

EXCEPTIONAL CIRCUMSTANCES HANDBOOK

Chapter 4 - Managing PGR Provision in the Event of Exceptional Circumstances

Contents

1	PGR Specific Definitions.....	1
2.	Recovery of PGR training in the event of Exceptional Circumstances	2
3.	Managing PGR Studies.....	5
4.	Deferrals to Upgrades and the submission of amendments post-viva	7
5.	Individual Student Mitigation in Exceptional Circumstances/Years	8
6.	Exceptional Circumstances Thesis/Dissertation Impact statement	9
7.	Graduation	12

Associated documents:

[TQA Exceptional Years Handbook, Chapter 1 - Managing Education and Postgraduate Research Provision in the Event of Exceptional Circumstances](#)

1 PGR Specific Definitions

- 1.1 Exceptional Circumstances in the context of this policy will not apply to circumstances where an individual student faces challenging personal circumstances during their period of study, for which there are other mechanisms for support. Students should contact [PGR Support team](#) to discuss individual circumstances. Where PGRs are affected by circumstances that do not fall within the scope of this policy, there are lots of options to help them manage their study in such circumstances (see the [TQA PGR Handbook, Chapter 5 - Periods of registration and changes to registration status for Postgraduate Research](#)).
- 1.2 In the event of unforeseen building closure or in the event that a student is unable to complete field work, lab work or data collection as a direct result of exceptional circumstances as defined in this policy (see [TQA Exceptional Years Handbook, Chapter 1](#) for definitions), and where it is unlikely that the opportunity can be replicated in totality, provision or project reconfiguration should be considered.

- 1.3 All PGR students and supervisors are expected to plan how to adapt their projects and mitigate risk in the event of disruption in project design from the beginning of their research.
- 1.4 Where students are enrolled on the taught phase of a professional doctorate programme or integrated PhD during an exceptional year or exceptional circumstances as defined by this policy, the procedures for exceptional years for taught students will apply, see the [TQA Manual Exceptional Years Handbook, Chapters 2 and 3](#).
- 1.5 Where students are enrolled on the research phase of a professional doctorate programme or integrated PhD during an exceptional year or exceptional circumstances the procedures for PGR students will apply see the [TQA Manual Exceptional Years Handbook, Chapters 2 and 3](#).

2. Recovery of PGR training in the event of Exceptional Circumstances

2.1. Introduction

- 2.1.1. In Exceptional Circumstances, researcher training, development and other learning opportunities may not be provided or may not be provided in the way initially planned. This guidance is intended to suggest alternative ways for providing PGR training, development and other learning opportunities for PGRs that have been disrupted by Exceptional Circumstances.

2.2. Guiding Principles

- 2.2.1. If PGR training, development and other learning opportunities have not been provided as originally intended due to significant but time-limited Exceptional Circumstances, the recovery of lost learning should be prioritised on return to normal (when the Exceptional Circumstances/Exceptional Year has passed). For example, where a PGR training session which has been cancelled, suitable alternative delivery methods should be employed (see [section 2.3. below](#)), but if it is not possible to, normal provision should restart when possible.
- 2.2.2. If PGR training, development and learning opportunities have not been provided as intended due to ongoing Exceptional Circumstances an initial assessment will need to be undertaken by the Doctoral College, Faculty or training provider as to whether the lost

training opportunities and any future opportunities associated with the student's research can be provided by alternative means. For example, research training sessions could be delivered virtually, or training/reading materials could be made available online.

2.2.3. The Doctoral College, Faculty or training provider should take all reasonable steps to assure themselves that the lost training opportunities has been / or can be recovered, within an appropriate timescale to mitigate the impact on PGR students' progress and preparation of their thesis/dissertation. The Doctoral College should maintain a record of such steps and the outcomes. These records will need to be reported to the PGR Board and may be needed when considering AMR, extensions, academic appeals or complaints.

