POSTGRADUATE RESEARCH HANDBOOK

Chapter 9 – Upgrade from MPhil, MA by Research or MSc by Research to Doctoral Study

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Important Notice to all Students

All students in receipt of funding, whether that is through the University of Exeter, a Research Council, a Masters or Doctoral Loan or any other financial sponsorship, must check whether upgrade from MPhil, MA By Research or MSc by Research to Doctoral Study is allowed under the terms and conditions of their funding. It is the student's responsibility to check these conditions ahead of requesting to change status.

1. The Regulations for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

1.1   The Regulations provide that:

"Candidates registered for a degree of Master of Philosophy, Master of Arts by Research or Master of Science by Research may be allowed to transfer their registration to the degree of Doctor of Philosophy and to have all or part of the period of study already completed under the original registration counted towards the period under the new registration." (Regulations, Section 2.2)

2. Application to Upgrade

2.1   A student registered for the degree of Master of Philosophy (MPhil), Master of Arts by Research or Master of Science by Research (hereafter referred to as "Masters by Research") who wishes to upgrade to an appropriate doctoral programme shall submit a formal application, provided that they have met the entry requirements for the doctoral programme.

2.2   It is important to note Masters By Research students wishing to upgrade, who are receipt of a UK student loan **must** check and understand the terms and conditions of their loan provision with their PGR Support Team, and understand the consequences of changes to their programme on their loan provision before decisions about upgrade are confirmed. Students are responsible for ensuring that they understand the implications of upgrading from MByRes to Doctoral Study on any loans, sponsorship or other funding that they receive.

2.3   Masters By Research students wishing to upgrade who have a Tier 4/Student visa must discuss their plans with the International Student Support Office, as upgrading may have serious implications for their visa.

3. Purpose of Upgrade

The purpose of the upgrade process is to:

3.1   Confirm that the student is making satisfactory progress.

3.2   Confirm that there is evidence that the student is able to produce work of doctoral quality.

3.3   Act as a structural milestone within the student's research journey.

3.4   Provide the student with formal feedback on their work, and a developmental opportunity in the form of a viva.

3.5   Provide an opportunity for a detailed review of the research project and plan to take place from experts independent of the supervisory team.

4. Timing of Upgrade

4.1   Entrants registering before the 2019-20 academic year:

4.1.1 Timeframes for transfer of registration should be specified in Faculty and Department Handbooks and should normally be completed not later than after 18 months of full-time registration, or 36 months of part-time registration. Applications to transfer registration should take place within a timeframe that allows a decision about changes to registration status to be made within this timeframe.

4.2   Entrants registering from the 2019-20 academic year:

4.2.1 Transfer of registration should normally be completed not later than after 12 months of full-time registration, or the pro-rata equivalent for part-time registration, and as specified within Faculty and Department Handbooks. Applications to transfer registration should take place early enough to allow a decision about changes to registration status to be made within this timeframe. This means that Departments should specify internal deadlines for initial submission of documentation for consideration by the Department Upgrade Committee.

4.2.2 Students initially registered on a Masters by Research programme should discuss their intention to upgrade with their supervisor at the earliest opportunity.

a. The student should submit an MByRes Intention to Upgrade form (see TQA PGR Handbook, Chapter 9: Upgrade from MPhil, MA by Research or MSc by Research to Doctoral Study: Annex 3) to their PGR Support Team no less than 4 weeks before the Faculty upgrade deadline (or pro-rata equivalent for part time students).

b. The decision about whether a student shall be permitted to apply to upgrade will be made by the Faculty PGR, or delegated authority. The person considering the intention to apply to upgrade must not be one of the upgrade examiners.

   c.   The deadline to upload documents for upgrade will match the Faculty norm. Further details about the intention to upgrade are confirmed in the Faculty and Departmental Handbooks.

4.3   All students:

4.3.1 In exceptional circumstances beyond the student's control applications for deferral to the deadline for transfer of registration may be made. These will be considered by the Faculty Pro-Vice-Chancellor and Executive Dean. Further details on the process to be followed in consideration of deferral of the deadline for the transfer of registration from MPhil or Masters By Research to Doctoral Study, which may involve applying for deferral of the deadline for initial submission of documentation to the Department Upgrade Committee, is appropriate as set out in the TQA PGR Handbook, Chapter 9: Upgrade from MPhil, MA by Research or MSc by Research to Doctoral Study, Annex 1a: Applications for upgrade deferral.

