

## Documenting impact of Covid-19 on PGR study at assessment stages and in the final examination

### Early stages of DPhil (up to Transfer)

Students may have absorbed disruption experienced due to the coronavirus pandemic by adjusting planned research (e.g. turning to data analysis, changing the order in which work is planned), others may have changed aspects of their programme of work – for example changing emphasis or focus – or focused on secondary research such as literature reviews while unable to access laboratory space. Many students will have experienced some disruption in the progress of their research, with this being substantial in a large number of cases.

At the front of their Transfer report affected students should therefore provide:

- (i) A brief summary (approximately 300 words) of the work they were planning to complete before university buildings were closed to non-Covid-19 research.
- (ii) A further statement (no more than 300 words) of the work they have been/were able to conduct while their laboratory space has been closed to them, if different from (i).
- (iii) If appropriate – for example if it demonstrates the feasibility and/or likely success of their research project – students may wish to include detailed plans/protocols for specific studies they were intending to conduct. These could then form a basis for discussion at the Transfer assessment meeting and give assessors additional information as to the volume and standard of the work completed and planned on which to make a decision regarding the outcome of the Transfer process.
- (iv) If appropriate, then brief excerpts or details from a student's Covid-19 log may be provided as well but this information may have been captured already in the two brief statements (i) and (ii), above. Examples where this might be appropriate include where the student has experienced changed personal circumstances (such as ill health or additional caring responsibilities), has returned to clinical service, or has worked in a voluntary capacity in testing or for a project other than the focus of their own DPhil research. Inclusion of material detailing personal circumstances is at the discretion of the student. Information that is provided will be treated by transfer assessors in confidence and will in no case be used to the student's detriment.
- (v) Finally, a brief summary (no more than 300 words) of the work planned when laboratory access is regained, in order of priority and taking account of possibly limited access times so that work needs to be more systematically planned around what needs to be conducted in person in a laboratory or facility and what such as data analysis can be conducted from home. This summary should seek to look 6 months ahead in the planning given.

The decision on whether to attempt Transfer rests ultimately with a student in consultation with their supervisors and DGS. Whether a student is transferring on their original timetable (e.g. for those starting in Michaelmas Term 2019 by the end of Michaelmas Term 2020) or after a deferral then the information outlined above should be provided as appropriate. On the GSO2.MPLS form the student should note in their section the reasons they are applying to Transfer, which may reference information also provided at (i) and (ii) above for the Transfer report. The supervisor should indicate in their section the reasons for them supporting the Transfer application, in context. The student's supervisor should discuss with them individually how they are approaching the Transfer process, the different outcomes available and what they will mean for the student. If the

situation is unusually complex students and supervisors should meet with the DGS to discuss the Transfer process.

Transfer assessors should conduct their assessment according to the standard guidelines (<https://www.mpls.ox.ac.uk/study/additionalinformation/examinations-for-higher-degrees>) and in particular the six core points:

1. The student has proposed a viable DPhil project that can be completed within the proposed timeframe and funded period or within 12 terms.
2. The work undertaken to date provides an appropriate background and platform for progress.
3. The student has developed a critical understanding of the relevant literature.
4. The student understands, can justify and defend their research project, its objectives and rationale.
5. The student has a clear plan for the future direction of the project.
6. The student has begun to take intellectual ownership of the project.

But in this regard it is important to note that some of the evidence provided by the student at the front of their Transfer report, in the GSO2.MPLS form, and as listed above will be relevant to assessment of these core points. For example, clarity in their hypotheses and understanding of the background of the project may satisfy point (1); a detailed protocol for experiments planned on the basis of a relatively small amount of data already collected by the student may indicate that points (2), (4) and/or (6) are satisfied; clarity about how work will be conducted as laboratory access becomes available may help to demonstrate point (5).

#### Second and third years (full-time equivalent) of DPhil (up to Confirmation)

As for pre-Transfer students it may have been possible to absorb disruption by adjusting planned research (e.g. turning to data analysis, changing the order in which work is planned), or changing aspects of the programme of work – for example by a changed in emphasis or focus – while unable to access laboratory space. The disruption experienced may have been more significant than it would have been at an earlier stage in the project but this will vary quite considerably across the student body. In some disciplines or with some techniques it may have been possible to work in data analysis and interpretation without much disruption; for others their research work will have come to a full stop or been significantly affected by ill health. Confirmation will, as usual, provide an important opportunity to assess progress and map out the timeframe to DPhil completion.

