

Advice and FAQs for Postgraduate Research Students (PGR Students) and Supervisors

The University is currently open, although teaching and supervision activities are suspended. PGR Students will be able to progress with their studies to differing degrees, depending on the nature of their research. Supervisors have been asked to keep in touch with their supervisees and to discuss plans to adapt research plans and timetables wherever possible. PGR Students and Supervisors should take into account the UK government's current advice on home working and social distancing.

The situation is constantly evolving. Please refer to the University's [staff](#) and [student](#) pages for the latest updates.

Wellbeing Support

We understand the particular challenges COVID-19 places on your wellbeing and we're continuing to provide support for your health and wellbeing. University support services are here for you if you are facing challenges during this extended period of having to stay at home. The University's counselling services remain available 24/7 via online and by phone appointment. Validium, our counselling provider, is offering remote delivery and you can receive counselling on-line or over the phone. Referral for counselling is continuing as normal. The Wellbeing and Inclusivity Team are reaching-out to our students who have previously attended drop-in sessions, to make sure you are well and are feeling supported. If you are a care-leaver or estranged, this team can offer you additional support: [Get help and support from our dedicated University teams for your mental and emotional health](#)

The University is also organising a number of [activities and events covering wellbeing, fitness, entertainment, arts and Faith](#) You can also get in touch with your Graduate Director to enquire about the departmental social events and, if you are staying in campus accommodation, connect with Residence Life.

Supervision and research plans

PGR supervision should continue remotely, ideally via video link (e.g. Zoom).

Where research activities are impossible (e.g. where facilities/labs are not available) PGRs and Supervisors should discuss whether it is possible to alter the research project (whether temporarily or longer term) to enable different activities to take place, under remote supervision. This could have a significant impact on some PhD projects. In those instances, PGRs and Supervisors should consider contingency plans with their Graduate Director. The University will advise and seek to support such cases wherever possible.

Where a change to the plan of research incurs extra time to study, arrangements for extensions will be considered to allow maximum flexibility, paying due regard to the challenging current global context.

- **What if I can't attend my supervisory meeting, Supervisory Panel, RSPB or viva in person?**
Until further notice, all students, staff and examiners are expected to attend meetings and viva examinations via video link (ideally [Zoom](#)). If you are not familiar with Zoom, the University can support you. Please see the 'Zoom Support' section below.
- **What if I don't have the right equipment or a good enough internet connection to attend meetings or my viva via video link?**
If you do not have access to the required equipment and/or reliable internet connection, please inform your supervisor and the [PGRE Team](#) know as soon as possible. It may be possible to borrow equipment from the University, but this will need to be actioned sooner rather than later.

In the event that either of these matters prevent you from engaging remotely via video link, alternative methods of communication should be agreed and used. For example, email and telephone for supervisory meetings. If lack of access to IT equipment or reliable internet connection prevents you from attend your viva examination via video link, you should let your department and the [PGRE Team](#) know immediately.

- **What if I need to access the library?**

Although the libraries at our campuses are closed our library team is offering remote support through live chat, phone, email, and librarian appointments (via Zoom) Monday to Friday from 9 to 5pm: <https://library.essex.ac.uk/COVID19-Library-Updates>

- **What if I can't access the lab to carry out my research? If I can't access the lab, will my submission date be extended?**

Where research activities are impossible (e.g. where facilities/labs are not available) PGRs and supervisors should discuss whether it is possible to alter the research project temporarily or longer term, to enable different activities to take place under remote supervision. This could have a significant impact on some PGR projects. In those instances, PGRs and supervisors should consider contingency plans with their Graduate Director. The University will advise and seek to support cases wherever possible.

Where a change to the plan of research incurs extra time to study, arrangements for extensions will be considered to allow maximum flexibility, paying due regard to the challenging current global context. These will be considered on a case-by-case basis, taking individual circumstances into account.

- **What if my supervisor is unable to supervise me?**

If your supervisor is unable to supervise you for a short period, this should not significantly affect your progress. If there is likely to be long-term disruption to your supervision, a replacement supervisor should be sought, as per 1.5 in the [Code of Practice](#). Please contact the Graduate Administrator within your department if there is likely to be long-term disruption to your supervision.