2.2.4. This guidance applies to all PGR training providers, including the Doctoral College, Faculties and Partner institutions. Where the Doctoral College/Partner Institution deems that a research opportunity cannot be provided satisfactorily by alternative means, options for ensuring that students are not disadvantaged during upgrade, AMR or other progression milestones (outside of examination) should be forwarded to the PGR Support Team for consideration by the Faculty Director of PGR and decisions should be recorded for future reference by the Doctoral College Quality Development team (DCQD). All students affected by lost research training, development and learning opportunities should be kept fully informed and in a timely manner of any action being taken to recover lost learning and any alternative provision being put in place.

2.2.5. Where roles are named, these may need to be substituted for an equivalent role at a Partner Institution.

2.3. Alternative Provision for Research Training

2.3.1. Finding an appropriate method of alternative provision for missed PGR training and other learning opportunities will be dependent on the type of learning activity that has been disrupted.

2.3.2. The alternative provision should, as far as possible, provide students with the same learning opportunity, taking into account the aims and objectives, Intended Learning

Outcomes and student experience of the provision that was originally planned. For example, if a transmissive (non-interactive) training session is cancelled, the provision of training notes, reading materials, and/or a recording of the same training session given previously, alongside an invitation for PGRs to ask follow-up questions with the training provider, may be sufficient. However, if Exceptional Circumstances prevent the provision of a seminar session, in which students would have been able to interact with peers and/or training facilitators, alternative provision may have to provide equivalent opportunities for student-student and student-staff interaction (whether virtually/face-to-face, synchronously/asynchronously, etc.)

2.3.3. Alternative provisions should still consider the principles of accessible teaching and learning, in accordance with the Accessible Teaching and Learning Policy.

2.3.4. Possible alternative methods of provision are listed below. This list is not exhaustive and provides examples. In the event of disruption due to Exceptional Circumstances, it is recommended that multiple methods are considered to ensure learning opportunities are appropriately recovered, but it is not intended that all need to be undertaken.

- a. Upload previous training recordings (or equivalent presentations) to the online Virtual Learning Environment.
- b. Upload additional learning resources to the Virtual Learning Environment, including readings, web-based and other electronic resources.
- c. Use of mobile devices, multimedia management capabilities, social media and online learning platforms.
- d. Provide notes and teaching materials from cancelled training sessions online.
- e. Organise replacement and/or additional sessions, workshops, etc. to address some or all of the missed content.

2.3.5. The Head of Researcher Development and Research Culture should present the proposals to the Doctoral College and Director of PGR Monthly Meeting, who will collectively be responsible for deciding if the alternative provision is satisfactory in terms of mitigating the effects of research training and learning opportunities that have been disrupted due to Exceptional Circumstances.

- 2.3.6. It is advised that records are kept, detailing how missed research training and learning opportunities have been provided by alternative means. These records will need to be reported to the PGR Board and may be needed when considering AMR, student progress, academic appeals or complaints.

3. Managing PGR Studies

- 3.1. Policies applied under Exceptional Circumstances and in Exceptional Years will be temporary policies, which will only be applicable to limited time periods as specified when the Exceptional Circumstances or Exceptional Years are declared.
- 3.2. Students should ensure that they have taken account of the guidance below prior to considering applying for deferrals or adjustments to upgrades or the submission of amendments following their final examination (see [section 4 below](#)). A period of deferral or adjustments to examinations may not be granted if the guidance below has not been followed. The Faculty DPGR may, however, consider an application that is not fully compliant with this guidance where they consider that there is a reasonable case to do so, with evidence provided by the student in support of their request.
- 3.3. Where progress for any PGR student is impacted by Exceptional Circumstances or an Exceptional year as defined by this policy, this will be taken into account when considering requests for deadline deferrals or extensions to study. However, students in the first instance should be proactive in working with their supervisory teams to adapt and refine their research and study, to ensure that it can be completed within the remaining period of study and to the academic standard of the award in question, as needed.
- 3.4. During Exceptional Circumstances or Exceptional Years, students' individual circumstances might mean that an interruption is a more appropriate option than a deferral or examination adjustments (see [Sections 4 and 5 below](#)). In cases of personal, financial or medical circumstances or other difficult circumstances it is expected that the student and Faculty will follow the advice on [TQA Manual PGR Handbook, Chapter 5, Interruption of Study](#). As an interruption suspends a student's registration this will lead to an automatic postponement of the relevant deadline for the duration of the period of interruption.