Some students may have significantly altered their plans (e.g. onto Covid-19 related projects) and continued working in a lab. That work may be written up as one or more chapters in their eventual DPhil thesis if it can be placed there appropriately, and this will be relevant to the Confirmation process both in terms of the thesis outline given with their GSO14.MPLS form and also at the Confirmation assessment meeting.

It is important to emphasise that a student's work may have been significantly disrupted and yet they do have sufficient data and analysis to report to satisfy their assessors that they are on course to submit within 3 terms (if full-time, 6 terms for part-time). Such students are strongly advised to attempt Confirmation by their original deadline of 9 terms from the start of their DPhil studies.

It is of course recognised that at later stages of a DPhil the possible routes to successful completion would usually become more limited as the research strategy is more fixed. This is likely to lead to a

greater number of students wishing to make good on disrupted research rather than alter their plans. Against this will be balanced the recognition that DPhil theses are variable in contents and reach and that aspects of reagent or tool development, for example, represent valid focuses for thesis chapters in their own right.

Nevertheless, the standards for Confirmation remain unchanged and are as follows:

1. The student's DPhil project is following a trajectory that will lead to completion and submission within the remaining timeframe (and not exceeding 12 terms).
2. The work undertaken to date provides a sufficient background and a platform for completion/submission.
3. The student's work/research has the potential to make a 'significant and substantial contribution' to their field of study
4. The student has developed critical knowledge and understanding of the relevant literature.
5. The student understands, can justify and defend their research project, its objectives and rationale.
6. The student has a clear plan for the future direction of the project.
7. The student has taken intellectual ownership of the project.

See: <https://www.mpls.ox.ac.uk/study/additionalinformation/examinations-for-higher-degrees>.

It is also emphasised that the primary focus of assessment should be on the quality of the work completed rather than the amount – though obviously there needs to be sufficient to make the judgements at (1), (2) and (3) immediately above.

Within the Progress report section of their GSO14.MPLS form students should provide:

- i. A brief summary (approximately 300 words) of the work they were planning to complete before university buildings were closed to non-Covid-19 research.
- ii. A further statement (no more than 300 words) of the work they have been/were able to conduct while their laboratory space has been closed to them, if different from (i).
- iii. If appropriate – for example if it demonstrates the feasibility and/or likely success of their research project – students may wish to include detailed plans/protocols for specific studies they were intending to conduct. These could then form a basis for discussion at the Confirmation assessment meeting and give assessors additional information as to the volume and standard of the work completed and planned on which to make a decision regarding the outcome of the Confirmation process.
- iv. If appropriate, then brief excerpts or details from a student's Covid-19 log may be provided as well but this information may have been captured already in the two brief statements (i) and (ii), above. Examples where this might be appropriate include where the student has experienced changed personal circumstances (e.g. ill health or additional caring responsibilities) or has worked for a Covid-19 project other than the focus of their own DPhil research. This information may also have a bearing on their plans for thesis completion, e.g. indicate continued disruption of some form or other to their work. Inclusion of material detailing personal circumstances is at the discretion of the student. Information that is provided will be treated by confirmation assessors in confidence and will in no case be used to the student's detriment.
- v. Finally, a brief summary (no more than 300 words) of the work planned towards completion of their DPhil thesis when laboratory access is regained, in order of priority and taking account of possibly limited access times so that work needs to be more systematically

planned around what needs to be conducted in person in a laboratory or facility and what such as data analysis can be conducted from home. This information may allow the Confirmation assessors to provide advice on which components of work planned are essential to successful thesis defence and which are not.

In setting out their thesis contents and timeline to completion students should indicate clearly where they are including any Covid-19-related research which they have been conducting in place of what was previously planned. They should include a brief statement of how this Covid-19 work relates to their overall thesis. Examples could be that technology they developed, or techniques which they have mastered, or a general set of research questions on which they are engaged, have relevance to understanding, controlling or treating Covid-19 infection and disease. If in doubt on this point students should consult their supervisor and their DGS.

