

## Expectations for upgrade from MPhil to PhD status

### Purpose of the upgrade

1. PhD programme students are initially registered for an MPhil degree<sup>1</sup>. To proceed to a PhD, an assessment must be made about whether their registration should be changed from MPhil to PhD: this is known as the 'upgrade'.
2. The purpose of the upgrade is to assess the student's progress toward successful submission of a thesis that will satisfy the criteria for award of a PhD and their ability to complete in a reasonable time frame (between three to four years full-time, or between five to seven years part-time). Timely submission of an upgrade attempt and engagement with the upgrade process demonstrates commitment to pursuing research at Birkbeck, University of London (the College), leading to the PhD degree.
3. Readiness for upgrade from MPhil to PhD is a significant achievement and the upgrade process provides a mechanism to reflect that. Consideration of the upgrade submission should be an opportunity to provide effective and essential support, either to prepare the student for a subsequent PhD examination attempt or to identify further work that will need to be addressed to satisfy the criteria for a PhD. The upgrade process determines whether a student's registration can be transferred from MPhil to PhD but there are outcomes of the upgrade attempt that will allow students to enter examination for MPhil, rather than for a PhD.
4. The criteria defined below should be applied. The assessment should not be confined to the research material presented by the student but should also consider the student's demonstrable academic and generic skills.

### Criteria for upgrade

5. A student should be upgraded to PhD status if they meet the following criteria:
  - 5.1. Satisfactory progress in the work so far
  - 5.2. Demonstrate sufficient awareness of the context of the work and completion of key tasks, such as a review of relevant literature appropriate to the stage of the work and a bibliography
  - 5.3. Demonstrate formulation of a viable hypothesis and/or research question(s), that can be completed within the maximum registration period specified in the College research degree regulations
  - 5.4. Confirmation from the supervisor that the student has achieved satisfactory technical and generic skills development. Where students are funded by approved funding bodies such

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<sup>1</sup> Upgrade procedures for Professional Doctorates will be carried out in accordance with programme specifications. In cases where an overseas funder requires confirmation of PhD programme enrolment, students should contact the International Student Administration team in the first instance.

as UKRI, who may set specific expectations for skills development, it must be demonstrated that sufficient progress has been made to meet any specific requirements stipulated by those bodies

- 5.5. Demonstrate formulation of a viable plan for the work including a timetable and key milestones for completion of remaining work
- 5.6. English Language proficiency, both written and spoken since this is a requirement specified in the research degree regulations
- 5.7. If appropriate, consideration of the research ethics dimensions of the project and, if appropriate to the phase of the project, application for and/or ethics approval from the relevant Ethics Committee
- 5.8. These expectations do not include a word count but a word count may be stated in guidance from schools/faculties based, where appropriate
- 5.9. It is expected that the specific components in the student's upgrade submission, in conjunction with an upgrade viva (see sections 9-10 and 12-13 below), will demonstrate that these criteria have been met.

## Process of upgrade

### Management and oversight

6. The management and oversight of the upgrade process is the responsibility of the School PGR Leads, with support of PGR Support Managers. Schools and Faculties must ensure that the upgrade process is clearly defined and that students and supervisors are made aware of approaching upgrade attempt expectations. Schools should maintain up to date records about which students are due to submit for upgrade and records of upgrade attempts, to monitor the progress of students in each doctoral programme.

### Timeframe

7. It is expected that most students will successfully upgrade on the first attempt. A maximum of two attempts at upgrade are allowed. Timing of upgrade attempts is based on initial registration for the doctoral programme at the College, unless there is an agreement for Accredited Prior Learning agreed at the point of admission. The timeframe for part-time students is based on 0.6 full-time equivalent. Where a student has taken breaks in studies or changed mode, the timing of the upgrade attempt will be decided by the PGR School Lead, with support of the PGR Support Manager.
  - 7.1. Full-time mode of study:
    - a. First attempt- students whose programme of study is typically three years, the first upgrade attempt should take place between nine and 18 months after the start of the research project at the College.
    - b. Second attempt- If a full-time student fails at the first attempt, a second attempt can be made between 15 and 24 months. The period between the first and second attempt should normally be no more than six months apart.
  - 7.2. Part-time mode of study:

- a. First attempt- For part-time students whose programme of study is typically five years, the first possible attempt at upgrade should take place between 15 and 30 months.
- b. Second attempt- If a part-time student fails at the first attempt, a second attempt can be made between 25 and 40 months. The period between the first and second attempt should normally be no more than 10 months.

### **Components of an upgrade attempt**

8. The process of assessment is implemented by means of a written submission from the student, a report from the Principal Supervisor(s) outlining the work accomplished so far and the programme of further work that will lead to a successful thesis. The expectation is that all students attempting upgrade will be assessed in an upgrade viva.

### **The student's upgrade submission**

9. The precise form of material considered as part of the upgrade will vary across Faculties and disciplines, who may indicate advice about word limits. The student should draft their upgrade submission in consultation with the supervisory team and submit it to the Faculty PGR Support Manager, in accordance with instructions issued for submission of the work.
10. Whilst it is recognized that the exact nature of the upgrade submission from the student will depend on the discipline, it should cover at least the following components (not necessarily as discrete items):
  - 10.1. An introduction giving the context of the work
  - 10.2. A literature review (or evidence that a literature review has been undertaken e.g. through the provision of a sample chapter)
  - 10.3. A research question and/or hypothesis (it is anticipated that hypothesis/question formulation will be completed before the upgrade but in many projects, these will evolve over time)
  - 10.4. A section on methodology (or evidence that methodology has been considered and agreed e.g. through the provision of a sample chapter)
  - 10.5. A substantial piece of work towards the thesis objectives, dependent on discipline, for example:
    - a. If a student's work will involve substantial fieldwork in year 2, a literature review, ethical approval (where appropriate) and methodology, can form the substantive portion of the upgrade attempt at the end of the first year
    - b. Theoretical projects would normally involve a literature review, a developed or developing methodological and theoretical framework and a discussion of work to date and planned next steps
    - c. For empirical projects, a literature review, any ethical or health and safety considerations, a complete description of the methodology and results obtained to date, with some initial analysis and planned next steps would be expected
    - d. For Practice based projects, the substantive piece of work may have a shorter written component and may also include elements of their practice

