



**Senate**

<b>Paper Title</b>	<b>Research Degrees Programmes and Examinations Board Executive Summary October – November 2020</b>
<b>Outcome requested</b>	Senate is asked to <b>note</b> the executive summary of business considered by the Research Degrees Programmes and Examinations Board (RDPEB).
<b>Points for Senate members to note and further information</b>	This paper summarises business considered by RDPEB at meetings held in October – November 2020: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• withdrawal of a thesis from examination;</li><li>• research degrees remote viva policy;</li><li>• requirements for transfer to writing-up status.</li></ul>
<b>Questions for Senate to consider</b>	Senate is asked <b>to note</b> the report.
<b>Regulatory/statutory reference points</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Queen Mary Strategy 2030</li><li>• Queen Mary Academic Regulations</li><li>• Queen Mary Code of Practice for Research Degrees Programmes</li><li>• UK Quality Code for Higher Education</li></ul> <p>RDPEB has oversight of quality and standards issues relating to research degree programmes. The quality assurance framework is key to the maintenance of academic standards and the quality of the student learning experience.</p>
<b>Strategy and risk</b>	N/A
<b>Reporting/consideration route for the paper</b>	N/A
<b>Authors</b>	Mary Childs, Research Degrees Office
<b>Sponsor</b>	Vice-Principal (Research and Innovation) Professor Adrian Armstrong, Director of the Doctoral College and Chair of the Research Degrees Programmes and Examinations Board

## RESEARCH DEGREE PROGRAMMES AND EXAMINATIONS BOARD

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

October – November 2020

#### Meetings and membership

1. The Research Degree Programmes and Examinations Board meets monthly. The membership comprises:
  - Director of the Doctoral College [Chair]
  - Faculty Deputy Deans for Research (PGR)
  - One additional representative (a school/institute Director of Graduate Studies) from each Faculty

The secretariat is provided by the Research Degrees Office. The Doctoral College Manager is in attendance.

#### Examinations Business

2. The Board:
  - considers and approves nominations for internal and external examiners for research degrees;
  - considers and approves outcomes of research degree examinations and reviews all examiners' reports;
  - considers and makes decisions on applications to interrupt studies and extensions to the thesis submission deadline;
  - approves awards for research degrees on behalf of Senate.

Decisions are recorded in the minutes of the monthly meetings of the Board.

3. Request to withdraw a thesis from examination

The Board has considered a request to permit a submitted thesis to be withdrawn from examination under Academic Regulation 8.96.

“The examiners may reject a thesis which they consider to be incomplete or unacceptable without conducting an examination. Such cases will be reported to the Chair of the Research Degree Programmes and Examinations Board to determine the action to be taken. The candidate may be permitted to submit the thesis for examination on a subsequent occasion.”

This is a very rare occurrence. The request has been approved. The details are recorded in the confidential minutes of the Board.

## **Review of research degrees remote viva policy**

4. The Covid-19 situation has required the Board and the Research Degrees Office to make changes to research degrees policies and processes to enable these to be conducted online. The Board reported these to Senate in its report of May 2020.
5. At several recent meetings the Board has reviewed the policy on remote vivas for annual progression and examination. The review noted in particular:
  - it is very likely that most examination vivas and annual progression review meetings will be held online in the remainder of the 2020-21 academic year;
  - experience has been gained across all academic departments by staff and students in managing and participating in online meetings, supervision meetings, progression review meetings and viva examinations. The stability of the online platforms hosting these meetings has exceeded initial expectations at the beginning of the March 2020 lockdown. Feedback indicates that holding these events online has worked satisfactorily;
  - the need to reconsider the recommendation in policy version 1 that progression review meetings and examination vivas where the decision was likely to be an unsuccessful one might be deferred until an in-person examination was possible. The ongoing situation indicates that this policy needs to be amended so that all progression review meetings and examination vivas may be held online;
  - feedback from some academic departments that it is becoming increasingly difficult to identify an Independent Chair for online vivas.
6. The Board has approved these main changes to the policy:
  - all annual progression review meetings and viva examinations may be held online unless it is safe to do otherwise;
  - for the viva examination the candidate has the right to choose the format of their examination: either online or in person. This does not apply to annual progression review assessment meetings which should not normally be delayed;
  - the thesis submission form will be revised to include a tick box for the candidate to indicate if they do not consent to an online viva. In discussing the examination arrangements, the supervisor should discuss with the candidate that if they do not wish to proceed with an online viva, a face-to-face viva may not be possible for some significant time. All participants in the viva must agree to an online viva or to hold an in person viva;
  - approval for an online viva is no longer required from the appropriate Faculty Deputy Dean for Research;
  - it will no longer be mandatory to appoint an Independent Chair for every online viva examination. Schools and institutes may consider it desirable to appoint an Independent Chair in line with the Academic Regulations and Code of Practice, for example if the examiners' combined experience of conducting research degree examinations does not meet the minimum requirements in the Academic Regulations;