Supervisory Panels and Research Student Progress Boards

- **Will my Supervisory Panel and RSPB be held at the regular time or will I have more time?**

We are committed to ensuring as much flexibility as possible at this challenging time. Whilst we remain hopeful that the majority of the Supervisory Panels will be able to take place at the usual time, it's understandable that some may not be able to. It has therefore been agreed that, in exceptional cases due to the current circumstances, the summer term Supervisory Panels may be delayed by up to 4 weeks.

Where students and panel members are able to attend (virtually) a Supervisory Panel at the usual time, in May/June, they should continue to do so. These progress recommendations should be considered by the RSPB that is already in place, and reported to the PGRE Team by the original deadline, Friday 26 June 2020.

For students or panel members who, due to the impact of COVID-19, are unable to attend (virtually) a Supervisory Panel in order for a progress decision to be made by the original deadline, the Panel should instead take place during June/July. The recommendations should be considered by an exceptional RSPB and reported to the PGRE Team by Friday 24 July 2020.

- **What is the extended tuition stipend?**

We recognise that, for some of you, the effects of COVID-19 may be so substantive that they prevent you from completing your study in time and that the thought of extension creates further anxieties. We have developed a programme of support for those who find themselves in this situation. If you are in the final year of your studies and the pandemic disruption prevents you from submitting your thesis on time, you can apply for an extension through your department once you have a plan of work for the extension period agreed with your supervisor, and this has been agreed with your Supervisor Panel and RSPB. The Extended Tuition Stipend applies to PGR students who are expected to submit their thesis between 1 March 2020 and 26 April 2021 (the start of the summer term 2021). Students who are granted an extension will be awarded a University of Essex extended tuition stipend, which will directly pay their University fees for the period of extension.

▪ **Am I eligible for the extended tuition stipend?**

The Extended Tuition Stipend applies to PGR students who are expected to submit their thesis between 1 March 2020 and 26 April 2021 (the start of the summer term 2021). This includes;

- Students who first registered before October 2018, whose maximum period (thesis submission date) ends between 1 March 2020 and 26 April 2021.
- Students who first registered from October 2018 and whose standard period ends between 1 March 2020 and 26 April 2021, OR who have been permitted to enter a period of completion which ends between 1 March 2020 and 26 April 2021.

▪ **How do I apply for an extension and the extended tuition stipend?**

For the summer term SP and RSPB recommendations, we expect some requests for extensions for students due to submit in October 2020 (or before). However, we can foresee circumstances in which students who are due to submit in January or April 2021 (or any time in between), whose progress has been affected by the current Covid-19 Advanced Protection Measures, will want to request an extension now. We have advised academic department to ensure that these discussions are noted on the SP reports and for a recommendation to be made to either request the extension now (evidencing why) or to note that an extension may be sought nearer the submission deadline if the Covid-19- related factors impeding your progress remain and cannot be mitigated against. The request for an extension will be submitted via the SP and RSPB and the PGRE Team will automatically apply the extended tuition stipend to all eligible students. This will also be the case for any subsequent requests received via the SP and RSPB in the spring or summer terms.

▪ **I am a student in year 1 or 2 (or part-time equivalent), how to I apply for an extension?**

The current arrangements relating to extensions and the Extended Tuition Stipend apply to students who are expected to submit their thesis between 1 March 2020 and 26 April 2021 (the start of the summer term 2021). If you are in years 1 and 2 (or pro-rata equivalent) you are not eligible for extensions or the Extended Tuition Stipend at present, but we are reviewing our guidance and options available to these cohorts as the current pandemic evolves.

We are not expecting extension requests from departments concerning students in years 1 or 2 (or part-time equivalent), as it is too early to judge what the overall impact will be on your studies and whether you are able to subsequently progress such that any “lost time”, due to adjusting your research and/or changing you timeline, is redeemed: This is also consistent with the approach that UKRI has taken to considering extensions. However, we would strongly encourage students and their SPs to document any impact on their studies that has been caused by the current pandemic and/or the move to Advanced Protection Measures. It is important that any impact is clearly documented and kept on subsequent SP reports, as well as subsequent assessments of the success of any mitigating factors implemented in subsequent months (and years), so that this account can be considered if any extension request were to be submitted when you approach the end of your standard period.

