

## Guidance for Early Stage Assessment

**To be completed by doctoral students (PhD, MD[Res] and EngD) no later than 12 months (full-time) and 24 months for (part-time)<sup>1</sup>**

### Early Stage Assessment (ESA)

1. The university requires that assessment of a student's doctoral research potential, to determine whether registration for the doctoral degree can continue, will be determined by an examination. **The ESA must be completed by doctoral students no later than 12 months (full-time) and 24 months (part-time) from the date of initial registration, which will include one opportunity for re-assessment.** This guidance compliments Section 9 of the university's [Regulations for the Awards of MPhil and PhD](#).
2. The purpose of the Early Stage Assessment is to confirm that the student:
  - a. understands their research problem adequately;
  - b. has a critical awareness of the relevant literature on the subject;
  - c. has the capacity to pursue research.
3. A student must demonstrate their doctoral research potential by successfully completing the following:
  - a. the student must submit a written report;
  - b. the written report must be submitted to Turnitin;
  - c. the student must be orally examined on the report by an assessment panel.
4. Data presented at this stage may be minimal but should be indicative of the student's ability to perform. Where generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools have been used in the preparation of assessed work, students are required to provide an appropriate reference to the specific tool utilised, in accordance with the university's guidance on the use of generative AI. In addition, students must offer a clear explanation of how the tool was employed, the extent of its contribution to the work, and the means by which any AI-generated content was subject to critical evaluation.
5. These arrangements apply to all doctoral students whether full-time or part-time, registered under the Partner Research Institute (PRI) Scheme, Split PhD Scheme or

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<sup>1</sup> The milestone deadlines listed in this document apply to students admitted from October 2021 onwards. Students registered prior to October 2021 should refer to the Academic Regulations in effect for their cohort. Additionally, the timings of some milestones may vary for some CDT students and some EngD students. Students are advised to check the timing of their milestones with their department.

for Joint PhDs (unless a variation has been approved by the university).

6. The assessment panel will include at least one independent academic assessor (a member of academic staff independent from the research 'group', i.e. from the project and the supervisor) in addition to the supervisor.
7. Students are required to follow the university's policy on using Turnitin as part of the ESA submission process. Students must submit a copy of their ESA report to Turnitin for an originality check to safeguard against possible plagiarism. This should be completed via Blackboard prior to the submission of the written report for examination.
8. Where ESAs contain material of national security classification, these will be exempt from submission to Turnitin. This applies to research projects funded by one of the national intelligence agency funding bodies. In such cases, the supervisor will need to submit a declaration confirming that the ESA has not been submitted to Turnitin because it contains material of national security classification and that to the best of the supervisor's knowledge, the ESA is free from plagiarism. This email declaration should be submitted to the department's PGR administrator and the ESA assessors should be informed.
9. If the university determines that the student's progress is such that they cannot continue, the student may be required to withdraw at this stage; alternatively, the university may transfer their registration to the degree of MPhil. The date of MPhil registration will, in this case, be backdated to the date of the initial doctoral registration. Where a student has had their registration transferred to MPhil following an ESA, they should normally complete the MPhil within 12 months (full-time) and 24 months (part-time) of the date of the ESA.
10. All doctoral students are expected to complete the following:
  - a. professional skills development training;
  - b. the online Plagiarism Awareness Course;
  - c. the Doctoral Academic Communication Requirement (DACR).
11. The ESA must confirm whether the student has completed the required professional skills development training and Online Plagiarism Awareness Course as follows:
  - a. **Doctoral Students (PhD, MD[Res] and EngD):** The university requires all doctoral students to achieve a minimum of four professional skills development training ECRI credits, plus the online Plagiarism Awareness Course. The online

Plagiarism Awareness Course is compulsory but does **not** count towards the minimum credit requirement set out below.

