

## Loughborough University, Doctoral College: Additional information for examiners of research degrees

Thank you for agreeing to be an examiner for a research degree candidate at Loughborough University.

The following guidance has been produced by the Doctoral College and approved by the University's Doctoral College Sub-Committee in response to the pandemic. We ask that you read this guidance before commencing the examination process.

External examiners are asked to liaise with the internal examiner in the first instance if there are any queries arising from this document. Alternatively, you may contact the Doctoral College via [pgresearch@lboro.ac.uk](mailto:pgresearch@lboro.ac.uk).

### Assessing criteria for a research degree in response to COVID-19

It is recognised that as a result of the pandemic many doctoral researchers will have had to modify their original research plans in order to complete and submit their work by their final submission deadline. This adaptation has been encouraged by the Doctoral College, and across the wider Higher Education sector, and is in line with guidance and expectations from UKRI.

On account of reductions in access to research facilities, fieldwork locations or human participants, for example, some theses may have less empirical research than under normal circumstances. Moreover, the completion of some originally planned chapters/sections, publications, and placements or other wider work/educational experiences (e.g., conferences) may not have happened, or been practicable, in order to meet expected submission deadlines.

It is still the expectation, however, that **examination of all doctoral degrees will be focussed specifically on the candidate's demonstrated achievement of doctoral outcomes**. Even in cases where a doctoral researcher has been required to modify their research plans or activities in response to the pandemic, this must still apply.

In cases where the volume of empirical research produced has been negatively impacted it may still be feasible for the candidate to demonstrate they have met the criteria for the award of a PhD. This could include exploring new implications of previous findings in light of new information; revisiting a current issue or debate from a different perspective or context; replication of earlier work in a different context or presenting research in a novel way.

Any such mitigations should not be at the expense of the overall quality of the PhD however. The candidate must still demonstrate a contribution to knowledge and contain original work worthy of publication.

Absolute volume of work, or number of chapters, should not therefore be used as an indirect means of assessing if doctoral outcomes have been met.

These standards and expectations can also be extended to best practice when assessing a doctoral researcher's progression at the mid-part or end of part reviews.

Excerpts from QAA guidance on criteria for research degrees and Loughborough University Regulations are included for information as an appendix to this document.

### **Mitigating circumstances**

Doctoral researchers who have been affected by the pandemic have had the opportunity to submit mitigating circumstance claims at each progression point, including at the end of the standard active registration period in order to request an extension. It is not therefore appropriate to apply further mitigations at the point of assessment or to accept a lower quality of work as a form of re-dress for any disruption experienced.

### **Recommendation of awards**

In making a recommendation following an examination the current situation must be taken into consideration when asking the candidate to make corrections or complete further work.

In particular, if there is a requirement for additional work to meet key doctoral outcomes relating to quality, recommendations should be considered very carefully to ensure that they are appropriate and achievable under current constraints, including the time asked for completion of any changes.

Although the Government's current exit strategy gives us hope for the continued easing of restrictions in the coming months, examiners are advised to take into account the likelihood of continued restrictions to research facilities, fieldwork locations or human participants in the short to medium term. In such cases, alternative mitigations that enable the candidate to still demonstrate the quality of the work is sufficient should be given further consideration.

# Appendix

## Criteria for Doctoral Degree Award

The QAA provides the following outcomes descriptor for a higher education qualification at level 8, doctoral degree, namely doctoral degrees are awarded to students who have demonstrated:

- the creation and interpretation of new knowledge, through original research or other advanced scholarship, of a quality to satisfy peer review, extend the forefront of the discipline, and merit publication;
- a systematic acquisition and understanding of a substantial body of knowledge which is at the forefront of an academic discipline or area of professional practice;
- the general ability to conceptualise, design and implement a project for the generation of new knowledge, applications or understanding at the forefront of the discipline, and to adjust the project design in the light of unforeseen problems;
- a detailed understanding of applicable techniques for research and advanced academic enquiry.

Typically, holders of the qualification will be able to:

- make informed judgements on complex issues in specialist fields, often in the absence of complete data, and be able to communicate their ideas and conclusions clearly and effectively to specialist and non-specialist audiences;
- continue to undertake pure and/or applied research and development at an advanced level, contributing substantially to the development of new techniques, ideas or approaches.

And holders will have:

- the qualities and transferable skills necessary for employment requiring the exercise of personal responsibility and largely autonomous initiative in complex and unpredictable situations, in professional or equivalent environments.

University **Regulation XXVI** specifically describes the following criteria for the award of a PhD: 11.2.1 The thesis should be presented in satisfactory literary form (including references, notes and bibliography, as appropriate) and should not be of unnecessary length. Students are advised not to exceed 80,000 words or their adjudged equivalent for a Doctoral thesis.

11.2.2 The thesis should represent a contribution to knowledge and contain original work worthy of publication. It should also provide evidence of training in and application of research methods appropriate to the particular field of study.

11.2.3 In addition the student is expected to satisfy the examiners that they are well acquainted with the general field of knowledge to which their subject relates.