

QMU Graduate School

Probationary Assessment - Guidelines for Candidates

This guidance must be read in conjunction with the relevant section from the [PhD Regulations \(2020\)](#)- the Regulations take precedence in all situations.

1 Introduction

When you commence PhD studies at QMU, there are a number of progression requirements that must be completed during your programme. These are:

Stage	Full Time	Part Time
1. Outline Proposal	1-2 months from start date	2-4 months from start date
2. Probationary Assessment	5 months from start date	10 months from start date
3. Annual Progress Report	Annually in September / October	
4. Assessed Seminar 1	By the end of Year 2	By the end of Year 4
5. Assessed Seminar 2	By the end of Year 3	By the end of Year 6
6. Submission of Thesis	3 years from start date (4 years if continuation year used)	6 years from start date (8 years if continuation year used)
7. Oral Examination (or viva)	Approximately 6 weeks after the submission of the thesis.	

The **Probationary Assessment** is an important, early progression point for all candidates registered on the PhD programme. The assessment presents a valuable opportunity for you to articulate the plans for your study to a panel of experienced academics who will offer constructive feedback to you. Successful completion of the assessment leads to confirmation of your registration as a PhD candidate at the University. The relevant PhD Regulations (20120) concerning probationary assessment are found [here](#)

You and your supervisors are advised to familiarise yourselves with the probationary assessment guidelines at the start of your programme.

In summary, the key points are:

- The probationary assessment proposal should be submitted no later than 5 months after commencing on the programme for full-time candidates, or 10 months for part-time candidates. Candidates may apply to the Graduate School Academic Board (GSAB), in advance of the probationary assessment date, for permission to delay the assessment beyond this time. Justifiable reasons must be provided to the GSAB for an extension to be approved. You will be advised on all of your submission deadlines at the start of your programme but if you are unsure of any dates, please contact GraduateSchool@qmu.ac.uk.
- All candidates must have had their registration as a PhD candidate confirmed within 12 months (full time candidates) or 24 months (part time candidates) (Regulation 6.3.1).

- Where a candidate is unable to meet the registration deadline due to extenuating circumstances, they should apply to the GSAB for an extension to the submission / completion deadline (Regulation 6.3.1).
- Candidates have up to three opportunities to fulfil the requirements of the assessment. Candidates will be given guidance and feedback at each stage to help them develop to the research standard required to successfully progress. If a candidate does not reach the required standard for the probationary assessment within two years of initial matriculation (full-time) or four years (part-time), a recommendation will be made for de-registration (Regulation 6.3.14).

2 Purpose of the assessment

The aim of the probationary assessment is to give you (and your supervisors) an independent assessment of how well you are progressing with planning your research study and your programme as a whole. Assessors will highlight particular strengths, as well as any potential areas for development at an early stage so you can decide how to respond to these.

The format of the assessment has been designed to mirror (as far as possible) the examination of the final thesis, giving you practice in both the written element and in dealing with an oral examination. However, it is not expected that you will be at doctoral level at this early point in your programme.

The process should provide a friendly, kind and constructive discussion of the proposed research so that you can clarify your thinking and develop a research proposal that fulfils the requirements of doctoral research study.

3 Composition and selection of assessment panel

A pool of suitable assessors is kept by The Graduate School consisting of members of academic staff appropriately qualified and experienced to undertake PhD probationary assessments. Assessors undertake regular training to promote a consistent approach and ensure they are up to date with the expectations for the role. You require two assessors to make up your panel. The assessors are normally experienced researchers who are both qualified to doctoral level and are research active. Supervisory Teams, in discussion with yourself, are invited to suggest names for assessors. However, panel members will be approved by the GSAB. Assessors can be selected for their expertise on the topic or methodology of your research or other relevant criteria. The Graduate School encourages assessors to be selected both from within the same research field or Research Centre and from a complementary field or a different Research Centre. In rare circumstances, an external assessor may be brought in for research in specialist fields (for example, practice-based research) or where a programme is a joint or shared award. Assessors may be members of Graduate School Academic Board (GSAB) or Research Strategy Committee (RSC). The Assessment Panel should be confirmed in advance of the submission of the probationary report to avoid any unnecessary delays in planning the probationary viva.