4.3.2 The form to request a deferral to the upgrade is available in the TQA PGR Handbook, Chapter 9: Upgrade from MPhil, MA by Research or MSc by Research to Doctoral Study, Annex 1b: PGR upgrade deferral request form.

5. Submission Requirements

5.1   Supervisory Team: The candidate's supervisors appointed for the initial registration on the MPhil or Masters by Research shall have the opportunity to submit a report commenting on the application and statement.

5.2   Student:

   5.2.1 **Students upgrading from MPhil**: The student shall apply to upgrade via MyPGR and shall upload documents as required by their Department (see 5.3 below).

   5.2.2 **Students upgrading from Masters by Research**: The student shall submit their documents via email to their PGR Support Team by the deadline confirmed to them when they return their MByRes Intention to Upgrade form (see TQA PGR

Handbook, Chapter 9: Upgrade from MPhil, MA by Research or MSc by Research to Doctoral Study: Annex 3). Students wishing to upgrade from Masters by Research programmes must demonstrate that they have met the entry requirements for the doctoral programme. Exceptions to the entry requirements for upgrade to the doctorate may only be considered as an exception by the Faculty Director of PGR.

5.2.3 **All students**: The required documentation will vary by Department, in order to account for disciplinary variations. Approval of upgrade submission requirements in each Faculty sits with the Faculty Pro-Vice-Chancellor and Executive Dean. Departments or Faculties may also determine whether any additional mechanisms for considering upgrade applications are necessary; but if any mechanisms are in place they must be operated without exception for all applications within the Department or Faculty.

5.3 In all cases the documentation required must be sufficient to allow the Department Upgrade Committee to form a judgement and provide feedback on the candidate's progress, and determine whether or not to make a recommendation to support the candidate's request to upgrade.

5.4 Faculty and Department Handbooks should provide clear guidance on the documentation required. Indicatively, this might include:

5.4.1 A statement of aims and objectives.

5.4.2 A Generative AI (GenAI) use statement (see 6 below).

5.4.3 A statement of how the candidate expects the final thesis to demonstrate how the thesis meets the programme requirements for an award at doctoral level, with reference to the qualification descriptor for level 8 in the TQA Credit and Qualifications Framework, Chapter 7: Academic Level.

5.4.4 A contents outline for the thesis.

5.4.5 Submission of one or more pieces of written work (as defined by the Department) in good presentational order.

5.4.6 Confirmation that the student has discussed the ethical implications of their research with their supervisor, and where applicable, started to make preparations for ethical approval for their data collection, and/or started the application process for ethical approval.

5.4.7 A draft timetable for submission of the thesis within the candidate's planned submission period.

5.4.8 Confirmation of completion of all PGR Mandatory Training, as specified by the Training Needs Analysis.

5.5   The candidate may also be expected to give a presentation on their work.

5.6   All students are required to attend an upgrade (mini) viva.

6. Generative AI (GenAI) Statement

6.1   All students **must** include one of the following statements in the title page of their upgrade portfolio submission. The relevant statement (6.1.1 OR 6.1.2) can be copied and pasted.

6.1.1 I acknowledge the use of [insert the name of GenAI tool(s) used and link] to*:
  a.   generate materials for background research and independent study*
  b.   generate materials that I have adapted to include within my upgrade portfolio*
  c.   refine writing/improve grammar within my upgrade portfolio*
  d.   I confirm that no content from generative AI has been presented as my own work. Any use of generative AI has been referenced throughout the upgrade portfolio.
       *Delete any statements that do not apply

6.1.2 I have not used any generative AI tools in preparing the upgrade portfolio.

Note: The inclusion of statement 6.1.2, or the absence of any generative AI statement will be considered a declaration that you have not used generative AI in preparing your work.

