

Degree Committee for the Faculty of Physics & Chemistry

Probationary review of doctoral students

Guide for Assessors, Supervisors and Departments

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1. PROBATIONARY REVIEW INTRODUCTION

The end-of-probation 'first-year' review is a crucial stage in the progress of potential PhD students:

- Serious problems need to be dealt with at this stage if they have not been already;
- Minor problems, and suggestions for improvement, can be formally recorded and acted on.

In this Faculty, the process consists of four main steps

1. **Formal assessment** of the student's written report by two **Assessors** (neither of whom is the supervisor) – to include an oral and to take place before the end of the first year of study.
2. **Feedback** - given to the student and supervisor.
3. An invitation to the **Principal Supervisor** to submit a **report by email** on the student's progress and aptitude in the first year including a clear recommendation on whether or not the student should now be registered for the PhD.
4. Consideration of the above reports by the **department** responsible for the student, leading to consideration by the **Degree Committee**, who formally approves registration for the PhD or recommends an alternative outcome to the University's **Postgraduate Committee**.

The outcomes will be familiar from the format of the PhD examination itself and are as follows:

- In most cases, Assessors recommend that the student **passes** the probationary review first time, and may suggest some points for discussion with their supervisor(s). Subject to a satisfactory supervisor report by email and departmental agreement, the student can be REGISTERED for the PhD degree;
- In a few cases, Assessors may want to see a **corrected report** before agreeing to recommend a student for registration for the PhD;
- In a small minority of cases, the Assessors cannot recommend the student for registration and may ask for a **revised report and possibly a second meeting** with the student; this will either lead to registration for the PhD, or the Degree Committee's process for dealing with students who have **failed** to be registered for the PhD then comes into play.

The following pages explain these steps in more detail. The same information is available on our website for Assessors - <https://www.dpc.physsci.cam.ac.uk/examiners/examiner1styear>. You can also find the process described from the student's viewpoint at <https://www.dpc.physsci.cam.ac.uk/students/1styear>.

2. FOR ASSESSORS

A. Assessment process

Assessment is a formal process and works along the same lines as a PhD examination, conducted by two independent Assessors. Ideally, the process will be completed within 6 weeks of you receiving the student's work:

1. **Appointment:** Assessors will be asked (normally by the Supervisor) whether or not you are willing in principle to examine the report; please try to avoid any discussion of the student and their work at this point so that you remain independent of the other Assessor and of the Supervisor.
2. **Receipt of student's work:** Following confirmation of your appointment by the Degree Committee, you will receive the student's work and supporting documentation via a Moodle link sent by the Degree Committee Office. Please allow one week for the report to be sent to you following your appointment or report submission, whichever is later. Please do not contact the student directly for a copy of their report or any additional documents; they should be assessed on the report submitted to the Degree Committee.
3. **Coronavirus impact statement:** COVID-19 has had a substantial impact on research activities undertaken by many research students. Lack of access to facilities or field sites may have limited the amount of empirical research that could be completed in their first year. Students may have had to implement a change in research direction to that originally planned.
Students have been invited to submit an optional Research Impact Statement which you can access through Moodle alongside their report. The statement provides details of how their research has been impacted by COVID-19 and what adjustments they have made in response. The student's personal circumstances should not be taken into account as there are other mechanisms to mitigate for these.

We ask that you take into account any circumstances detailed in the impact statement, for example recognising the report may have less or different empirical research than under normal circumstances. Information provided in the statement may be explored in more detail in the oral assessment. The Degree Committee expects the first year assessment will continue to focus on the student's ability and aptitude for PhD research. The standards and requirements for recommending registration for the PhD are unchanged.
4. **Your independent pre-oral report:** You are asked to review the student's work and make your own independent, provisional pre-oral assessment using form Reg1. Please provide brief comments to support your ratings.
5. **Oral:** You will need to arrange to meet the student and the other Assessor for an oral examination as soon as possible AFTER you have received the student's work. Please allow at least 10-14 days after the student's report submission deadline when scheduling a viva date.
6. **If the student has declared any disability or chronic condition** that they wish you to know about or that requires adjustment to viva, we will tell you.
7. **Joint report and recommendation:** Having conducted the oral, you should write a joint report and make a joint recommendation concerning registration using **form Reg2**.
8. **Report submission:** Upload all your reports to Moodle as quickly as possible after the oral, ideally as a single .pdf package. Do not wait for any corrections or revisions to be completed; we want to be able to consider your recommendation and release your reports to relevant parties as quickly as possible. Instructions for using Moodle are available on the Degree Committee website.
Note that your reports and coversheets will be made available to the student, their supervisor and the Department as part of our decision-making and feedback processes.
9. **Fee:** If you are not a University Officer you can claim a small fee for this work – see the Degree Committee website.

