessing research degrees in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. This guidance is offered recognising that each UKCGE member with research degree awarding powers is responsible for the standards of its own awards. It is our hope that this guidance will inform the development of institutional responses whilst also securing and maintaining the academic standards of all awards. Institutions are encouraged to clearly communicate any revised approaches to doctoral candidates at the earliest opportunity to alleviate concerns that many will have at this time.

## Examining the Impact of Covid-19

### Assessment of Doctoral Degrees in the UK

Higher education institutions with research degree awarding powers have legally regulated institutional autonomy to set the assessment criteria and standards for all Masters and Doctoral research degrees awarded in their name. (This does not apply to Higher Doctorates or Honorary Degrees.) Institutional academic standards are expected to align with *The Frameworks for HE Qualifications of UK Degree-Awarding Bodies*<sup>2</sup> which defines the national expectation for setting and maintaining the standards of degrees including research degrees at Masters and Doctoral Level. Higher education institutions are thus able to claim that the degrees they award are assigned to a specific level in the UK framework known as the FHEQ in England, Wales and Northern Ireland and the FHEQIS in Scotland. The overall standards of the UK's national frameworks are maintained and assured by QAA which provides national and international recognition for the standards of research degrees awarded by UK higher education institutions. The Framework is part of a wider *Quality Code*<sup>3</sup>, also maintained by QAA, that includes advice and guidance and supporting resources which institutions can use to inform and enhance the quality of the environment they offer to support research degree candidates.

As legally regulated autonomous entities, higher education institutions also prescribe the procedures used to determine if a body of work is sufficient to demonstrate achievement of the standards and learning outcomes for the award of a research degree. Assessment of doctoral awards includes the submission of written work and an oral (viva-voce) examination, typically conducted by an internal and external examiner, and supported by an independent chair when circumstances require this. In practice-based disciplines other outputs are also considered during the assessment.

Higher education institutions have established criteria used to identify internal and external examiners such that together they have sufficient subject expertise, specialist knowledge and previous experience of research to correctly assess the achievements and abilities of doctoral candidates. It is the

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<sup>2</sup> QAA: Qualifications and Credit Frameworks - <https://www.qaa.ac.uk/quality-code/qualifications-and-credit-frameworks>

<sup>3</sup> QAA: UK Quality Code for Higher Education - <https://www.qaa.ac.uk/quality-code>

responsibility of the internal and external examiners to come to a consensus and agree a recommended outcome for institutional scrutiny and approval. In making this judgement, the examiners will refer to the institution's regulations and assessment criteria, also drawing on their own specialist knowledge, expertise and previous experience. The format of the work submitted for assessment varies considerably by academic discipline and many disciplines will have their own norms and expectations on what constitutes an appropriate body of evidence for an award.

The assessment of research degrees is an iterative process where candidates are often required to make revisions to their work in response to the comments of the examiners. In some occasions a subsequent oral exam may be required. If the candidate satisfies the examiners at this final stage a recommendation to award a degree is expected to be the final outcome of the examination.

### What Do Doctoral Examiners Look For?

The final doctoral examination, while contested as an assessment process by some social scientists for its lack of transparency, is designed to enable examiners both to scrutinise the candidate's work in detail and to question them about it in an oral examination or viva.

The process of assessment normally takes place over a period of around 3 months, taking the form of a 'continuum of judgement' (Houston, 2019; p.106, and see Denicolo et al, 2020). Most assessment processes can be improved and of course this is true of the doctoral examination, but some would agree it is fit for purpose in demonstrating whether the candidate is at the point where they can be accredited as an independent researcher, this being the exam's stated purpose in most universities.

What, then, are examiners seeking to discover about the candidate and their work so as to make this judgement through the media of the thesis and viva? How do they evaluate their 'doctorateness' and is it the work or the candidate and their potential that is being assessed (Boud and Lee, 2009; Lovat et al, 2008; Lovitts, 2007; Park, 2007; and Denicolo, 2003)?

Attributes sought by examiners have been the subject of research by several authors, notably Lovitts (2007); Mullins and Kiley (2002); Nyquist (2000); and Winter et al (2000) and more recently by Houston (2019 and 2021), in a PhD study that explored the examination process, the attributes sought and the possible outcome.

The most widely recognised attribute, recognised by examiners and candidates alike, is the requirement for originality, or a contribution to knowledge (Clarke and Lunt, 2014). Houston found that STEM and AHSS examiners interpret these terms differently, but that all had a common understanding of the need for the candidate to add knowledge to the field, whether uniquely or incrementally. The contribution to knowledge, however, is just one of the interdependent attributes examiners seek in candidates. Houston (2021, pp 273-74) categorises these additional attributes into three further groups: publishability (regarded by some examiners as almost equal in importance to originality); research competence (actualisation of attributes in this group is different, depending on discipline); and intellectual rigour (a collection of transferable personal and professional qualities). She also analysed

which group of attributes were most evident from the thesis or viva. The thesis was found to be relevant to all four groups but perhaps surprisingly, the viva contributed to all but the publishability group.