- the Board has agreed that the role of Viva Convenor will be responsible to check the IT connections prior to the viva and at the commencement and end of the viva, and to be a contact for the examiners and candidate during the viva. The Viva Convenor may be a member of the student's supervisory team or other member of academic staff in the student's school or institute. The Viva Convenor cannot be one of the examiners or a member of administrative or other departmental staff;
  - examiners in their joint report will be required to confirm if the viva was held in person or online and to comment on the quality and consistency of the online connection and record any breaks in connection.
7. The policy is being finalised for publication.
  8. The Research Degrees Board has approved at its November meeting suspension of those parts of the Academic Regulations 8.91 and 8.92 for the academic year 2020-21 that concern approval of online / video-link vivas. Academic Registrar approval will be requested. These regulations require specific approval of the arrangements for each online viva and attendance of an examiner or the student by video-link as follows:

8.91 The examination process is held in private, and is not a public examination. Normally, the oral examination is held at Queen Mary with the candidate and both examiners present. If agreed by the candidate, Senate or its delegated authority may under exceptional circumstances permit one of the examiners to attend the examination by video-link. In such cases an independent chair must be appointed.

8.92 If requested by the candidate, Senate or its delegated authority may under exceptional circumstances permit the candidate to attend the examination by video link. Both examiners must be present in person at Queen Mary. The candidate must attend the examination from an approved location in a recognised University or other approved body, such as the British Council, and a member of that organisation's academic or professional staff must act as invigilator and be present in the room with the candidate for the duration of the examination.

#### **Requirements for transfer to writing-up status**

9. The Board has reviewed the Academic Regulations concerning transfer to writing-up status concerning the requirement that a student is *required to have completed **all** experimental work or collection of material related to their thesis* before they may transfer to writing up status.
10. The Board has agreed to remove the requirement concerning collection of material from the conditions. Different approaches to writing-up status are taken within each Faculty, and sometimes more locally within schools and institutes. The requirement that a student be considered able to submit the thesis within 12 months of transfer to writing-up status does not depend on data collection being complete. In practice there is not always a clear cut-off for students between data collection and the drafting of the thesis and students may need to continue their research activity to some extent whilst writing to confirm results or conclusions.
11. The change to Regulations will come into effect from August 2021. The Research Degrees Board therefore has approved at its November meeting suspension of

Academic Regulation 8.20 for the academic year 2020-21 to remove the requirement in square brackets. Academic Registrar approval will be requested.

8.20 A student may transfer to 'writing up' status with the approval of Senate or its delegated authority provided that they have completed the minimum registration period and not exceeded the maximum registration period. In order to transfer to writing up status, a student is normally required to have passed annual progression in the second year of study (fourth year of study for part-time students) and, in the judgement of the primary supervisor, be in a position to submit the thesis within 12 months. A student registered for MPhil/PhD can only be transferred to writing up status if they have completed the transfer process from MPhil to PhD where transfer is a requirement of their research studies programme.

Mary Childs  
Research Degrees Office, ARCS