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## The roles of Graduate Studies Committees and the operation of progress reviews for research students

POLICY DOCUMENT



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# **The roles of Graduate Studies Committees and the operation of progress reviews for research students**

## **1. Executive summary**

1. All academic units, and research centres where appropriate, must have a functioning Graduate Studies Committee;
2. All doctoral students will have, at a minimum, an annual assessment to review their progress and provide feedback. Such reviews should generally be a positive and constructive experience for the student and supervisor(s);
3. In cases where it is judged that progress of research students is unsatisfactory, students will have a subsequent supplementary review with specific guidance on targets to be met in a defined time period. Should such a supplementary review indicate that progress is unsatisfactory, but the student wishes to proceed with their research, a formal adjudication process on the matter will be enacted, the process for which is described herein.

## **2. Background**

While Graduate Studies Committees (GSCs), usually at Department level, and regular reviews of PhD student progress (e.g., early and mid-term reviews) have been recommended best practice in UCC since the publication of *Guidelines for a Code of Practice for PhD Supervision* by the Interfaculty Graduate Studies Board in 2001, the actual extent and nature of implementation of these principles across the University is somewhat inconsistent.

In recognition of the key roles of GSCs in oversight of graduate education at the level of academic units or research centres, and the need to improve completion times and rates of PhD students by monitoring of student progress, the guidelines for roles of GSCs have been updated as outlined in this document, in particular with reference to the monitoring of progress of the research of postgraduate students. The objectives are to support good practice and fair procedures in operation, while ensuring consistency of practice across UCC, and to support both students and supervisors in a way which does not interfere with core supervisory arrangements. In parallel, the *Code of Practice for Supervision of Research Students* has been extensively revised and was approved by Academic Council in April 2010.

## **3. Responsibilities of Graduate Studies Committees**

1. Each School/Department/Discipline, and the larger Research Centres, must have an active Graduate Studies Committee (GSC), the principal function of which is to monitor and support the progress of postgraduate research students. In addition, in some cases the oversight of progress of students on named structured PhD programmes may be the responsibility of a Programme Board as outlined in the programme description.

2. Each research postgraduate student is assigned to one GSC. Students are notified by their Supervisor(s) at the commencement of their studies as to which GSC will monitor their progress.
3. A GSC typically consists of the Head of relevant unit (or his/her nominee) plus at least two other full-time academic staff members, including a designated Chair. In the case of larger/smaller units, alternative arrangements may be made depending on particular circumstances while, in the case of research centres, members may be drawn from the full-time research staff.
4. The GSC's primary role is to monitor and support the progress of students. The committee interfaces with students, supervisors and the university for the purpose of monitoring student progress (including the transfer of students from Masters/PhD track to PhD programmes, if appropriate), assisting supervisors and improving the research student experience. It provides a mechanism for local identification and resolution of any problems that may emerge in relation to a student's progress.
5. The progress reviews of student progress will be managed by the GSC, in terms of identifying the staff responsible for the review and verifying that such reviews have taken place.

Progress reviews are intended to assess whether:

- (i) The student has knowledge and skills appropriate to the stage of his/her research programme;
- (ii) S/he has completed work of a quality to justify continuation, that the research methods are appropriate and practical;
- (iii) A realistic plan is in place for progression and eventual completion of the research within the expected timeframe;

While it is recommended that progress is reviewed on an annual basis, academic units may wish to conduct such reviews more frequently; if so, this must be clearly stated in the Postgraduate Research Studies Handbook of the unit.

In addition, the Chair of a GSC may recommend that a review for an individual student is held outside an annual cycle, where a review is requested by a student or supervisor(s), once adequate notice is given to all involved.

There are two principal models for the operation of progress reviews:

- A. The GSC may undertake reviews of all students in the unit;
- B. The GSC may approve the membership of a Progress Review Panel (PRP) specific to each individual student, which has responsibility solely for assessing the progress of that student. For consistency, a member of the GSC should serve on all PRPs within the unit, along with one or two academic staff from the academic unit, or a cognate unit, or full-time research staff in the case of research centres.

In both cases, the student's supervisor(s) will be invited to participate fully in the review panel, either as a member of the panel or, if not, through thorough consultation during the panel's review process.

The detailed principles of operation of reviews of student progress are elaborated below in Section 4.