Notwithstanding the above guidance, if you are in years 1 and 2 (or part-time equivalent) and you experience extenuating circumstances which are unrelated to the move to Advanced Protection Measures, you may report those to your SP and consideration of appropriate action (including a recommendation for an extension) can be made in cases where this is deemed to be the only justifiable option – for example, in cases of long-term illness or the effects of bereavement (whether COVID-19-related or not).

▪ **How do I report my Extenuating circumstances and what evidence is expected?**

It is important that details of any extenuating circumstances and their impact is clearly documented and kept on the SP and RSPB reports. We understand that circumstances may change month to month as the situation changes, e.g. schools going back, moving away from Advanced Protection Measures etc., however, the narrative you provide needs to be well-documented. Your SP and RSPB will not expect the same level of evidence that would normally be requested, and it is acknowledged that in some cases you may not be able to get evidence (including medical evidence). As you are keeping in contact with your Supervisors and ensuring they are aware of your circumstances, we would expect you SP and RSPB to operate with reciprocal transparency

and trust. So, for example, instead of a medical letter, you might provide an explanation of how you have been affected and for what period of time, either on your SP report or on an extenuating circumstances form.

▪ **I am due to resubmit my thesis for examination, following corrections or a referral period; can I apply for an extension?**

Students who, following examination, have been referred for re-examination and are due to submit on or before the first day of the Autumn term 2020-21 but, have reported extenuating circumstances (whether Covid-19 related or not) that have impacted their referral period may ask for an extension to their referral period through the normal route of contacting the PGRE Team. If you are in this situation, you will be asked to complete the Extension to Resubmission Deadline form

Extensions to resubmission deadlines are normally granted in exceptional cases only, following exceptional events which were unforeseen, and beyond the student's control; for example, medical/health issues; personal life events; and exceptional pressures of work. However, we anticipate that this may also be appropriate if your progress with your corrections has been affected by the pandemic. You will be expected to provide details of any extenuating circumstances and their impact your studies and ability to submit your thesis by the deadline.

Financial wellbeing advice

If you need advice on financial wellbeing, the Funding Team offers support and guidance regarding internal and external sources of financial support, including accessing the University's Student Support/Hardship Fund. They also have tools to help you manage your finances in this complex period. Please bear in mind that financial challenges can also affect our general wellbeing, so, if you are feeling anxious, please do contact the Wellbeing and Inclusivity Team, who can provide a listening ear.

Student Support Fund/Student Hardship Fund

In the Academic Year 2020/21, the University will offer an enhanced Student Financial Support package to assist our postgraduate research students who are experiencing unexpected financial difficulties. This fund is open to applications from all postgraduate research students. At the same time, we are increasing the size of this fund to help us meet increased demand. This includes identifying as much existing resource as we can to top-up the fund, from existing budgets and through a new fundraising campaign. This fund will include money that is specifically targeted at supporting financial well-being for postgraduate research students. Information about the support available next academic year will be available shortly – in the meantime, you can [find information about support available this academic year from the Funding Team](#).

Travel

The University has asked for all research trips to be cancelled. If you have a trip booked, contact the University's insurance team on insurance@essex.ac.uk for guidance on what to do next. Please note that you should seek refunds from your travel provider in the first instance. You may also need to cancel closer to the date you were due to leave.

Fieldwork

If you are due to travel out of the UK much later in the year on fieldwork, please check the current [advice on foreign travel](#) from the University and the [Foreign & Commonwealth Office \(FCO\) guidance](#) before making any bookings, and delay booking for as long as possible.

If you are on fieldwork, the University recommends a return to the UK or to your home country. While circumstances for individuals in different locations will vary, please follow FCO travel advice when considering continuing fieldwork or ending fieldwork early.

If you wish to return to the UK and need help with finding accommodation, [SU Homes](#) (the Student Unions lettings service) can support you. If you would like support with regards to the legalities associated with renting (including contract checking), the [SU Advice Centre](#) can support you.

PGR students currently on fieldwork – and their supervisors – can make use of all University support services. If you are a PGR student and an overseas location or the current Coronavirus situation is affecting your health and wellbeing, the [Wellbeing Team](#) can offer support and guidance. For technical questions regarding travel, risk assessment and insurance, please contact the University's insurance team on insurance@essex.ac.uk.

