

Research Degree Examiners: Covid-19 Impact Guidance Note

This guidance note is for research degree examiners and provides information on what Imperial College London has put in place to support students to mitigate against disruption to their research and to provide reassurance about the examination.

Adjustments to research projects

As is the nature of research, it is not uncommon for student progress to become disrupted in some way during the course of the doctorate. This may be due to changes in personal circumstances and, where this is severe, students can apply to [interrupt their studies](#) or [apply for an extension](#) to their thesis submission deadline.

However, as a result of the pandemic, it is recognised that some may have experienced far more disruption than might normally be expected in the usual course of research. This includes, but is not limited to lab closures, limitations to/lack of experimental work, lack of technical/practical skills training, access to data, access to facilities and access to specific colleagues or collaborators. Whilst it is usual practice for students and supervisors to regularly review their research plan, the College has recommended that students log any disruption in an ongoing manner and that they discuss with their supervisor how their research project can be adjusted to mitigate for this. For some, projects may have had to be significantly adapted or re-scoped to enable them to be brought to completion.

Registration and milestone extensions

The College has provided all affected research students (except those who were in the Writing Up Phase of their PhD or those who were interrupted at the time of the disruption), with an automatic registration and milestone extension of **up to 6 months**. The length of automatic extension was determined by the student's academic department and depended upon the level of disruption experienced between the period Monday 16 March 2020 until Wednesday 30 September 2020.

Student Covid-19 Impact Statements

Students have been provided with the option of including a short statement setting out how they have been impacted by the pandemic. If students have chosen to do this, their statement will be appended to their thesis. The College has suggested that students may wish to comment on the following as part of their statement:

1. A summary of work that they were planning to do prior to Covid-19 restrictions and how they altered the framework/balance of their final thesis in response to Covid-19.
2. Any adjustments that were made to their research project, such as:
 - a. Changes to the scope of the research question

- b. Adjustments/adaptation/cancellation of experimental work (including if this was linked to any external or central facilities or sites)
 - c. Any difficulties accessing laboratories, facilities, data and/or specific colleagues/collaborators
 - d. Postponement/cancellation/restrictions to fieldwork, placements, site visits and collections
 - e. Any other challenges encountered
3. If appropriate, any changes to their personal circumstances (e.g., ill-health, caring responsibilities), any difficulties relating to underlying disabilities, return to clinical service or voluntary Covid-19 related work, that they wish to bring to your attention.

Examining the thesis

Examiners should continue to assess the thesis and examine the student against the College's Examination Regulations to determine whether the required academic standard has been met. [2019-20 Regulations \(Research\) | About | Imperial College London](#)

Examiners are asked to be cognisant of any potential limitations on the *quantity* of work produced as a result of the pandemic and to note that the criteria for the award relate to the quality of work presented, and its contribution to advancement of knowledge in the field.

Examiners must discount any information in a student Covid-19 statement that does not relate to disruptions to research activities caused by the pandemic and to the content of the thesis.

The recommendation from examiners is a matter of academic judgement and therefore it is their decision on what allowance to give to any limitations in the volume and scope of the thesis due to the impact of Covid-19. Examiners must consider closely the result of pandemic-related disruptions in the production of the thesis and decide whether in their academic judgement the thesis meets the criteria for the award of the research degree.

The examiners' joint final report must incorporate an overview of their consideration of a Covid-19 statement (where this has been included) and their determination of the impact on the scope and volume of the thesis within the context of maintaining the academic standards required for the award.

Any corrections, or a resubmission, required by the examiners must take into account any allowance made by them on the limitations in volume and scope of the dissertation due to the pandemic. Examiners must consider what corrections are necessary to meet the criteria for the award and should not require additional work unless it is critical for the award of the degree.

The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) has recently published a short document which clarifies national expectations for doctoral academic standards and aims to reassure students who have had to replan and reschedule their research to accommodate the obstacles they have encountered. It also makes it clear that the standard of this degree is the same as in any other year, the difference is that it has been achieved during a global pandemic.

The QAA's document is available to view here: [QAA publishes new advice on doctoral standards for research students and supervisors](#)