6.2   Students will not be penalised for using GenAI tools in their submitted work, provided the use falls within the latest referencing guidance at [Using generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools in academic work - Referencing](). However, failing to declare the use of GenAI may be considered under the University's research misconduct procedures, available at the TQA PGR Handbook, Chapter 13: Research Misconduct: Procedure for Graduate Research Students suspected of Research Misconduct.

6.3   Students are expected to keep a record of how they have used GenAI when preparing their upgrade portfolio, including:

      6.3.1   the prompts used;

      6.3.2   the outputs obtained;

      6.3.3   how the output was adapted for use in the work etc.

This information does not need to be included in the upgrade portfolio, but students may later be asked to submit it as evidence if they are asked to discuss how they have used GenAI.

7. Department Upgrade Committees

7.1   At the end of the upgrade viva, the Upgrade Committee may, if they choose, inform the candidate of their preliminary recommendations; however, in doing so it must make clear that this will be a recommendation only, subject to confirmation at Faculty level.

7.2   Upgrade requests should be considered by a Department Upgrade Committee. The Faculty Pro-Vice-Chancellor and Executive Dean must give approval to the arrangements with regard to constituting Upgrade Committees within their Faculty. These arrangements should ensure that:

7.2.1 One member of the Department Upgrade Committee is nominated to act as Chair.

7.2.2 The Department Upgrade Committee comprises at least two members of academic staff, none of whom should be (or have been) a supervisor, PGR Pastoral Tutor or mentor of the student.

7.3   The Committee shall viva the student; the viva may take place by video-link provided it complies with the procedure set out in the TQA PGR Handbook, Chapter 9: Upgrade from MPhil, MA by Research or MSc by Research to Doctoral Study: Annex 2: Upgrade Vivas by Video-link.

7.4   The student's lead supervisor should attend the Committee's meeting as an observer. To allow the student to make any comments they wish to the Committee without their supervisor being present, the student shall always be invited to talk with the Committee after the supervisor is asked to leave.

7.5   The Committee shall confirm that, bearing in mind the requirements in respect of periods of study (see the TQA PGR Handbook, Chapter 5: Periods of registration and changes to registration status for Postgraduate Research students (Section 2: entry prior to the 2019/20 academic year and Section 3: entry from the 2019/20 academic year) the projected programme of research can be completed within the period of study stipulated.

8. Upgrade Outcomes (applicable for students entering from 2019/20)

8.1   At the first attempt at upgrade, the following outcomes are available:

8.1.1 Pass;

8.1.2 Require completion of minor amendments[1] within 2 months (or the pro-rata equivalent for part-time registration);

8.1.3 Refer for a second attempt within 3 months (or the pro-rata equivalent for part-time registration) and normally recommend initiation or progression of a case under the TQA LTS Handbook, Chapter 15: Unsatisfactory Student Progress, Engagement and Attendance: Code of Good Practice.

8.2   Following a second attempt at upgrade as a consequence of outcomes 8.1.2 above or 8.1.3 above at the first attempt, the following outcomes are available to the Department Upgrade Committee:

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[1] The definition of minor amendments is as set out in the TQA PGR Handbook, Chapter 12: Handbook for Examination of Postgraduate Research programmes (Section 8.3.1)

8.2.1   For students **initially registered on an MPhil**:

a. Pass;

b. Remain registered as an MPhil student, where a student has provided satisfactory evidence of their ability to submit work of MPhil quality, within the appropriate time-frame for an MPhil;

c. Remain registered as an MPhil student and normally recommend initiation or progression of a case under the TQA LTS Handbook, Chapter 15: Unsatisfactory Student Progress, Engagement and Attendance: Code of Good Practice.

8.2.2   For students **initially registered on a Masters by Research**:

a. Pass;

b. Remain registered as a Masters by Research student, where a student has provided satisfactory evidence of their ability to submit work of Masters by Research quality, within the appropriate time-frame for an Masters by Research;

c. Remain registered as an Masters by Research student and normally recommend initiation or progression of a case under the TQA LTS Handbook, Chapter 15: Unsatisfactory Student Progress, Engagement and Attendance: Code of Good Practice.

8.3   Upon review of a second submission by a student, if the Department Upgrade Committee are satisfied that a recommendation of 'pass' can be made to the Faculty Pro-Vice Chancellor and Executive Dean without the necessity for a second viva they may make this recommendation to the Faculty Pro-Vice Chancellor and Executive Dean without delay.