Having undertaken observations of 10 vivas and conducted 43 interviews, Houston concluded that while the thesis is the principal source of evidence for examiners' judgements, the viva can influence the outcome – not with regard to passing or failing the examination – but in recommendations about major or minor corrections which in turn affect the quality of the final thesis. She concluded therefore that the viva fulfilled an important moderating role. Additionally, the extent of agreement among examiners in all disciplines in the study (including supervisors who also had examining experience) about the attributes they seek was striking and suggests some consistency, supported by previous studies (op cit). Observations and interviews suggested most examiners involved in the research were rigorous in their approach to the examination, had rarely disagreed substantially with co-examiners, and remained confident of the integrity of the process.

In current circumstances, however, the whole of the doctoral examination comes under greater scrutiny, especially when the research process has been affected, as we will explore in section 3.

### Impact of Covid-19 on Doctoral Research

The Covid-19 global pandemic began in early 2020, and on 23 March 2020 the UK government issued a stay at home order. This lockdown resulted in the immediate cessation of many areas of UK activity and had a significant impact on doctoral candidates. Research facilities were closed with immediate effect. International travel was restricted and many candidates were recalled to the UK for their own safety. In the initial stages of lockdown candidates had to work at home limiting research activity to online investigations and online support from supervisory teams, institutions and other online sources of support. Beginning summer 2020, higher education institutions developed Covid-19 secure operating protocols which enabled a slow and restricted reopening of research laboratories and research facilities. This has enabled the resumption of a range of research related activities but at a much lower level than pre-pandemic.

At this time the volume and intensity of research activity is reduced, having a significant effect on the rate of progress of doctoral candidates. The impact on research degree candidates has been substantial, far reaching and is still ongoing. Research projects have been halted or delayed, fieldwork has not been possible, access to laboratories and research facilities has been restricted, travel both in the UK and internationally has not been possible, workshops and conferences have been cancelled or moved online. Almost all aspects of undertaking research, developing research skills and producing original research work, appropriate for a doctoral thesis and examination, has been impacted.

Supervisory teams and institutions have worked hard to adapt their support providing online alternatives<sup>4</sup>. Research projects have been reviewed, rescoped, adjusted and have adopted revised research questions and research methodologies. This has included interrogation of the concept of

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<sup>4</sup> The UKCGE has published a guide to online supervision available at <https://supervision.ukcge.ac.uk/resources/ukcge-guide-to-online-supervision/>

originality and novelty which differs across disciplines, as noted in the “What Do Doctoral Examiners Look For?” section above. For some research projects the initial intended outcome cannot be achieved, and candidates have had to move onto new areas of research. All of this has had a significant impact on what candidates can present for the assessment of a doctoral award. Many are left with significant unanswered questions about the extent to which their eventual work will meet, or not meet, the required standard for an award.

### Implications of the Covid-19 Impact

All of this raises complex and challenging questions on what doctoral candidates should do to present their work for assessment. Some candidates may have extensions provided by institutions to allow additional time for the submission for their work. Funders of research degrees may have provided additional funding to support candidates with additional work requirements<sup>5</sup>. While providing additional time is one response, another important response is to ask, within the overall approach described above, what adjustments can reasonably be made to the assessment procedures for doctoral degrees to mitigate the impact on doctoral candidates caused by Covid-19 issues?

Higher education institutions have a legal duty to assure and maintain the standards of all degrees they award. Notwithstanding this duty to secure academic standards, there is opportunity to examine learning outcomes, the doctoral assessment criteria, and the skills and attributes that candidates are expected to demonstrate for an award. In other words, the extent to which doctorateness has been achieved, but in a different way. The doctoral examination is based on evidence presented by the candidate in the written work, other practice-based outputs where necessary, and in the oral examination giving an opportunity to defend their work and approach.

The important question raised here is the extent to which examiners can accept forms of evidence which are different to previously acceptable evidence? This will be very discipline specific and will include consideration of the scope and scale of research activity, the volume of evidence presented, a consideration of the breadth versus depth of the work, the use of different methodologies or combinations of methodologies, the level of originality and novelty, and the extent to which the achievements of the candidate robustly demonstrate the standards required, through a coherent programme of research, for a threshold judgement by the examiners.

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<sup>5</sup> The largest funder of UK doctoral candidates, UKRI, has guidance for candidates at <https://www.ukri.org/our-work/tackling-the-impact-of-covid-19/guidance-for-applicants-and-awardholders-impacted-by-the-pandemic/>

### Impact of Covid-19 on Doctoral Theses

Having established that the global pandemic has affected researchers in several important ways and acknowledging that some may have been more challenged than others in completing their doctorates as planned, we aim to suggest how we can be fair to all doctoral candidates in the final examination.

