

## QMU Graduate School

### Probationary Assessment - Guidelines for Assessors

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

These guidelines are periodically updated and it is good practice to re-read them prior to each probationary assessment to ensure your understanding is up to date and accurate. This is important for all supervisors and assessors but especially for those new to supervision at QMU.

#### **The guidance covers:**

1. Composition and selection of assessment panel
2. The probationary assessment process
3. Assessment Outcome Options
4. Other considerations

#### **1. 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. This provides a source of internal assessors, or panel members, for doctoral candidates across the university and can support a fair distribution of the internal assessment workload across the Research Centres and Divisions.

Each candidate requires two assessors to make up their panel. The assessors are normally experienced researchers who are both qualified to doctoral level and are research active. Research supervisors, in discussion with candidates, are invited to suggest internal assessors. However, panel members will be approved by the Graduate School Academic Board (GSAB). Panel members can be selected for their relevant expertise of the topic methodology 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 panellist may be brought in for research in specialist fields (for example, practice-based research) or where a programme is a joint or shared award. Panellists may be members of The Graduate School Academic Board (GSAB) or Research Strategy Committee (RSC).

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

The selected probationary assessment panel will usually remain in place for the purpose of assessing the candidate's Assessed Seminars in their second (or fourth) and third (or sixth) year of study. Panel members may be contacted by candidate in-between assessments for informal discussions and updates.

#### **2. The probationary assessment process**

The assessment process consists of:

1. Review of the candidate's proposal/report \*
2. Submission of a preliminary and independent assessor's report prior to the viva
3. Conducting the viva and providing the agreed outcome and verbal feedback and feedforward
4. Panel chairperson coordinating and submitting the joint written report with a recommended outcome
5. Checking any required amendments by the candidate (where a resubmission is required)

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

## **2.1 Reviewing the candidates proposal/report**

Before the viva, the panel reviews the candidate's proposal/report, looking for evidence of the following:

- The candidate has outlined, as fully as possible, their research proposal (6000 words in length (+10%)) describing and justifying their research project and the way in which they are planning to conduct their 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 candidate progress and must conduct the assessment on what the candidate has been working on, and not on what the assessors' judges they should have worked on.

Guidance is provided to candidates on what they should aim to include in their probationary proposal/report. See Appendix 1 in this document and/or the PhD Candidate Handbook for further details.

The 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, and that it will add knowledge to the field and builds on existing knowledge.

Please note that PhD by Creative Practice candidates are asked to submit indicative or draft examples of the proposed creative outputs and an associated 2500 word text.

Candidates who are building directly on Masters level research or who have planned a scoping or pilot study may wish to include that material in their proposal/report (but this is not generally expected at this stage).

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
- A good knowledge of key literature relevant to the study
- Evidence that the candidate's role in the research has been considered
- 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.

## 2.2 Submission of the preliminary report form

Each panel member must independently review the candidate's proposal/report and complete a Preliminary Report Form (Probationary Assessment). This form should be submitted to [graduateschool@qmu.ac.uk](mailto:graduateschool@qmu.ac.uk) no later than two working days before the scheduled viva. Any suggestion that a candidate would be de-registered must be raised with Graduate School in advance of the viva.

The preliminary report should indicate areas for discussion at the viva and a provisional outcome. These reports can be used to assist in drafting the final report. On occasions they may be used to respond to concerns or complaints from candidates or supervisors.

Assessors must arrange a discussion prior to the assessment taking place. The Graduate School will schedule a 15 minute meeting immediately prior to the viva, however, you may also wish to arrange a meeting before this to avoid delaying the start of the viva. The Graduate School can help with any arrangements as needed. Where serious issues of considerable concern have been identified by the assessors, the panel chair person must contact supervisors for clarification. If this is unsatisfactory, they must contact the Graduate School. Where assessors fail to agree on the format of the assessment, again the panel chairperson must contact The Graduate School.

## 2.3 Conducting the assessment viva

Vivas usually take place on campus, although virtual vivas may be arranged, if required due to extenuating circumstances. You will be informed as early as possible if the viva will be held virtually.

Candidates may bring in their proposal/report and a small number of other relevant materials.

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

Timings	Details
30 minutes	The panel meet and have the summary 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 and points for verbal feedback and feedforward
15 minutes	The panel informs the candidate of their decision and gives feedback feed forward.

Candidates are not expected to be at SCFC Level 12/PhD level at this stage, but they are expected to demonstrate that they are working towards this level and that they have progressed since the start of their programme.

Considerations for the viva:

- Clarity and relevance of answers to questions in the viva
- Ability to defend decisions or choices
- Ability to ‘think through’ the research process in the viva
- Oral communication skills, including good command of spoken English

While the purpose of the probationary assessment is, as far as possible, to confirm registration, there are four possible assessment outcomes, as detailed in PhD Regulation 6.4.5

- (a) That the candidate be confirmed as a PhD candidate
- (b) That the candidate be required to resubmit amendments
- (c) That the candidate be required to resubmit with amendments and another viva
- (d) That the candidate be de-registered.

These outcomes are explained in more detail in Section 3.

At the end of the assessment, the candidate (and supervisor) should leave the room so the panel can have a short private discussion to agree the assessment outcome (more details provided in the following sections). The candidate (and supervisor) should then be called into the room to hear the recommendation and receive the feedback and feedforward.

At the end of the assessment the panel chairperson should collate sufficient information to complete the joint report form. Note that the other assessor may complete the joint report as a learning and development opportunity – however the panel chairperson must sign the report.

