



Early Stage Review: Guidelines

Introduction

The Early Stage Review (ESR) is required of all students registered on a research degree. The timing, arrangements and outcomes of an ESR are specified in the Postgraduate Research Regulations http://www.staffs.ac.uk/assets/research_degrees_regs%201516_tcm44-87020.pdf. (¶ 49-59).

In the case of an MPhil or PhD registration, ESR serves to establish (i) that the research student has formulated research plans that are level-appropriate, sufficiently detailed, and feasible, (ii) is making adequate progress both with respect to those plans, and with respect to their parallel personal and professional development. In the case of candidates who are registered on an MPhil with transfer to PhD, the ESR serves in addition to establish (iii) that the project is of PhD scope, depth and originality, and thus the transfer to PhD can be approved.

The event will include an interview, held normally with two members of staff of the University. This interview will generally be 45-60 minutes in length. The interviewers will discuss with the candidate the contents of their portfolio, seeking clarification or expansion of any issues, with the interviewers' primary aim being to assist the candidate with furthering and strengthening their work.

Students will in most cases be informed of the provisional outcome by the panel on the day. They will be officially informed of the outcome by the Faculty, within two weeks of its ratification by the Faculty Research Degrees Committee, including a list of any conditions attached, a timescale for completion of these, and how to submit the corrections or additions. If the recommendation is that a candidate be withdrawn, the recommendation is forwarded to the University Research Degrees Sub-Committee who will make the final decision. The student will again be informed within two weeks of the decision being made.

The research student's Faculty is responsible for organising the Early Stage Review. The research student's supervisors are responsible for informing the student of the nature of the review, and helping the student prepare the portfolio and for the interview.

Issues that arise during the interview that concern the Faculty or University's provision of research degrees, will be recorded on the report form and then raised at FRDC and as appropriate URDSC

The Portfolio

The portfolio to be submitted prior to the interview being scheduled should comprise six parts, totalling a maximum of 5000 words, excluding the list of references. Not all the people reading the portfolio are subject experts, and therefore it should be written as far as possible for a non-specialist audience. The six parts are as follows (for ease of reading, it is suggested that the six parts be incorporated sequentially in a single PDF document):

- An outline critical literature review, with respect to both the topic of the research, and the methods to be employed. There is no expectation that this literature review will be

exhaustive as in the completed thesis, but rather that it will be indicative and evaluative of the range of current work on the topic, the methods employed, together with comment as to the relation of these to the proposed research.

- A research proposal -- including (a) the formulation of a research question or brief set of questions; (b) a contextual introduction to the project, for example specifying the need for or significance of the research, and/or indicating its key elements of originality; (c) a list of research objectives -- objectives should be SMART in nature, and should be such that completion of all the objectives will entail the answering of the research questions; (d) a discussion and justification of the key features of the research design, of the methods to be employed, of research challenges likely to be encountered, and of the contribution to knowledge that will result, making reference throughout to the literature review section of the portfolio, and; (e) a plan of work (e.g. a Gantt Chart) scheduling completion of all the objectives. The plan of work should indicate progress achieved so far.
- Some types of research project will be well into the primary data collection phase by this time, others will not. In any case, please include discussion of the state of ethical and risk approval for the research, including any research issues that might be foreseen of later stages of the work, and declaration that no research has been undertaken without these approvals in place; that agreements with external partners are still in force; that any IP issues have been considered and resolved.
- Discussion of results to date (if any), such as an evaluation of a pilot study.
- Either a skills appraisal as detailed below, or (where the student has chosen to take the PgCert in Research Methods), the approved learning contract from that award.
- For students registered prior to the academic year 2015-16, the portfolio must include confirmation that the candidate has/is due to complete the Postgraduate Certificate in Research Methods within the required time-frames (the first 12 months of registration for full-time students, or the first 24 months for part-time students). For students who registered during the academic year 2015-16, details of any professional development activities undertaken will be included in the skills appraisal.

A list of references should be appended.

It is impossible to specify in advance how long each of these elements should be, but as an indication, we suggest that the literature review and proposal sections be roughly 1500-2000 words each, and the skills appraisal roughly 500.

The Skills Appraisal

The research student and supervisory team should use the VITAE Researcher Development Framework (RDF) to complete the skills appraisal. The report on this appraisal should contain:

- (a) A list and where possible evidence training already undertaken since registration, and indicate its relevance.
- (b) For each of the RDF headings, provide a reflection upon the current state of the research student's own knowledge and skills, with respect to both the research project and career goals.
- (c) Where there are knowledge and skills deficits, a justification of a prioritisation of these.
- (d) With respect to the most urgent, identify opportunities for improving knowledge and skills. These opportunities could be training sessions offered by the Faculty or through the

Graduate School, or other services, or they could be externally available training (see 'Research and Professional Training' above).

- (e) Indication of the dates on which the research student will undertake these training opportunities.

An update of this skills appraisal will be required at every annual review, and at the latest state review.

The document should use Arial font, size 11, and 1.5 or 2 line spacing; footnotes should be used only where necessary and in general sparingly; tables and diagrams are encouraged where they aid clear communication. References should be in the University's standard Harvard style, unless an exception has been approved for your subject area.

Notes on outcomes:

- Continue to completion: This means that the portfolio presents a project, plan, set of methods, and timescale, that are both feasible and of the appropriate scope and depth (in the case of transfer, appropriate to a PhD project). Further, that the candidate has demonstrated the ability to carry out the research and manage his or her professional development. No conditions of approval are deemed necessary. The review team can recommend to the research student minor corrections to the documentation, and can also recommend potentially useful courses of action (papers to look at, strategies to evaluate, etc.). However, these are not conditions.
- Continue subject to conditions: The review team believe it is likely that the above criteria are met, but would like to make their approval conditional on a set of changes to the portfolio. Normally, the research student will have one month to complete and submit the changes, although the panel may agree a different time-scale.
- Continue / transfer to MPhil: The review team believe that the project is feasible, but that even with additional work is not of doctoral standard.
- Recommendation to Withdraw: The review team believe that little significant progress has been made towards a research degree.

Please note that all outcomes are only recommendations and subject to confirmation from the Faculty Research Degrees Committee (or University Research Degrees Sub-Committee where applicable)