First, the thesis. Access to data collection will have affected all candidates to a greater or lesser extent, from laboratory experiments to visiting archives. It is usual to reference any such challenges in the thesis, for example in a chapter on the theoretical approach, research design and research methods used by the candidate. If access challenges have been experienced, it is entirely relevant to mention these and importantly, to explain how these have been overcome without compromising the integrity of the research. It is possible to show that the candidate's resilience and resourcefulness have been strengthened by such challenges, especially if they have been able to adopt a creative approach to solving them.

Supervisors can be particularly helpful in supporting candidates through such challenging events and guiding them on how to structure their thesis so as to assure examiners of the integrity of their research. In some cases, supervisors will have the difficult challenge of discussing with a candidate the impact of a lack of data, at which point they will jointly have a decision to make about the feasibility of extending the candidate's period of study with the aim of increasing the data to enable viable and convincing conclusions to be drawn, or perhaps to complete the study for a research master's degree with the option of returning to develop the study into a doctorate at a later stage, which of course would have funding implications.

Second, the viva. While both elements of the examination form a 'continuum' (section 2), it is unsurprising that candidates are judged principally on the content and quality of their thesis (or artefact plus analytical account). Houston's study demonstrated that the viva assumes much greater significance if or when examiners are concerned about the quality of the thesis: it is therefore important that online vivas provide such candidates with equal opportunities to fully defend their research as would be possible in a face to face situation. The viva is especially important for enabling candidates to display their professional and personal attributes, which have often been employed in completing their research project, and while examiners will not want to extend the length of online vivas, candidates should be given every opportunity to convince them they fully meet the criteria for being awarded the doctorate.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, universities have of necessity implemented special arrangements for online vivas, with the aim of replicating as closely possible the usual face-to-face experience. In the online context, it becomes even more important to put candidates at their ease and to facilitate examiners' judgements, thereby minimising challenges for all involved. In 2020 the Council produced guidelines about online vivas, for candidates, examiners and supervisors<sup>6</sup>, which provide further information.

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<sup>6</sup> UKCGE: Conducting Vivas Online. A Guide for Institutions and Candidates - <http://www.ukcge.ac.uk/media/Download.aspx?MediaId=2252>

Two further points: our personal view is that there should be no diminution of quality in doctoral theses, both to protect the integrity of the candidate's research and to prevent any suggestion that the achievements of those graduating with a doctorate since the inception of the pandemic have somehow produced inferior work. Equally, examiners should limit their expectations to what is reasonable for the candidate to have achieved in the circumstances. This extract from guidance to examiners summarises our preferred approach, while taking account of any Covid-related circumstances:

Examiners shall bear in mind that their judgement of the substantial significance of the work should take into account what may reasonably be expected of a capable and diligent student after three or at most four years of full-time study in the case of a full-time student, or eight years in the case of a part-time student. (University of Oxford, Regulations for the Doctoral Examination)

### Institutional Response: Issues to Consider

In considering how to respond to this complex and evolving situation, institutions have a duty of care to doctoral candidates, staff, examiners, and must also secure the academic standards of their awards in line with the UK's legal and academic frameworks. Each institution will respond in a way that is appropriate to their context with no right or wrong approach. Similar institutions may wish to adopt similar approaches and all institutions will wish to consider this guidance in developing their response.

In supporting institutions, we have framed a number of questions to inform debate, discussion and action. It is recognised that the answers to these questions will vary by discipline and research area in institutions, and that institutions may then decide to adopt a variety of different approaches as appropriate for different disciplines.

### Institutional Considerations

1. What are the key criteria in your doctoral assessment regulations? What is an appropriate body of evidence that has the potential to demonstrate this in term of volume and range of work? Does the work presented (through the thesis and the viva) represent the output of a well-constructed and diligently undertaken research project in the time available?
2. In view of this, is it necessary to clarify these requirements or provide additional institutional level guidance on these criteria related to the impact of Covid19? Do all criteria have the same weight, or are some more important than others?
3. What approach will your institutions take to acknowledge the impact of Covid-19 in doctoral theses and other material presented for doctoral examination? Will the approach be time-limited or open-ended pending review? Will it be optional, or compulsory for all?
4. Will this acknowledgement, or Covid-19 statement, be an integral part of the discussion in the thesis, a separate section in the thesis, or presented in a separate document alongside the



thesis? Will this additional information remain in the final version of the thesis archived in a repository, or will it be removed after the doctoral examination is complete?

5. What will this acknowledgement or statement cover? Will it discuss Covid-19 as a contextual factor impacting on the research which enables the candidate to demonstrate ingenuity or resourcefulness? Will it demonstrate how Covid-19 has shaped the research project in a new direction extending the scope of the work? Will it highlight the impact of the lack of access to resources, the need to seek alternative methodologies in response to factors that have bounded the research project in ways not anticipated?