Doctoral students are required to accumulate a minimum of 2 credits by the ESA and a further 2 credits by the LSR as follows:

- By the Early Stage Assessment – 2 credits
- By the Late Stage Review – a further 2 credits

Course Length	Number of Credits
Up to 1 day	1
Over 1 day, up to 2 days	2
Over 2 days	3

b. **MPhil Students:** those who are direct entry MPhil, or those being awarded with an MPhil degree having first registered for a PhD, must complete a minimum of two credits and the online Plagiarism Awareness Course before Examination Entry. The LSR professional development credit requirement does not apply to MPhil students.

12. If a doctoral student has not achieved a minimum of two professional skills credits and completed the online Plagiarism Awareness Course by the date of their ESA, then provided they pass the academic requirements of the ESA, the student can still progress with their doctoral programme. However, a condition of their progression will be to set a deadline for achieving the required number of professional skills credits and if not already completed, the Plagiarism Awareness Course. This deadline will be set by the Department, in agreement with ECRI.

13. The ESA must confirm whether a student has fulfilled the Doctoral Academic Communication Requirement (DACR), which has been updated for autumn 2025.

a. **For students registered before 1 September 2025:**

Unless formally identified by the Centre for Academic English (CfAE) as being exempt, the university requires doctoral students to take DACR Assessment 1 (DACR A1) within 3 months of the doctoral programme start date. If the student scored level 3 or level 4 in DACR A1, they have fulfilled the Requirement. If the student scored level 1 or level 2 in DACR A1, they should have had their progress checked through DACR A2 in order to complete the ESA.

b. **For students registered from 1 September 2025:**

The university requires all doctoral students to complete the initial academic

communication training provided by the CfAE by the Early Stage Assessment. This training is compulsory and does not count towards ECRI's Professional Skills Attendance Requirement credits.

14. If a student has not completed the training by the date of their ESA, then provided they pass the academic requirements of the ESA, the student can still progress with their research programme. However, a condition of their progression will be to set a deadline for completing the initial training. This deadline will be set by the department, in agreement with CfAE.
15. The ESA must consider whether the student would benefit from developing their academic communication competence. In such cases, students should be referred to the CfAE for further academic communication feedback and training.
16. The ESA form must include the names and signatures of the Head of Department (or nominee), the supervisor(s), and the independent assessors.
17. The ESA Form can be found on the university's [Academic Policy webpages](#), under the *Milestones for Research Degrees* section.
18. Departments must confirm to the Assessment Records Team in Registry that an ESA has been completed. The completion date will be recorded as the date of the oral examination in the university's central student record system. However, the ESA should only be reported and confirmed as complete once all elements of the procedure have been finalised, including submission, examination, and review of the assessment panel's recommendation, confirmed by the Director of Postgraduate Studies (or nominee).
19. In accordance with the university's [Regulations for the Awards of MPhil and PhD](#), any extension to the ESA completion deadline<sup>2</sup> would require approval. An extension should only be considered due to mitigation where a student's progress has been affected by circumstances beyond their control. Students concerned about their ability to submit and complete the assessment for their ESA by the given deadline are advised to speak to their supervisor and departmental administrator at the earliest opportunity. Prior to consideration of an ESA extension request, departments are advised to consider whether an interruption of study would be appropriate and more beneficial to the student based on the mitigation declared. For further information, refer to the university's [Student-led Changes to Registration Status Procedure](#).

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<sup>2</sup> 'Completion deadline' refers to the date by when the student submission and oral examination for the ESA must be completed.

20. All requests to extend the ESA completion deadline require departmental approval. Once approved, the new deadline must be confirmed to the Assessment Records Team in Registry for recording in the student's central record. The updated deadline will then be visible to students via the PGR Milestones platform on the My Imperial student portal.
21. An approved milestone extension will extend the milestone completion deadline for the individual student with no detriment to the student's academic record; this will allow the student to proceed to assessment in the usual way. Please note that extensions will apply only to the relevant milestone (ESA or LSR), and any agreed extension period will not affect future milestone deadlines or extend the overall registration period.