Specific requests for panel membership cannot be guaranteed. Once the GSAB has agreed the panel membership, the selected panel members will be contacted by the Graduate School to request their participation on the assessment panel and will be informed of the likely timing of assessment requirements. In the event of a resubmission, the original panel would normally be retained unless there are reasons why this is not constructive.

The selected probationary assessment panel will usually remain in place for the purpose of assessing your Assessed Seminars in second (or fourth) and third (or sixth) year. You may also contact your assessors in-between assessments for informal discussions and updates about your research.

4 Framework for the written probationary report

The probationary assessment constitutes two parts:

1. The submission of a 6000 (+10%) word written proposal or report. Or, for Creative Practice candidates, indicative or draft examples of the proposed creative outputs and an associated 2500 word text; and
2. An interview (or viva) with your assessment panel.

More information with regard to the assessment requirements are discussed below.

4.1 What the written report should include

You should write a research proposal or report describing and justifying your research project and the way in which you are planning to conduct your research. Guidance on what you should aim to include in the probationary report (and what assessors will expect to see or may ask you about in your viva) is included in the table below.

Candidates may decide to use a different or creative format where this better suits the research.

Your submission for the probationary report should include the context for your research ideas, therefore, you will need to read widely and relevantly to make sure that your proposal has originality, that it will add knowledge to the field and that it builds on existing sources.

Section	Guidance
Introduction and evidence and/or literature review	The introduction should set out what will follow in the document as well as providing a brief background to the study. Summarise current and relevant evidence and/or literature in your proposed area of research to determine the relevance and value of your research as well as the gap in knowledge that your research would address.
Research question(s)	Explain the question(s) you want your research to address. You may instead need to include a hypothesis. If you are not including a research question then you must set out the aims and objectives of your research.
Aim(s) and objectives	These should clearly and concisely outline what you are seeking to achieve as you undertake your research unless you are designing research that is of a participatory nature where participants will be involved in the process.
Research paradigm (including but not limited to methodology)	Consider the ontological and epistemological positioning of your research and the methodology or methodological principles you will be drawing upon. It is important to demonstrate your understanding of the limitations of your proposed methodology and why it is the most appropriate (or more appropriate than possible alternatives) for your research. It may be that the methodology is not yet fully worked out.
Methods	Where possible , you should include a plan, either in outline or more detailed format, setting out the research you are going to do and how you are going to do it. It is acceptable for your research methods to be 'preliminary' at this stage as they will evolve over time and as your thinking progresses. If you have spent more time considering your research paradigm, you may not have your methods set out yet. Where you do, make sure that the methods are

	appropriate for your research questions / aims and are consistent with the proposed methodology.
Ethics	Consider and discuss the ethical implications of your study, for example, the ethical issues that are likely to arise during your research. Also consider what ethical approval will be required and how you will manage your reflexivity as a researcher.
Anticipated outcomes	Describe what you hope to discover at the end of your research and what new areas it might open up. This can prove difficult as you cannot know the research findings prior to completion, but there needs to be a range of possible outcomes e.g. a new interpretation, a new discovery or a problem solved.
Research time plan	Work out how you will go about your research and the writing up in the time you have. Develop a Gantt chart, which can be high level at this stage.
Impact planning	You need to develop a research impact plan later in your research and you can be asked about your understanding of research impact and how you might go about paying attention to impact in your own research.
Summary	This should briefly outline what has been considered in the document and provide the reader with a summing up of all the relevant information.
References	Provide a complete and correctly applied list of any cited references (The QMU Write and Cite Guide to referencing is an essential resource and can be viewed here).

If you have been involved in scoping or pilot research, then it may be appropriate to write this up also, providing there is enough information included about the full project for the assessors to understand the project scale, where the pilot data fits, and how feasible the overall project is. Such questions should be fully discussed with your supervisory team.

4.2 Get input from your supervisory team

You are strongly recommended to seek guidance and feedback from your supervisory team as you prepare your probationary assessment proposal/report.

You are advised to agree with your supervisors a date for submission of written drafts of your report, on which supervisors should provide timely feedback (as agreed in your learning contract). There should be sufficient time between submission of drafts and submission of the final work to allow supervisors to read and provide feedback and for you to make the necessary amendments before submitting the final version of the report to the Graduate School.

Supervisors should be proactive in ensuring they are providing the necessary support and guidance for you to successfully progress past the probationary assessment stage at the first attempt.