- 3.5. Reasonable adjustments for disabled students are implemented through [an Individual Learning Plan \(ILP\)](#) in accordance with the [TQA Manual LTS Handbook, Chapter 26, Inclusive Practice within Teaching and Learning](#). Students should be mindful of the need to review, and if necessary, update, their ILP in a timely manner to reflect changed approaches to study and assessment to ensure that it is possible to put appropriate support in place. A disability that has not been declared in a timely manner cannot be taken into account retrospectively, unless the student can provide a reasonable explanation and properly documented evidence for not having declared it (see also the [University's Procedures Relating to Student Academic Appeals](#)).
- 3.6. Students who feel that they may benefit from a change to their mode of attendance between full-time and part-time hours should refer to the [TQA PGR Handbook, Chapter 5, Changes to Mode of Attendance: Full-time and Part-time Status](#).
- 3.7. There are circumstances under which a PGR student may be temporarily absent from study for a short period which does not qualify for interruption of study. Students should refer to the [TQA PGR Handbook, Chapter 18, PGR Student Absence Policy](#) for details about managing such absences.
- 3.8. Periods of study for research degrees are calculated with an allowance for periods of annual leave during the registration period. Students are encouraged to use their annual leave allocations to support their work/life balance. Impacted students should discuss with their supervisory team when taking annual leave during this period, to ensure this is the best option for their individual circumstances. Taking annual leave does not automatically shift deadlines.
- 3.9. It is advisable to keep a record of discussions between supervisory teams and students with regard to the impact of the Exceptional Circumstances on a student's research and any required adjustments agreed to the research through the completion of a MyPGR contact event at the time the issue arose wherever possible.

- 3.10. Students are reminded that funder requirements may be more stringent with regard to requirements for evidence, such as when making applications for extensions to the period of study. See also [TQA PGR Handbook, Chapter 5, Extensions to Study](#).

4. Deferrals to Upgrades and the submission of amendments post-viva

- 4.1. Students requiring extensions in order to submit or resubmit their thesis/dissertation should apply for a formal extension, see [TQA PGR Handbook, Chapter 5, Extensions to Study](#). The exceptional circumstances will be considered as context for/part of the approvals process for extensions. Students are encouraged to discuss with their supervisor or PGR Support Team for further advice.
- 4.2. The following section should be read in conjunction with the [TQA PGR Handbook, Chapter 9 - Upgrade from MPhil, MA by Research or MSc by Research to Doctoral Study](#) and its accompanying [Annex 1a: Applications for upgrade deferral](#).
- 4.3. The nature of PGR upgrades and examinations is unique to individual student journeys which makes them inherently flexible. This therefore means that additional adjustments in response to Exceptional Circumstances and Exceptional Years as defined in this policy is limited, as existing policies and procedures already allow significant flexibility. This section outlines the circumstances under which students may request deferrals to upgrade submission deadlines and the deadlines for completing minor or major amendments post-examination.
- 4.4. The upgrade portfolio submission is an important milestone in a PGR student's journey. As such deferral of this milestone should only take place with good reason. Deferral to the upgrade portfolio submission deadline will not automatically lead to a programme extension. Extending other in-programme deadlines, including deadlines set by supervisors, will also not lead to programme extensions. Any in-programme deadline deferrals should be carefully considered to avoid deadline bunching which may disadvantage the student and put them under undue pressure towards the end of the period of study.

- 4.5. Students on Professional Doctorate programmes, should consult their Programme Director/Administrator for any local requirements with regard to mitigation before proceeding.
- 4.6. Depending on the nature of the Exceptional Circumstances, there may be various impacts arising from the circumstances which mean that the normal requirements to provide evidence for deferral requests may be temporarily suspended. Requests for deferral/extension for postgraduate research project deadline must be supported by a member of the supervisory team. If such circumstances are approved by the PGR Board, students may request evidence-free deferrals for their upgrade portfolio submission deadline for a further period as defined by the PGR Board. It is recommended that this period shall not exceed 3 months (pro-rata for part time students). Such deferral would not automatically result in a programme extension at the end of the period of study, and this must be accounted for by the FDPGR (or nominee) approving the request.
- 4.7. In the event of exceptional circumstances that lead to the implementation of this policy, the Doctoral College will consult with Faculties to ensure that collective decisions are made about where adjustments may be necessary to ensure that students are assessed fairly in response to the exceptional circumstances which may have affected their thesis or upgrade preparation.