At the Confirmation meeting assessors should decide whether, in their judgement and taking contextual data into account, the student has met the academic standards set out at (1) to (7) immediately above. But in doing this they should allow for the following:

- a. Ways in which the work students have been able to undertake during lab closure have helped them advance their study in a different form to what previously was planned.
- b. That their detailed plans demonstrate work which may add further to their study but which are not essential at this time to conclude that a successful DPhil thesis will be submitted on the timeframe envisaged.
- c. That their intended thesis contents should be achievable given ongoing impacts of Covid-19 on a student's capacity to work, e.g. restrictions to laboratory access, caring responsibilities.
- d. Which work planned when laboratory access is regained is necessary to a successful thesis, and whether the order of priority given by the student seems correct.
- e. That the thesis may contain material on both the original questions being addressed by the student and on Covid-19 research. Allowing for this might be based on the judgement that the Covid-19 work has enabled the student to apply approaches they previously developed for another purpose, or demonstrate further expertise and understanding alongside that shown using similar approaches but for another research focus.

#### Post-Confirmation (up to and including Submission of Thesis)

The timing of the closure of University facilities to non-Covid-19 research meant that most such students will have been within a few months of completing their DPhil thesis research, and some will have already stopped practical work or have been in a position to do so and write up and defend a successful DPhil thesis. Students in this last category may have been able to write up during the shutdown period, but all post-Confirmation students should be in a position to do a significant amount of thesis writing, subject to personal circumstances.

As with Transfer reports (see above), students submitting their DPhil thesis should include the following statements at the front:<sup>1</sup>

- (i) A brief summary (no more than 300 words) of the work they were planning to complete before university buildings were closed to non-Covid-19 research.

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- (ii) If appropriate – for example if it helps demonstrate the significance of the findings they report in their thesis – students may wish to include detailed plans/protocols for specific studies they were intending to conduct, and if appropriate include a priority order which may also be relevant to the Examination. This information could then form a basis for discussion at the DPhil viva Examination and give Examiners additional means to assess the volume and standard of the work completed.
- (iii) If appropriate, then brief excerpts or details from a student’s Covid-19 log may be provided as well on a separate flysheet to be included with the dispatch of the thesis to the examiners but this information may have been captured already at (i), above. Examples where this might be appropriate include where the student has experienced changed personal circumstances (e.g. ill health or additional caring responsibilities) or for a Covid-19 project other than the focus of their own DPhil research. These data could contextualise the judgement made by Examiners as to the most appropriate outcome. In no circumstances should excerpts from the student’s log be included within the body of the thesis.
- (iv) If a student has included Covid-19-related research, then they should include a brief statement of how it relates to their overall thesis. Examples could be that technology they developed, or techniques which they have mastered, or a general set of research questions on which they are engaged, have relevance to understanding, controlling or treating Covid-19 infection and disease. If in doubt on this point students should consult their supervisor and their DGS.

Examiners should assess the thesis and the student at the viva Examination using the criteria on academic quality and standards set out in General Regulations for DPhils at Clause 7.6:

“In making this recommendation (for award of a DPhil), the examiners must include in their report statements that:

- the student possesses a good general knowledge of the particular field of learning within which the subject of the thesis falls;
- the student has made a significant and substantial contribution in the particular field of learning within which the subject of the thesis falls;
- the thesis is presented in a lucid and scholarly manner;
- in their opinion the thesis merits the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy;
- the student has presented a satisfactory abstract of the thesis.”

In doing this Examiners will take account of the fact that DPhil theses are variable in contents and reach and that aspects of reagent or tool development, for example, represent valid focuses for thesis chapters in their own right. They will also take into account, and in the context of the coronavirus pandemic, the General Regulations provision that:

“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.”

The Examiners will use their academic judgement on these points, and should at base ask themselves whether the core academic requirements for a DPhil have been met.

## Conclusion

It is intended that this guidance and mode of documenting the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on DPhil student progress at points of assessment and examination should apply to all students currently on course, irrespective of any extensions (funded or otherwise) which may be granted.