4.3 Formatting of the written report

Proposals should be word processed in a plain font (such as Arial or Times), with at least 1.5 paragraph spacing. Please refer to the general guidelines on the format of the final thesis, as these are applicable to most academic work. The probationary assessment report is a good opportunity to get into the practice of writing in the format required for the final thesis.

For formatting guidance refer to Section 10 of the [PhD Regulations \(2020\)](#).

4.4 Submitting the written report

The proposal cannot be anonymously marked, so include the “Probationary Assessment Report Submission Form” at the start of the document. It is available from the Graduate School website and the Doctoral Hub site.

Your proposal/report should be submitted to graduateschool@qmu.ac.uk by the end of the day of the stated deadline. This deadline should have been communicated to you by email following your first Doctoral Development week. Please ask the Graduate School if you have not received a formal deadline or are unsure. Whilst we make every effort to communicate dates and deadlines, candidates and their supervisors also have a personal responsibility to be familiar with the regulations and stages of the PhD journey and ensure timely submission of work.

Submissions which are over the maximum word limit (6600) will not be accepted for examination.

5 The probationary oral assessment (or viva voce)

The probationary assessment constitutes two parts:

1. The submission of a written proposal or report up to 6000 (+10%) words. Or, for Creative Practice candidates, indicative or draft examples of the proposed creative outputs and an associated 2500 word text; and
2. An interview (or viva) with an assessment panel.

More information of the viva and assessment panel is provided below.

5.1 Viva arrangements

Vivas usually take place on campus, although virtual vivas may be arranged, if required due to extenuating circumstances. Please let the Graduate School know in advance (i.e. before submission of the written report) if you will not be able to attend a viva in person.

If you have any particular requirements or adjustments that need to be made to enable you to fully participate in the assessment, please inform the Graduate School and we will plan these with you or your named personal assistant.

The viva process should be friendly, kind and constructive. The general format of a probationary assessment is as follows:

Timings	Details
30 minutes	The panel meet and have a pre-assessment discussion.
60 minutes (max)	The candidate (and supervisor) arrives and the discussion / assessment takes place
15 minutes*	The panel discuss the outcome/recommendation and come to an agreed final outcome
15 minutes*	The panel inform the candidate of their recommendation. (please note this is not confirmed until approved by the GSAB)

* These are guideline times only.

You are not be expected to be at PhD level at this stage, instead you will be expected to demonstrate that you are working towards the PhD criteria and that you have made progress since you started your programme.

Before the viva, the panel review your proposal/report, looking for evidence of the following:

- You have outlined as fully as possible, your research proposal (6000 words in length (+10%)) describing and justifying the research project and the way in which you're planning to conduct your research.
 - The fullness and definitiveness of the proposal will depend on the research paradigm, including the methodology for the project.
 - Assessors must take the research paradigm and methodology into account when considering your progress and must conduct the assessment fairly based on the study and decisions you have taken to date.

A submission for the probationary proposal/report should include the context of research ideas, therefore, there should be some background and specific context to the research. Assessors might also look for where the proposal has originality, how it will add knowledge to the field and how it builds on existing knowledge.

Other considerations are:

- The report is written in an appropriate format (i.e. in the QMU style of final thesis)
- Written work is clearly presented with a logical structure
- Writing is coherent with good use of English language and grammar
- Conventions of citation and referencing are correctly applied
- Logical structuring of the proposal/report
- Clarity and relevance of answers to questions in the viva
- A good knowledge of key literature relevant to the study
- Ability to defend decisions or choices
- Ability to 'think through' the research process in the viva
- Evidence that your role in the research has been considered
- Oral communication skills, including good command of spoken English
- Appreciation of the training, skills and development required to complete the project (drawing on The Vitae Researcher Development Framework) and to engage in wider learning opportunities such as the READ programme

At the end of the assessment, you (and a supervisor if you have agreed to one attending) should leave the room so the panel can have a private discussion to agree the assessment outcome. You will then be asked back into the room to hear the recommendation and to receive verbal feedback and feedforward. Please note that at this stage the outcome is pending GSAB approval.

5.3 Supervision Support

Although it is not a regulatory requirement for a supervisor to attend the viva with you, it is recommended that a member of the supervisory team is in attendance. They will not be able to contribute to the discussion, (unless invited to do so by the Panel) but they can take notes which may be useful afterwards.