## **Guidance on completing the Early Stage Assessment Form**

### **Section A**

22. To be completed by the student and department ahead of the ESA assessment. Section A includes confirmation from the department that the student has completed the Professional Skills credits, the Online Plagiarism Awareness Course, and the Doctoral Academic Communication Requirement (DACR).
23. ECRI ([ecri@imperial.ac.uk](mailto:ecri@imperial.ac.uk)) will provide departmental administrators with a report confirming what professional skills courses students have completed. Alternatively, students may present their administrator with a copy of their professional skills attendance certificate as evidence. The CfAE ([english@imperial.ac.uk](mailto:english@imperial.ac.uk)) will be able to provide confirmation that the DACR has been met, if not known.

### **Section B**

24. To be completed by the independent assessor(s) (a member of academic staff independent from the research 'group', i.e. from the project and the supervisor). Departments are reminded that it is best practice to appoint members of staff who are not responsible for providing pastoral care to students as independent assessors of those students.
25. The independent assessor must be given a copy of the relevant Turnitin report and satisfy themselves the ESA report is free from plagiarism.

## **Section C**

26. To be completed by the supervisor following the ESA. Both the supervisor and student must sign the form to confirm the conversation has taken place.
27. The university is committed to ensuring that its research students receive a world-class experience, supported by high-quality supervision. Supervisors are expected to provide students with regular informal feedback; however, the ESA Form serves as the formal mechanism through which supervisors provide structured feedback to students.
28. Supervisors and assessors are also reminded that students are asked to comment on the quality of supervision that they receive at Imperial as part of the national Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES), an important benchmarking tool. Students will be asked to comment on whether they are supported by their supervisors and receive regular feedback on their research activities.
29. Section C has been developed to facilitate broader discussions between students and supervisors not just on academic progress but the wider developmental needs of students. Supervisors should also take the opportunity to support students following an outcome of transfer to MPhil.
30. When considering what professional, technical and other training students may need as they progress through their doctoral programme, supervisors are reminded that they can review the full list of training and development opportunities available to students via the ECRI website. It may also be possible for students to attend technical and other taught courses offered by departments. To access this information, supervisors are advised to search the university's timetabling software and contact departments directly to see if venue capacity will permit additional attendees.

<b>Document title:</b>		Guidance for Early Stage Assessment	
<b>Version:</b>	10	<b>Date:</b>	June 2025
<b>Location and filename:</b>		R:\7.Quality Assurance\3. Policy Framework\9. Research Programmes\Early Stage Assessment Guidance Notes	
<b>Approved:</b>		Postgraduate Research Quality Committee (PRQC) June 2025 (with subsequent updates in line with Senate-approved <i>Regulations for the Awards of MPhil and PhD 2025/26</i> ) June 2025	
<b>Effective from:</b>		1 September 2025	
<b>Originator:</b>		Assessment Records	
<b>Contact for queries:</b>		Head of Assessment Records	
<b>Cross References:</b>		<a href="#">Student-led Changes to Registration Status Procedure</a> <a href="#">Academic Policy webpages</a> <a href="#">Guidance on the use of generative AI</a> <a href="#">Regulations for the Awards of MPhil and PhD</a>	
<b>Notes and latest changes:</b>		<p>Formatting changes made on 15 March 2016, revisions made in June 2016 to reflect change to professional skills requirements and removal of RPC requirement</p> <p>Updated to reflect Turnitin requirements for students starting on or after 24 September 2019 (August 2019)</p> <p>Updated to reflect exemptions for research covering national security (September 2019)</p> <p>Updated to reflect new milestone deadlines in effect from October 2021</p> <p>Updated to include reference to ESA/LSR milestone extension procedures and formatting changes (July 2023)</p> <p>Updates to reassessment allowance in line with regulations, credit requirements for ECRI courses, and guidance for referencing AI tools (June 2025)</p>	