8.4   When a student has not met the criteria for upgrade, the Department Upgrade Committees may determine whether or not it is appropriate to recommend initiation or progression of a case under the TQA LTS Handbook, Chapter 15: Unsatisfactory Student Progress, Engagement and Attendance: Code of Good Practice. This should normally be used where there is evidence that:

8.4.1   Performance at upgrade is indicative of wider concerns with performance;

8.4.2   Performance at upgrade indicates a failure to engage responsibly with their studies.

8.5   Normally, upgrade will not be the first point at which progression concerns might be noticed, as such, it is important that referrals to the TQA LTS Handbook, Chapter 15: Unsatisfactory Student Progress, Engagement and Attendance: Code of Good Practice are not delayed as a matter to be dealt with through the upgrade process. This means that it is more likely that the Department Upgrade Committee will normally recommend progression rather than initiation of a case under the TQA LTS Handbook, Chapter 15: Unsatisfactory Student Progress, Engagement and Attendance: Code of Good Practice. Warnings issued prior to upgrade can usefully use completion of upgrade requirements and performance in the upgrade as actions that a student needs to successfully undertake to demonstrate satisfactory performance. Staff responsible for monitoring action under the TQA LTS Handbook, Chapter 15: Unsatisfactory Student Progress, Engagement and Attendance: Code of Good Practice can ask Department Upgrade Committees to report accordingly in their feedback.

9. Health and Wellbeing and Upgrade

9.1   If the Department Upgrade Committee has concerns that a student's health, wellbeing and/or behaviour is significantly impacting their ability to successfully complete the upgrade process no decision (for 19/20 entrants in line with the above outcomes in Section 8) should be taken until it is determined whether it is appropriate to take alternative action under the 'Health Wellbeing and Support for Study Procedures'.

10. Feedback to Students

10.1   As this is a developmental process the Department Upgrade Committee will provide written feedback to the student on their submission and their performance in the viva.

11. Sponsorship Progress Reports

11.1   Where the University is required to provide progress reports to a student's sponsor, the report of the Department Upgrade Committee should be used as a source of information for that purpose.

12. Final Authority

12.1   The Faculty Pro-Vice-Chancellor and Executive Dean retains final authority with regard to the decision to approve or reject upgrades of registration.

13. Transfer of Registration from PhD/MD/MS/EngD to MPhil/MbyRes (Downgrade)

International Students who are Tier 4 visa holders: transferring from a Doctoral programme to a Masters level programme can have serious consequences for your immigration status as the University may be required to report this change to the Home Office. It is important that you receive advice on the implications of your decision, which you can access by contacting [International Student Support.](#)

All students in receipt of funding, whether that is through the University of Exeter, a Research Council, a Student Loan or any other financial sponsorship, must check whether transfer of registration from doctorate level to masters level is allowed under the terms and conditions of their funding. It is the student's responsibility to check these conditions ahead of requesting to change status.

13.1   Faculties (or delegated Schools) should be aware that the transfer of a student to a doctoral research programme, or the acceptance of a candidate onto a doctoral research programme, is a contractual undertaking by the Faculty to provide a student with a programme of supervision in preparation for examination at doctoral level. It is not possible, therefore, for a student's registration to be 'downgraded' from a doctoral research programme to MPhil/MbyRes without the agreement of the student. In cases where a Faculty, after due consideration, has reason to believe that a student is not able to produce work at doctoral level, this must be clearly stated to the student with the recommendation that they transfer their registration to an MPhil or MbyRes Programme.

13.2   Following agreement from a student, a Faculty Pro-Vice-Chancellor and Executive Dean or nominee[2] may approve the downgrading of registration.

13.3   Confirmation of the change in programme should take place through the completion of a change in programme form, available on request from the PGR Support Team.

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[2] It is at the discretion of the Faculty Pro-Vice-Chancellor and Executive Dean to decide whether or not a nominee may be appointed and Faculties (or delegated Schools) must specify who this nominee is in Faculty PGR handbooks. The following roles may be specified as nominees: Department Director of PGR, relevant PGR Manager, the Head of PGR Support.