5.4 Other Information

You may bring in your proposal/report and a small number of other relevant materials.

6 The Joint Report

Following the viva, the assessors will write a “Joint Report” consisting of their detailed feedback and they will recommend an assessment outcome. Once submitted to the Graduate School, the Joint Report will be reviewed by selected members of the Graduate School Academic Board (GSAB) and approved for release to you and your supervisory team.

On the basis of the written report and the performance at the viva, the assessors will make one of four recommended outcomes:

- (a) Candidate’s registration to be confirmed as a PhD candidate.
- (b) Candidate to make revisions to their proposal and resubmit the report.
- (c) Candidate to make revisions to their proposal and resubmit the report and attend a second viva.
- (d) In the unlikely event of serious concerns, the panel may recommend that a candidate’s registration be terminated.

The report and the assessment outcome will be reviewed by members of the Graduate School Academic Board (GSAB). Once approved, the outcome will be formally released to you and your supervisors. You will receive the Joint Report and outcome via email from the Graduate School. You and/or your supervisors are welcome to provide feedback on the process. Should you or your supervisors have any questions or concerns about the process or outcome, please contact the Graduate School in the first instance. Exceptionally a candidate or their supervisors may wish to challenge constructively and to aspects of the viva process or decisions made by assessors. Again, this should happen via The Graduate School.

If the outcome of the assessment is (d) this recommendation will be considered by the full GSAB and a decision on your continued registration will be agreed. To inform the decision making process, the GSAB will engage fully with the candidate, their supervisory team and assessors.

6.1 Post-viva Meeting

Following the dissemination of the Joint Report, you are advised to meet with your supervisors. If the panel recommended that your registration be confirmed, then you should carry on with your research as planned.

If the recommended outcome was (b) or (c) you must meet with your supervisory team to discuss the Joint Report fully. You will be provided with a list of recommended revisions. You must then agree an action plan to address the recommended revisions and any advisory comments that may have also been included. If need be, your supervisory team can organise a meeting with the panel Chair to clarify the panel’s comments prior to you making revisions to your proposal/report.

If you or your supervisory team is not in agreement with a particular aspect of the report (such as one or more of the recommended revisions), then you are within your rights not to make the

revision. In this instance, you must provide the panel with a constructive and considered response that appropriately justifies and defends your decision (as per the usual process when defending work at the final viva stage of the PhD).

7 The Second Submission

Candidates who are required to resubmit normally get 6 weeks (full time) or 12 weeks (part time) from the date the report is provided to make their amendments.

The revised proposal/report along with a table of revisions needs to be resubmitted to the Graduate School by the deadline.

Following submission of the revised proposal/report, the Panel will review it and inform the Graduate School of their acceptance or otherwise.

Where outcome (c) was originally recommended, candidates will be invited to another viva approximately six weeks following submission of the revised proposal/report.

The panel will review the resubmission and make an assessment recommendation from the following three options:

- (a) Candidate registration as a PhD candidate is confirmed
- (b) Candidate is required to revise their proposal and resubmit for a third and final time.
- (c) In the unlikely event of serious concerns, the panel may recommend that the candidate's registration be terminated.

The report and the assessment outcome will be reviewed by members of the GSAB and, will be approved for formal release to you and your supervisors. You will receive the Joint Report and outcome via email from the Graduate School.

If the outcome of the assessment is (c) this recommendation will be considered by the full GSAB and a decision on your continued registration will be agreed. To inform the decision making process, the GSAB will engage fully with the candidate, their supervisory team and assessors.

8 The Third and Final Submission

If candidates are asked to submit for a third time they will be required to meet with the Chair of the panel and their Supervisory team. This will allow the panel to explain clearly where the proposal/report and viva defence need improving and how the candidate can address these satisfactorily.

The third submission is the final opportunity to progress and have registration as a PhD candidate confirmed.

The panel will review the resubmission and make an assessment recommendation from the following two options:

- (a) Registration as a PhD candidate is confirmed.
- (b) The panel recommends that the candidate's registration be terminated.

The report and the assessment outcome will be reviewed by members of the GSAB and, will be approved for formal release to you and your supervisors. You will receive the Joint Report and outcome via email from the Graduate School. If the outcome of the assessment is (b) this

recommendation will be discussed by the full GSAB and a decision on your continued registration will be agreed.