B. What the assessment should cover

- Evidence of the student's **ability** and **aptitude for research** as provided by the written work, its oral defence, and the student's **knowledge** of the field in general.
- **Aptitude** of the student to work at doctoral level.
- Suitability of the **project** for completion within the normal time scale for the PhD.

You may also wish to comment on:

- Suitability of current supervisory arrangements.
- Suggestions for further/remedial work.

C. Assessors' recommendation on registration – see coversheet Reg2

Based on evidence from the written report and oral, you are to determine if you are satisfied the student should now be registered for the PhD. You are asked to jointly choose between four possible outcomes:

YES: Register for the PhD degree (Reg2 option 1)

Student and project are suitable for registration for the PhD degree. If more training is needed, or the project needs adjustment to complete in 4 years, please specify.

YES BUT: Register for the PhD degree after corrections (Reg2 option 2)

Student and project are suitable for registration for the PhD degree but you wish to see some essential aspects of the report corrected first. Please indicate in your recommendation which Assessor(s) will check the corrections. You should provide the student with advice of the necessary corrections at or shortly after the oral.

If you have any **doubts** about suitability for registration for the PhD degree, please select option 3.

WE CAN'T TELL YET: Allow student to resubmit report (Reg2 option 3)

Student shows aptitude, but the report and oral do not provide sufficient positive evidence to allow you to recommend continuation. Student should be allowed to revise their report and resubmit within 3 months for further assessment. Please advise on suitable **remedial action** to be taken by the student.

A second oral is normally conducted as part of a revised report assessment but in some circumstances may be waived.

NO: Do not register for the PhD degree (Reg2 options 4a-d)

On the evidence of report and oral, the student is not suited to doctoral research and resubmission is not likely to change your view. Students will usually be given one opportunity to revise and resubmit their report unless there are compelling reasons it would unlikely result in a different outcome. In this case please advise on a possible alternative outcome.

D. Dealing with corrections (option 2)

Please submit your reports shortly after the oral (do not wait for corrections to be made). The Degree Committee will notify the student of the timeline for corrections; normally up to 4 weeks will be permitted to make and submit their corrections directly to the Assessor(s) responsible for checking them.

When you are happy the corrections have been made to your satisfaction please notify the Degree Committee by email.

E. Assessment of revised reports

The Degree Committee will usually, but not always, appoint the same assessors for a revised report. Following confirmation of your appointment, you will receive the student's revised work and supporting

documentation via a Moodle link sent by the Degree Committee Office. You are asked to judge whether the report is now of a suitable standard to recommend registration for the PhD.

Processes for assessment and available outcomes are the same for the original assessment with two exceptions:

- 1. Oral:** If both assessors were appointed for the first submission, and if your independent reports (**Reg1**) on the revised work clearly recommend registration for the PhD, you may agree that the oral of the revised report is waived. Please make clear on your joint report (**Reg2 Revision**) if you are content to do this. If your separate reports recommend the student is not registered for the PhD or there is doubt, or an Assessor did not assess the original report, an oral should be held.
- 2. Joint report and recommendation:** A different recommendation form (**Reg2 Revision**) is supplied for assessment of a revised report. The option to submit a revised report for further assessment is not available a second time.

3. FOR SUPERVISORS

Opinion of the Supervisor

Supervisors play no part in the assessment of their student's probationary report, but their opinion is important to the Department and Degree Committee in coming to a final decision as to whether the student can be registered and, if so, for which degree.

As soon as the DC Office has received the Assessors' reports on your student's probationary review, we will contact you by email, give you access to the reports on Moodle (the student and the department's Postgraduate Office will also gain access to the Assessors' report at the same time) and **advise you what to do next:**

A. IF the Assessors' recommendation is positive

1. If you are content that:

- The Assessors' recommendation is positive;
- Any remedial action suggested by the Assessors can be achieved;
- The student's progress is indicative of being able to complete a PhD in the usual timeframe;
- You are happy to continue to supervise the student for a PhD.

You should

- email a progress report with a clear recommendation on registration to your Department Postgraduate Office within 14 days;
- propose a title/research topic for the PhD (which is provisional only).