## **2.4 Completing the Joint Report of the Assessors**

As detailed in PhD Regulation 6.4.5 the Joint Report should comment on whether:

- the candidate is suitable to undertake research leading to the successful award of the relevant degree
- the candidate is making satisfactory progress
- any additional research training is appropriate
- the necessary research facilities are available

Please see Section 3 for more detailed guidance on resubmission / amendments.

It is the overall responsibility of the panel chairperson to complete the joint report and send it to [graduateschool@gmu.ac.uk](mailto:graduateschool@gmu.ac.uk) within 5 working days following the date of the viva. The report will be considered and, if appropriate, approved by the GSAB. Once approved, the Joint Report will be shared with the candidate and their supervisory team and actions implemented as required. Candidates and/or supervisors may challenge the viva process or decisions made by assessors.

## **3. Assessment Outcome Options**

It is essential that assessors proceed on the basis that the research proposal has already been approved through the candidate’s Outline Proposal and has been further developed through the process of research supervision. Therefore, the role of the assessors is not to approve/disapprove the research proposal or aspects within it. Instead assessors are concerned with assessing if and how well the candidate is to progress with their specific research project.

The options available to assessment panels are explained below:

a) PhD Registration confirmed

- The candidate demonstrated good understanding of the project in their oral defence, and their written report is generally of a high standard.
- You have no serious concerns about the ability of the candidate to conduct doctoral level research of the type they propose.
- You are confident that the research is on the way to being well planned and achievable.

b) Resubmission with amendments with no second viva

- The candidate demonstrated a less than satisfactory understanding of their project in their proposal and in their responses.
- The candidate could not defend their significant choices and decisions regarding the research project.
- You have concerns that the candidate will not attend to the revisions unless they are formalised or the candidate will significantly benefit from undertaking the work associated with revising the proposal/report.

The panel must detail, at the end of the joint report, the required revisions that the candidate must attend to in order to pass probation. Assessors may include a minimal number of advisory comments that would be beneficial for the candidate to address but aren't required to pass the assessment.

The time-scale for resubmission will normally be 6 weeks for full-time candidates or 12 weeks for part-time candidates. Assessors should indicate the agreed timeframe for the resubmission (agreed with candidate and supervisor) in the Joint Report and the Graduate School will calculate the exact date based on when the report is released to the candidate. If you wish to state a specific resubmission deadline, please take into account that it may typically take up to two weeks for the joint report to be approved by GSAB.

Following sharing of the outcome, the candidate and Supervisory Team should discuss the required revisions. If required, the candidate's supervisory team may organise a meeting with the panel Chair to clarify the panel's report prior to the candidate progressing their amendments. If the candidate or supervisory team is not in agreement with a particular aspect of the report (such as one required revision), the candidate is within their rights not to make the revision. But in this instance the candidate must provide the panel with a response that appropriately justifies and defends their decision (as per the usual process when defending work at the final viva stage of the PhD).

c) Resubmission with amendments and second viva

A second viva is only required where a candidate has been unsuccessful in demonstrating a strong oral defence. In this instance, the panel can ask the candidate to resubmit their report with amendments and attend a second viva. Assessors intending to make this decision should let the candidate and supervisor know at the end of the viva, that this is the required option and that they will be in contact with the Graduate School to discuss the panel's provisional decision.

As with option b, the assessment panel should detail the required revisions and may provide advisory comments. If appropriate, the panel may also provide feedback that may be helpful to the candidate for their second viva.

d) Recommend for deregistration

Grounds for deciding on this option are generally related to a poor oral defence based on evidence that the candidate did not have ownership of the written work in the proposal/report. In the case of plagiarism, this issue will be dealt with under the “Academic Dishonesty, Plagiarism and Fraud” regulations as described in the PhD Regulations.

In the event that a candidate is recommended for de-registration, the Head of Graduate School will meet with the candidate to discuss the recommended decision and report back to the GSAB. The full GSAB membership will consider and, if appropriate, approve the recommendation of deregistration.

If approved, the candidate’s registration as a PhD candidate at QMU will end. Alternatively, GSAB may decide to offer a further attempt and may recommend a 3<sup>rd</sup> assessor be appointed, if appropriate.

### **3.1 If the panel requests a second submission and repeat viva**

If a candidate is required to resubmit with revisions the panel will be required to review the report again and if a second viva has been requested then this will be arranged by the Graduate School. Both panel members are required to review the second submission against the required revisions as stated in the Joint Report. Following the viva (if required), the chairperson of the panel submits a Joint Report (Resubmission) to the Graduate School within 5 working days of the second viva. If no second viva is required, the report should be submitted within two weeks of receiving the candidate’s resubmission.

The panel makes a recommendation based on the following outcomes:

- (a) The candidate is confirmed as a PhD candidate.
- (b) That the candidate is required to resubmit for a third and final time.
- (c) The candidate be de-registered.

### **3.2 If the panel request a third submission**

The third submission is a candidate’s last chance to progress and have their registration as a PhD candidate confirmed. If it is recommended that a candidate submits for a third time the panel will be required to meet with the candidate and their supervision 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 panel must review the third submission and make one of two recommendations:

- (a) The candidate is confirmed as a PhD candidate.
- (b) The candidate be de-registered.

The chairperson of the panel submits a Joint Report (Resubmission) to the Graduate School within two weeks of being sent the student’s resubmitted report.

## **4. Other considerations**

This process does not give candidates the opportunity to raise any issues around supervision or university facilities. This will be done through the usual annual progress report. If a candidate would like to raise issues about supervision or facilities, please inform the candidate to make contact with their relevant Doctoral Research Coordinator – or they might wish to talk to the Doctoral Candidate Association.

## Appendix 1 Guidance on Typical Probationary Reports Given to Candidates

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 form or a more detailed, for your research; outlining 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 <a href="#">here</a> ).