5. Individual Student Mitigation in Exceptional Circumstances/Years

- 5.1. In designated Exceptional Circumstances/Years, the total length of programme extensions may be extended as deemed appropriate by the PGR Board.
- 5.2. Students **may** be able to apply for a programme extension with less lead-in time than normal (i.e., students may apply for an extension no less than one month before their programme end-date, as opposed to 6 months).
- 5.3. The total length of interruption that students may receive may be extended as deemed appropriate by the PGR Board – it is likely that the total additional length would equate to the duration of the Exceptional Circumstances.

- 5.4. Where there are concerns about a student's academic progress, engagement and attendance in Exceptional Circumstances or an Exceptional Year, action taken under the [TQA LTS Handbook, Unsatisfactory Student Progress, Engagement and Attendance \(USPEA\)](#) procedures must be considered sympathetically when considering the student's circumstances. Informal progress checks will be encouraged ahead of launching USPEA formally, and deadlines should be set accommodating student circumstances.

6. Exceptional Circumstances Thesis/Dissertation Impact statement

6.1. Context around the thesis impact statement

- 6.1.1. Where possible, research students should adapt their research activities to address disruptions caused by Exceptional Circumstances and Exceptional Years.
- 6.1.2. Students may choose to include a statement at the front of their thesis on the impact of disruptions on their work. Examiners will consider this statement as contextual information to support their understanding of any changes to the scope and volume of the research student's work. As a thesis should usually include within its main body information on e.g. changes to research methodology, this statement may form a concise summary of and signposting to information contained within the main body of the thesis.
- 6.1.3. The quality threshold for the award remains unchanged throughout Exceptional Circumstances and Exceptional years and there must be no compromise in the integrity of the examination or the award. This means that in order to recommend award the thesis must provide the examiners with evidence that the candidate has met the criteria for the award in question.
- 6.1.4. An Exceptional Circumstances Impact Statement may be used for all research degrees, with the exception of by publication programmes, and is in force for first submissions for students registered during the Exceptional Circumstances or Exceptional Years period as agreed with, and defined by the Faculty Director of PGR, acting on behalf of the PGR Board.
- 6.1.5. The option to include an Exceptional Circumstances Impact Statement acts as a temporary policy expansion to the specifications with regard to the sequence of

materials in theses/dissertations for examination specified in the [TQA PGR Handbook, Chapter 11: Presentation of theses/dissertations for Postgraduate Research degrees: statement of procedures](#).

6.1.6. The inclusion of an Impact Statement is only permitted under Exceptional Circumstances/Exceptional Years as defined by this policy. Where students experience mitigating or exceptional circumstances during their period of study which are not linked to Exceptional Circumstances or Exceptional Years, it is expected that they will provide context about their research in the introduction of their thesis. Students should discuss further with their supervisory team.

6.2. The decision to include an Exceptional Circumstances Impact statement

6.2.1. Any research student who submits a thesis in the timeframe permitted by the PGR Board as result of exceptional circumstances or an exceptional year as defined by this policy may include an exceptional circumstances thesis/dissertation impact statement in the format set out below. A statement is not compulsory and should only be included where a research student wishes to highlight the impact of the exceptional circumstances/year on their research and the steps taken to adjust their research activities and where these adjustments are above what would be considered appropriate to include in the introduction chapter of the work.

6.2.2. Research students should discuss the inclusion of an exceptional circumstances statement in their thesis with their supervisors, but the decision to include the statement ultimately rests with the student.

6.2.3. Research students should also discuss with their supervisors the extent to which it is appropriate to reference any changes to their research project within the body of the thesis for guidance specific to the project and disciplinary area in question.