6. The GSC will also co-ordinate reviews involved in transfer between Masters (research) and PhD programmes, where appropriate, and may also wish to put in place:
  - A. Interim short paper-based progress updates for all students in the unit;
  - B. Reviews of the progress of students registered for Research Masters programmes.
7. The GSC also provides guidance to supervisors and students regarding graduate research policy and procedures.
8. The GSC is responsible for ensuring that a regularly updated Postgraduate Research Studies Handbook for intending applicants and existing research students is produced and distributed.
9. The GSC may advise a student and/or supervisor(s) where a dispute or grievance arises between them, in accordance with the UCC Postgraduate Research Student Dispute Resolution Policy.
10. The GSC ensures that accurate records of all relevant procedures, activities and meetings, including reviews of student progress, are kept within the unit.
11. The Head of unit may devolve, in writing to the Chair, additional duties to the GSC in the area of optimisation of graduate education and the student experience in the unit. It is recognised that the extent of responsibilities of GSCs beyond the basic core duty of oversight of student progress reviews will differ between units, but it is recommended that GSCs should play a key role in oversight of graduate education in a unit, and be allocated devolved responsibilities accordingly.
12. Such additional activities of GSCs may include, but are not limited to:
  - Promotion of graduate education within the unit (e.g., co-ordination of hard-copy or on-line promotional material, organisation of representation in open days etc.) and provision of advice to potential applicants about potential supervisors etc;
  - Liaison with College Graduate Schools and the Graduate Studies Office on enquiries and information;
  - Review of research student applications and provision of advice on selection and admission procedures;
  - Organisation of local induction programmes for new research students;
  - Organisation of subject-specific training for research students;
  - Dissemination of information about wider available generic and transferable skills training and other coursework which may be relevant to students in the unit;
  - Dissemination of information on funding opportunities (e.g., funding

- opportunities, scholarships);
- Provision of advice to supervisors on allocation of teaching responsibilities to research students;
- Organisation of local events such as seminars and conferences for research students;
- Co-ordination of local resources for research students (e.g., inter-library loans, IT facilities, photocopying, workspace).

#### **4. Reviews of progress of research students**

As outlined above, all doctoral students in UCC will undergo a formal review, at least annually, either by the relevant local Graduate Studies Committee (GSC), or by a Progress Review Panel (PRP) to which the GSC has delegated this function. This may include an initial review, within 3 months of commencement of a student's research, to ensure that an appropriate initial research plan has been put in place, and to review the student's plan for training and professional development (e.g., through attendance at required or optional modules).

It is also recommended that all students applying for transfer between research programmes (e.g., between MSc/MPhil and doctoral degrees) should be subject to reviews by a GSC or PRP, as appropriate. In addition, some units may choose to have a review process for Masters (Research) students. At a minimum, it is recommended that a PRP should be constituted in the case of significant problems with the progress of the research of a Masters (Research) student, in order to identify barriers, suggest strategies for improving progress, or recommend other outcomes as appropriate.

A common approach to progress reviews is strongly desirable to support supervisors and supervisory teams, to ensure that research students have regular milestones throughout their research, and to maintain accessible records of a student's progress. Such systems must take account of disciplinary norms, and must respect and support the supervisor(s)-student relationship and existing tried and tested supervision practices. An enabling framework that is effective and devolves decision-making power to the local GSC is described below, which outlines the key principles and tasks of the GSC with regard to the arrangement and oversight of the progress review system. It also aims to support and strengthen the normal supervisory process by drawing on peer advice within the local academic unit, in addition to encouraging normal student-supervisor(s) contact.

The principles of operation of progress reviews are as follows:

1. The purpose of progress reviews is to support both student and supervisor(s) by giving an opportunity to reflect and report on progress and achievements in the year concerned, and plans for the subsequent year. Progress will be recognised and acknowledged and, where appropriate, constructive and detailed feedback and advice will be provided. In cases where problems with the progress of research are identified, local steps to resolving such problems will be identified during the review and followed up.

2. The GSC will either undertake the reviews, or delegate the conduct of reviews to a PRP, which will include one member of the GSC and at least one additional member of staff, who is not a supervisor of the student under review. The same PRP will normally undertake all reviews for a particular student. If a student's supervisor(s) is not on the GSC/PRP, the GSC/PRP must ensure that they consult with the supervisor(s) to ensure that they have all relevant information in hand, particularly if a negative conclusion on student progress is reached.
3. The GSC is responsible for ensuring that reports from each student's reviews are recorded and stored appropriately.
4. While details of the exact operation of review systems may be defined by the relevant GSC, basic common principles are that such reviews:
  - Reflect the requirements of the specific discipline;
  - Reflect the different stages of a PhD depending on stage of the student's progress, i.e., differentiated review requirements for Year 1, 2 and 3 etc.;
  - Support the advancement of the student's research;
  - Encourage student self-assessment in advance of the review;
  - Ensure that students are notified of the nature of the review and the composition of the PRP/GSC in advance;
  - Are evidence-based, such that the GSC/PRP has sufficient information to advise the student on their progress. At a minimum, a review should take the form of a written report by the student to the PRP/GSC and, ideally, an interview, or oral presentation by the candidate to allow progress to be discussed and any issues clarified. Additional evidence could include a student written self-assessment, student written work, a report by the supervisor(s), or a joint student-supervisor(s) progress report. Overall, the review process and its requirements should not be too onerous for the student, supervisor(s) or GSC/PRP, and should not represent a significant interruption to the progress of a student's research. A GSC/PRP should apply the same review requirements to all students under their responsibility.
  - Assess progress under, *inter alia*, the headings described under point 6 of section 3 above;
  - Provide appropriate guidance arising from the findings in writing to the supervisor(s) and the student.