You are encouraged to follow all local advice and ensure that you have a means of accessing medical treatment if required.

Where you cannot return, are in an affected region and/or do not have access to medical assistance please contact the [Health and Safety team](#).

- **What if I am unable to return to the UK after completing my research away, attending an event overseas or returning from intermission?**

If you are overseas at the moment, it is unlikely that you will be able to return to the UK to resume your studies in the coming weeks, however please check with local authorities and travel companies. If you are able to continue or resume your studies remotely, then you should plan for this with your supervisor and apply to undertake [research away from the University](#). If remote research and supervision is not going to be possible, you may wish to [request an intermission](#) for the summer term. Please contact your supervisor in the first instance to discuss this.

Continuing with study outside of the UK

This might apply to those postgraduate research students who wish to continue their studies in their home country outside of the UK, whether sponsored on a Tier 4 visa or otherwise.

Please seek approval from your supervisor in the first instance before requesting Dean's approval via the 'Research Study Away' (for those who wish to request a temporary change in study location) form or 'Change of Mode' form (for those who wish to request a permanent change to distance learning) on your [Student Request Portal](#). We would encourage a change to 'Research Study Away' in the first instance, where possible.

Continuing with study in the UK but away from campus

If you are remaining in the UK but away from campus, please arrange remote supervision with your supervisor where possible.

Taking an intermission from your studies

If you wish to [take an intermission from your studies](#) you should speak to your supervisor in the first instance. It may be the case that you and your supervisor can work together on a contingency research plan which will enable you to continue with your studies, undertaking research and supervision remotely.

If you have a Tier 4 or Student visa there are visa implications for your immigration status if you take an intermission. PGR students and supervisors should seek advice from the [International Services Team](#) with any visa questions, and refer to the [online guidance for PGR students](#).

If you are in receipt of a UKRI or University studentship there may be funding implications if you take an intermission. Intermission normally means that the stipend is suspended and payments stop until re-registration. This automatically puts back your funding end date and your submission deadline.

Sickness and self-isolation

The University's priority is your health and wellbeing, so please ensure you follow NHS guidance if you become unwell and are required to self-isolate. It is recommended that PGRs and supervisors discuss in advance what to do in the event one or other needs to self-isolate, and the best use that can be made of that time.

Doctoral researchers must notify their supervisor or Graduate Director and their Graduate Administrator if they become unwell or need to self-isolate.

If a supervisor becomes unwell, supervisory teams should work together in coordination with the Graduate Director to ensure their work is covered.

UKRI Scholarships

The current advice from UK Research Councils is that postgraduate researchers should not be penalised by unavoidable delays and that UKRI-funded scholarships should be considered for extension, rather than suspension (intermission). This is likely to apply in situations where fieldwork and access to facilities and experiments are restricted.

If you are self-isolating, scholarships will not necessarily pause. If isolation means you cannot complete your PhD in the funded period an extension of the funding can be considered, although it must be noted that different funders will have different terms and conditions.

To check about eligibility for illness/sick pay, and for any further UKRI scholarship queries, please contact the PGRE Team: pgresearch@essex.ac.uk.

If you are funded by a Research Council, normal procedures will apply (up to 13 weeks' paid sick leave on provision of medical evidence while not intermitting, an extension of the funding end date, and intermission for illness lasting more than 13 weeks). The paid sick leave will extend your funding end date and submission deadline.

If an event you previously booked using RTSG is cancelled, you should seek reimbursement from travel insurers in the first instance. The scholarship may be able to cover costs that are not covered by insurance.

Submission / Viva

In the current situation, Essex is moving to online thesis submission. Your thesis can be emailed in PDF format (or via Box/file sharing software) to pgsubmission@essex.ac.uk.

Until further notice, your viva examination will be held remotely, with all parties attending via video link. The University recommends the use of [Zoom](#).

▪ I'm due to submit my thesis in April but I'm now unlikely to meet my deadline because of the current situation. What can I do?

It's understandable that the finalisation of your work may have been affected by the recent and ongoing COVID-19 situation. If you require a short extension to your thesis submission deadline, up to a maximum of 4 weeks, please email your request to the [PGRE Team](#) after first speaking to your supervisor, who will need to provide a short statement in support of this. The request will be subject to approval.