Please note that

- you should not send your report to the Assessors, who must be able to act independently.
- your student will be able to see your report as part of the normal online feedback process.

2. If you are NOT content that:

- The student should be registered for the PhD, *even though the Assessors may recommend it.*

You should

- consult your departmental Director of Postgraduate Education within 14 days and before making your report.

Your Department will make a registration recommendation based solely on the Assessors' reports if they have not received your report, or been contacted by you about registration concerns, within 14 days of the Assessors' reports being released to you.

B. IF the Assessors require the report to be *revised and resubmitted*

- We will contact you and the student and give you the Assessors' reports, as above;
- We will ask you and the student to meet to discuss the report and to plan for the revision;
- We will give your student a deadline for resubmission;
- You should consult your Departmental Director of Postgraduate Education;
- You should continue to submit supervision reports in CamSIS on a termly basis.

4. FOR DEPARTMENTS

A. Decisions of the department

The Department's Postgraduate Office is notified by the Degree Committee Office when the Assessors' reports are ready to be viewed on Moodle.

1. Most probationary reviews are completely **straightforward**. The Department will receive the Supervisor's report and registration via email. The department's designated postgraduate officer will be able to recommend registration on the strength of the reports, by uploading the supervisor's report and recording a registration recommendation in CamSIS.
2. In the minority of cases where the outcome is **not straightforward**, the department officer will refer the reports to the department's **Director of Postgraduate Education** for consideration. In this case, registration will not be recommended until further discussion and/or a reassessment has taken place.
3. In a very small minority of cases, an **apparently straightforward Assessors' recommendation may be followed by a negative Supervisor's report**. In this case, the Department will need to discuss this further with the Supervisor and an attempt made to mediate and/or make alternative supervisory arrangements.

Possible scenarios on *first* assessment are:

Recommendations & Department actions		Supervisor	
		Positive	Negative
Assessors	positive	Recommend registration for PhD	Department to discuss this with Supervisor. You may wish to consider alternative supervision arrangements, including the possibility of appointing a supervisory team to support both parties.
	negative	Ask the Supervisor to respond to the Assessors' report (this may include comments on supervision) If the student shows promise but is behind the expected level of achievement, they should normally be allowed to revise the report , (and possibly do more experiments and/or more training etc.) <i>Remedial action should be specified</i>	As on left

B. Decisions of the Degree Committee

- The DC Office considers all the reports
- **straightforward** cases will be registered by the officers without reference to the Committee
- where **revision** is required, the DC office will make arrangements with the student, Supervisor and Assessors
- the Degree Committee will make the final decision or recommendation to the University's Postgraduate Committee (as appropriate) on non-straightforward cases.

5. Students who fail to be registered for the PhD after the *second* attempt

University Regulations make provision for alternative outcomes and the possibility of further progress assessments at the discretion of the Degree Committee.

If a student fails at the *second* attempt, the Department should assemble relevant documentation (e.g. correspondence, minutes of meetings) and submit it to the **Degree Committee** with their recommendation. The Department are likely to wish to meet with the student and/or supervisor and/or College Tutor before making their recommendation. The recommendation and supporting documents should provide sufficient evidence for the DC to address the following questions in turn:

- a. Is the student likely to be able to write up this work for an **MSc** in up to one or two years? *If not:*
- b. could they write up this work for an **MPhil** in up to 3 months? *If not:*
- c. could they be awarded the **CPGS** on basis of this work *without further assessment* and exit? *If not:*
- d. they should leave without an award.

Obviously, the strength of evidence required to limit a student's possibilities of gaining a degree increases going down this list.

In the case of a) and b), providing the Department is satisfied that *sufficient improvement is still possible* (if, for example, the student experienced particular difficulties during the probationary period and these difficulties may be/have been overcome) and can provide a suitable case, the Degree Committee may consider recommending registering the student for a Masters degree *pro tem* and may agree to offer the student a **further, final attempt** in a few months (typically about 6 months, or before the end of the 2nd year, whichever is sooner) on the understanding that:

- further assessment with a view to registering for the PhD is dependent on supportive supervision report(s) being submitted at least a month prior to the deadline for reassessment;
- the Assessors may be the same or different from the original ones;
- there is no guarantee that a further assessment may lead to an upgrading of the registration status, but may simply confirm registration for a Masters degree

Students who are not satisfied with the outcome will be referred to the University's examination review procedure.