10.6. A bibliography.

### **Report by Principal Supervisor**

11. A written report from the Principal Supervisor on the student's work must be submitted in advance of any upgrade viva to the PGR School Lead and the student and must include a plan and timetable for the remainder of the work.

### **The Upgrade Viva**

12. The purpose of the viva is to ascertain, in conjunction with the student's upgrade submission and the report by the Principal Supervisor, that the criteria (see section 5, above) have been met. The viva should be an opportunity for the student to discuss and defend their ideas and gain essential experience ahead of any eventual research degree viva, after submission of their thesis. While the viva should provide an opportunity for thorough discussion of the upgrade submission, the intention is for it to be a supportive and valuable opportunity to receive essential feedback rooted in expertise and to provide an opportunity to affirm progress made by the student.
13. The Principal Supervisor may be present at the upgrade viva, if the student requests this but should withdraw while the Upgrade Panel makes its decision.

## **Consideration of upgrade attempts**

### **The Upgrade Panel**

14. The PGR School Lead is responsible for ensuring that an Upgrade Panel is convened, with organisational support from the PGR Support Manager. PGR School leads are not required to be members of the Panel.

### **Membership of the Upgrade Panel**

15. The Panel should comprise two members of academic staff, who must have the subject expertise required to evaluate the upgrade submission. The supervisor should discuss selection of the Panel examiners with the student. Members of the Panel will be ineligible as examiners for any subsequent MPhil or PhD thesis.
16. A member of staff external to the School of the student and supervisor, or external to the College, may be on the Panel. A Panel member external to the College may be chosen based on their expertise in relation to the upgrade submission, or to provide an independent view, for example, in cases of a second upgrade attempt.
17. Exceptionally and with permission from the Pro Vice Chancellor (Research), a student's second supervisor may be a member of the Panel, for example, if there is a lack of subject specific expertise required to assess the student's upgrade submission elsewhere.
18. One member of the Panel should be identified by the PGR School Lead to act as Chair. The Chair should ensure that the upgrade is considered in accordance with these expectations and with any specified School or Faculty upgrade requirements. The Chair should also coordinate the upgrade viva and on conclusion, complete the Upgrade Report form.

19. The PGR School Lead has final jurisdiction over membership of the Panel, its constitution and any dispute between Panel members. The Panel considers the submitted written work and undertakes the upgrade viva.

## Outcomes

20. Students may either upgrade on the first attempt or if unsuccessful, be referred for a second attempt within the timeframe described (see section 7, above). A student may be referred to either re-submit the written work only and/or for a second oral assessment.
21. In all instances where the student fails to meet the criteria for upgrade to PhD status on the first attempt, the student must be provided with feedback detailing any additional requirements and support necessary before the second upgrade attempt.
22. It is essential that the potential outcomes of the process are made very clear to students at the outset, including the need to address feedback and requirements agreed by the Panel after the first attempt and the potential outcomes of failure at the second attempt.
23. If there has been persistent failure to demonstrate academic progress, the matter should be reviewed in accordance with the College's [Discontinuation of Registration Policy](#). However, any decision to consider discontinuation of enrolment is the responsibility of the PGR School Lead, in line with the Discontinuation Policy and not the Panel members.
24. The following are the potential outcomes of the upgrade process:
  - 24.1. Potential outcomes of first attempt:
    - a. Student is recommended for upgrade to PhD status
    - b. Student is referred to a specific date with specific criteria, to meet for a second attempt, with the need for a second viva
    - c. Student is referred to a specific date with specific criteria, to meet for a second attempt, without the need for a second viva
    - d. With the written agreement of both the student and the Chair of the Panel, the student is not recommended for upgrade and remains registered for the MPhil. This may lead to the subsequent submission of a thesis for the MPhil, which must be done in accordance with the College's Research Degree Regulations
  - 24.2. Potential outcomes of second attempt:
    - a. Student is recommended for upgrade to PhD status
    - b. Student is not recommended for upgrade and remains registered for the MPhil. This may lead to the subsequent submission of a thesis for the MPhil, which must be done in accordance with the College's Research Degree Regulations
    - c. Student is not recommended for upgrade and is referred to the PGR School Lead for consideration of formal discontinuation of studies, on the grounds of failure to make sufficient academic progress.

## Upgrade Panel Report

25. The Upgrade Panel will complete a written joint report to confirm the recommended outcome of the upgrade attempt. The report should be signed by the Chair of the Panel and returned to the PGR School Lead.

26. The PGR School Lead should consider the Upgrade Panel Report and the Supervisor Report and if they are aligned, should sign the Upgrade Panel Report to confirm the outcome recommended by the Panel. This report should be sent to the student, the PGR Support Manager and the Supervisor(s).
27. If the PGR School Lead considers the Upgrade Panel Report and Supervisor Report to be incompatible or significantly lacking in alignment, further intervention will be required.

## Appeals

28. Appeals must be considered through the College's [Appeals Policy, Research](#).

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