### Guidance for Supervisory Teams

6. What guidance should be provided to supervisory teams to reflect any agreed changes at institutional level?
7. How are supervisory teams to support candidates in preparing for doctoral examinations both in terms of thesis content, practice-based output were required, and oral examination?
8. How can supervisory teams support candidates in preparing the necessary Covid-19 impact statements if these are required?
9. How can supervisors guide candidates on the discussion of the Covid-19 impact where this is included in the research discussion in the thesis?

### Guidance for Candidates

10. What are the key messages that should be provided to all candidates at this time to confirm consideration of these issues, provide support for candidates, and to acknowledge wellbeing issues?
11. How should any changes be communicated to candidates? At what stage in their doctoral programme should this be done? How can institutions be assured that all candidates receive the same information?
12. What can be done to persuade candidates that a key objective is to ensure clear pathways exist to achieve a successful outcome?

## Guidance for Examiners

13. What information should be provided, if required, to examiners to clarify your institutional expectations of the standards required?
14. What are the respective roles of internal and external examiners in this process? Is there a need to consider wider use of independent chairs for doctoral vivas to ensure a consistent approach?
15. Should you provide guidance on expectations and norms for the range and volume of evidence presented in the thesis? How can your institutional expectations be clearly identified when considering disciplinary norms and expectations of PhD theses held by examiners?
16. How can examiners acknowledge adjustments in the thesis by exploring other factors in the viva to compensate for these?
17. What are the expectations of examiners in commenting on Covid-19 statements? How should the Covid-19 impact be acknowledged in examiners' reports, recommendations for revisions and final recommendations?
18. How can examiners be confident that they have gathered sufficient evidence during the whole assessment process to make a robust decision about the doctoral award?

Institutions need to be explicit on exactly what criteria are required which may be distinct from disciplinary norms and examiners' expectations. All parties should have a clear and shared understanding of what is required and reasonable for the doctoral examination when taking appropriate consideration of Covid-19 as a wider contextual factor impacting on research degree provision.

## Conclusion

The global Covid-19 pandemic has impacted all areas of higher education including the assessment of research degrees. This document summarises the impacts to date and discusses how these impacts might be mitigated. It is our hope that this document will prove to be a valuable tool in facilitating discussion in your institutions when developing an appropriate response.

You are invited to share your response with the UKCGE as it is our intention to host a web-based repository of practice in this area so that innovation and good practice may be shared by all members.

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This guidance note was prepared by Professor Douglas **Halliday** (Chair, UKCGE) & Dr Gill **Houston** (Vice-Chair, UKCGE)

# About the UKCGE

## Who We Are

Established in 1994, the UK Council for Graduate Education is the national representative body for postgraduate education and research. The UKCGE is the third largest representative body of its kind in the world, representing 92% of all postgraduate research provision and 85% of all postgraduate taught provision in the UK.

## What We Do

We champion and enhance postgraduate education and research by enabling collective leadership on the development of postgraduate affairs across UK HEIs, research agencies and funding bodies. We do this by providing learning and professional development events, commissioning research, sharing best-practice developments, and by gathering information and evidence to support policies which promote a strong and sustainable postgraduate sector.

## Why We Do It

The institutional autonomy of UK Higher Education providers creates a vibrant and diverse higher education sector which meets the needs of a wide range of students and researchers. In that context, we enable collective leadership and foster inter-institutional exchange, to ensure that the postgraduate sector *as a whole* can learn and benefit from the actions and innovations of individual institutions.

Understanding the importance of postgraduate education and research for individuals, for the economy and for society more broadly, we use our collective voice to ensure that postgraduate education and research is properly resourced, structured and recognised within institutional and national policies. Among our charitable objectives, we have specific remits to promote the status, education and training of postgraduates and to advocate for equity and inclusiveness in postgraduate education and research.

## Who We Work With

We work with, and represent, everyone involved with postgraduate education and research: Pro-Vice Chancellors and Deputy Vice Chancellors with responsibility for postgraduate education and research; Research Supervisors; Deans and Directors of Graduate Schools, Doctoral Training Partnerships, and Centres for Doctoral Training; Graduate School and Doctoral College Managers; PGT Course Directors; and Academic Developers. We also work with doctoral candidates and Masters students, research centres; regulators; funding bodies and other interest groups. By serving and representing the postgraduate sector across all levels, we are a trusted voice on all aspects of postgraduate affairs.

## How We Do It

The Council is an independent educational charity which relies on voluntary contributions from individuals and institutions in the postgraduate sector. We are governed by elected representatives of the postgraduate sector, who serve for a 3-year term. We raise funds through membership subscriptions, event registration fees, and commercial sponsorship.



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