6.2.4. Inclusion of an exceptional circumstances statement will not preclude recommendations of further work where required in order to demonstrate that the standards for award have been met.

6.3. Exceptional Circumstances Impact Statement Format

- 6.3.1. The exceptional circumstances impact statement must be inserted in the thesis between the abstract and the list of contents: see the [TQA PGR Handbook, Chapter 11: Presentation of theses/dissertations for Postgraduate Research degrees: statement of procedures](#).
- 6.3.2. The statement is only required for the examination copy and should be removed when the final copy is deposited in [ORE \(Open Research Exeter\)](#).
- 6.3.3. The statement, which must not exceed 800 words, will form a summary of any planned research activities disrupted by the exceptional circumstances and the extent to which it was possible to adapt the work in those changed circumstances. The following may be included:
 - a. Details of any planned research activities curtailed by the exceptional circumstances because of, for example, lack of access to facilities, libraries, archives, research participants, fieldwork, etc. Information on any curtailed training should be included only insofar as it relates to the impact on research activities and on the thesis. An acknowledgement of the anticipated contribution and value to the thesis if those research activities had not been curtailed and what was possible to include in the thesis in the circumstances, including where alternative choices were made to adapt the work.
 - b. Any other relevant factors on the impact of the exceptional circumstances on research activities and on the contents of the thesis. The information included must only relate to disruptions to relevant research activities caused by the exceptional circumstances and to the content of the thesis. Students should not disclose information about their personal circumstances to the examiners in the statement – the thesis will be returned to the student if personal circumstances are included, for the statement to be removed, which may delay the examination of the thesis.

6.4. Guidance for Examiners on Exceptional Circumstances Impact Statements

- 6.4.1. Examiners must maintain academic standards in relation to the criteria for awards as set out in the Calendar. Where an exceptional circumstances impact statement is

included in a thesis there can be some flexibility in the consideration of the scope and volume of the work produced (in circumstances where it has not been possible to mitigate loss of access to data/archives, particularly at later stages of the research) but only where this does not impact on its quality or on the thresholds for the award.

- 6.4.2. Examiners must decide whether in their academic judgement there is evidence that the thesis meets the criteria for the award of the research degree. The exceptional circumstances impact statement's purpose is to provide a contextual overview to support the Examiners' understanding of any changes that it has been necessary to make to the original research project plan to respond to unforeseen research impediments.
- 6.4.3. The outcomes and amendments required following the outcome of an examination, as detailed in the [TQA PGR Handbook, Chapter 12, Handbook for Examination of Postgraduate Research programmes](#) must continue to be followed. This includes 'ensuring that any recommendations for further work are limited to *"those amendments necessary to satisfy the examiners that the thesis meets the assessment criteria detailed in the Regulations for the award in question"*. This means that Examiners must consider what amendments are necessary to meet the criteria for the award and must not require additional work aimed only at addressing where research activities have been curtailed by restrictions resulting from exceptional circumstances.
- 6.4.4. Online training via [LearnUpon](#) is available to support Non-Examining Independent Chairs and Internal Examiners in their roles - "Navigating the PGR Examination Process".

7. Graduation

- 7.1. In designated Exceptional Years, or following significant periods of Exceptional Circumstances, when the absence of results from PGR examinations due to exceptional events beyond the control of the University makes it impossible to guarantee a confirmed award result for a graduating cohort within required timescales, graduation ceremonies **may** be held as an academic achievement/programme completion event. This removes the statutory authority to confer a degree award from the graduation ceremony event in these circumstances.

Decisions about such ceremonies will be discussed with the Graduation Team prior to confirmation to students or staff to ensure that risks and mitigations have all been appropriately considered.

- 7.2. In the event that the nature and purpose of graduation ceremonies change in response to Exceptional Years/Circumstances, students should be fully informed and in a timely manner of what to expect at the event and its status.
- 7.3. A letter from the University outlining the Exceptional Circumstances that have led to the absence of an examination outcome within the required timescales, alongside an interim transcript, where applicable, should also be issued to PGRs awaiting the outcome of their examination at the time of graduation so that they have a record of their programme completion to date.