If you require a longer extension, then your Supervisory Panel will need to recommend an extension to your maximum period of study (for students who started their studies before October 2018), or a period of completion (for students who started their studies in October 2018 onwards).

If the RSPB agrees that an extension is required, their recommendation will then be considered by the Deputy Dean PGRE for your Faculty and the PGRE Team will confirm the Deputy Dean's decision as soon as possible.

- **What if I don't want to have my viva by video link?**

Until further notice, all students and examiners are expected to attend viva examinations via video link (ideally [Zoom](#)). If you are not familiar with Zoom, the University can support you. Please see the 'Zoom Support' section below.

Your department may also be able to offer you the chance to test Zoom before your viva takes place – please contact your Graduate Administrator regarding this.

Please note that it will not be possible to proceed with the examination of your thesis without holding an oral viva examination. If you choose not to proceed with your viva until it is possible to attend face-to-face, you should be aware that this will likely result in significant delays to your examination process and thus the conferral of your award.

- **What if my viva is cancelled because I / one or both of my examiners are unable to attend?**

If your viva is cancelled, due to illness for example, your department will make the necessary rearrangements for the soonest possible opportunity that is convenient for all parties. If it looks like it will be a long-term problem without a swift resolution, it may be that an alternative examiner(s) will need to be sought.

- **I'm not due to submit my thesis until October. Should I still expect my viva to be held via video link?**

At the moment, it is not possible to say for sure when things will return to 'normal' and face-to-face meetings will be permitted. It may be the case that you can attend your viva in person by November/December, but until further notice, all vivas are to be held remotely.

- **How will I get my hard copy award certificate?**

Unfortunately, it will not be possible to issue your award certificate while University staff are, necessarily, working remotely. If you need a document to verify your award before the Graduation Office team are back in the office, you may request an award confirmation letter or specialist alumni letter, free of charge, by emailing gradoff@essex.ac.uk.

Proficio training and PGR events

All internal Proficio workshops are either being postponed or reconvened as webinars that you will be able to access remotely, until the end of May at the earliest.

If you have booked onto an internal workshop you will be contacted directly. Please see the course details on the Proficio website for further information and to book a place on a webinar. If you have any questions or concerns please email proficio@essex.ac.uk.

If an external course or conference that you have used Proficio funding to attend has been cancelled please email proficio@essex.ac.uk to notify us that the event has been cancelled. If you have received a refund on the course/conference fee and/or any travel or accommodation booked and you have been reimbursed already from your Proficio funding you will be expected to return the money so your Proficio account can be credited. Please let the Proficio team know if you have been informed that you will not be able to receive a refund on your course/conference booking or any travel/accommodation costs.

Pending further updates, PGR-led events or seminars should be cancelled, or if possible converted to an online equivalent. If you would like to reach out to other researchers, or promote online materials, the PGRE Team can help. Please email pgnews@essex.ac.uk and stay abreast via the PGR Facebook page for regular news.

International students

If you have a Tier 4 or Student visa, please ensure that you keep up to date with the latest guidance via our [immigration pages](#).

- **I have a visa that limits the amount of time I can spend outside of the UK whilst remaining a registered student within the UK. I am at home at the moment and now unable to return to the UK – how can I remain a registered student?**

Due to current Home Office concessions, for the 2020/2021 academic year, provided that you continue to engage and progress academically and remain in contact with your Supervisor monthly via Zoom/Skype, the University will not need to take any action to withdraw our immigration sponsorship and your immigration and student registration status will remain valid. If you are intending to leave the UK permanently and will submit your thesis remotely, please check with your Department/School via email to ask if you can do so and copy in international@essex.ac.uk so that we can ensure you obtain further guidance regarding your student immigration status.

Contacting us

The majority of the University's academic and administrative staff are now working remotely. The best way to contact most people and services is via email, but if you need to speak to someone please use the following details:

- **PGRE Team:** pgresearch@essex.ac.uk, if it's an urgent matter please include your phone number and request a call
- **Proficio:** Proficio@essex.ac.uk
- **SIT:** askthehub@essex.ac.uk or 01206 874000
- **International Services:** international@essex.ac.uk or via their [enquiry form](#)
- **SU Advice:** suadvice@essex.ac.uk or 01206 874034

Zoom Support

- [IT Services: Zoom meetings and webinars](#)