Following their review, the GSC/PRP could reach a number of recommendations, such as concluding that the student's progress is:

- Satisfactory: recommend the student continue with their research;
- Not satisfactory: request another review meeting within a specified number of months (normally within a minimum of 3 months and a maximum of 6 months, specified by the GSC/PRP) with a full report addressing concerns. In such cases, detailed and clear feedback on the type of achievements which are expected in this period must be provided in writing to the student (e.g., a target of a chapter, piece of work, or set of experiments which should be completed in the time concerned).

Following a second unsatisfactory review of progress, a GSC/PRP may advise a student that it is in their best interests to choose to change their registration or deregister from their research degree programme. However, if a student wishes to continue in their programme despite this advice, this will result in the initiation of an adjudication process to determine the student's likelihood of successful progression.

A detailed progress review will not normally be held when a student is close to submission of their thesis.

Students should be made fully aware that positive results in progress reviews should not lead them to assume that their thesis examination is in any way pre-determined, as the examination process will be conducted in a manner that is entirely independent of preceding reviews and commences on submission of the thesis.

## **5. Adjudication process for progression of PhD students**

The process of progress reviews is clearly intended to be a constructive and positive experience for the student and supervisor(s) and should recognise and acknowledge good progress made. However, such reviews may occasionally result in negative conclusions by the GSC/PRP, i.e., there are major concerns about the lack of progress being made by a particular student in their research.

In all cases where a PhD student is deemed at a review to have made unsatisfactory progress, they will be allowed a supplementary review, usually a minimum of 3 months and a maximum of 6 months later, for which they will have been recommended specific targets or objectives in their research which should have been achieved. At this stage, if the supervisor(s) are not on the GSC or PRP which reviewed the student progress, that body should discuss the progress issues with the supervisor(s) to ensure that all relevant facts are known.

If the judgement of such a supplementary review is unsatisfactory and the student wishes to continue on his/her programme of research despite the advice of the PRP/GSC, the case will be referred to an adjudication process.

1. An Adjudication Panel comprising the Head of School/Department/Discipline in which the student is registered (or nominee in cases where the Head has been directly involved in the review process), the Head of a cognate academic unit (who will chair the panel), and an External Adjudicator from outside UCC. The Head of School/Department/Discipline will inform the Graduate Studies Office on initiation of an Adjudication process, and this office will provide advice on procedures. The External Adjudicator shall have expertise in the research area concerned, should be in a position to judge the merits of the work the student has completed to date on their thesis, and should be familiar with supervision of research students; they must also be free of conflicts of interest with the student, subject matter or supervisor(s). The External Adjudicator and Head of cognate academic unit will be nominated by the Head of School/Department/Discipline for approval by Head of College.

2. The panel shall be provided with the reports of the GSC/PRP in the matter plus any evidence provided by the student or supervisor(s) to the GSC/PRP on their progress (e.g., presentation, written report). The panel may also seek additional information from the student and/or supervisor(s), if the panel deem this necessary.
3. The reports of the GSC/PRP should also be made available to the student to allow the student the right to respond or clarify any matters.
4. Following consideration of these matters, when the panel is satisfied that all relevant facts are known, the adjudication panel shall make one of the following recommendations on a suitable course of action in writing to the ACGSC as follows:
  - a. Student continues PhD study and guidance is provided to supervisor(s) and student, where appropriate, on any measures required to enable the student to progress (including a possible recommendation of change of supervisor); or
  - b. Student registration is changed to a Masters programme and guidance is provided to supervisor(s) and student, where appropriate, on any measures required to enable the student to progress;
  - c. Student is deregistered, on the basis of lack of sufficient progress.
5. The outcome of the adjudication process will be made known to the student in writing by the Registrar and Senior Vice-President for Academic Affairs (or nominee) within 30 days of the meeting of the ACGSC which considers the matter.
6. Within 28 days of receipt of the above notification, a student may appeal the outcome of an adjudication process by writing to the Academic Secretary. Academic Board will then appoint a group to consider the appeal, which shall be conducted without prejudice to possible future examination of the student's thesis and independently of any other grievance procedure which may be concurrently in process.

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**Schematic flowchart of annual review and adjudication process for a PhD student**

