

Regulations Governing Special Considerations and Suspension of Candidature for Postgraduate Research Students

Introduction

These Regulations outline the policy and procedure to be followed when a student registered on a research degree at the University of Southampton applies for Special Consideration. These Regulations also include consideration of requests for suspension of candidature where the request is not related to Special Consideration. These Regulations apply to all research degrees, but do not cover taught components of Research Degrees, the policy and procedure of which are outlined in the [Regulations Governing Special Considerations \(including Deadline Extension Requests\) for all Taught Programmes and Taught Assessed Components of Research Degrees](#). These Regulations are divided into two sections. Section A gives details of the policy, whilst Section B outlines the procedure to be followed.

Additional guidance can be found on the request forms and [Guidance for Faculties on Regulations Governing Special Considerations and Suspension of Candidature for Postgraduate Research Students](#) in the University's Quality Handbook.

Students can obtain free, independent and confidential advice about Special Considerations from the [Students' Union Advice Centre](#).

Section A: The Policy

1. Under what circumstances do these Regulations apply?

- 1.1 Under this policy, a research student may request:
 - A suspension of candidature (which may or may not be related to Special Consideration);
 - An extension to candidature;
 - An extension to a Progression Review Report submission deadline;
 - To reschedule a Progression Review or, in exceptional circumstances only, a *viva voce* examination;
 - An extension to a revised thesis submission deadline (following a *viva voce* examination);
 - Special Consideration to be given to the outcome of an assessment;
 - Circumstances to be logged until such a time that they may wish to make a request for Special Consideration.
- 1.2 A request must be made as soon as circumstances are known, and in advance of any assessment or deadline which may have been affected. In exceptional circumstances, and on the decision of the Faculty Director of the Graduate School, requests may be accepted up to five working days after the assessment or deadline.
- 1.3 Retrospective suspensions are not normally permitted, and will never be granted if in conflict with regulatory or legal requirements, e.g. that of a funding body or visa requirement.

2. The Postgraduate Research (PGR) Special Considerations Board

- 2.1 Each Faculty is required to constitute one or more PGR Special Considerations Boards to consider requests made under this policy and to make recommendations to the Faculty Director of the Graduate School.
- 2.2 The Board shall be constituted as follows:
 - *The Chair*: a nominee of the Dean who is a senior academic member of the Faculty, and not a member of the Faculty Graduate School directorate

- Two additional academic members, who should normally have had some experience in evaluation of special considerations or pastoral issues
 - Faculty Academic Registrar or nominee, usually a member of the Graduate School Office
 - Co-opted members as deemed necessary by the Chair
- 2.3 The Faculty Director of the Graduate School is not permitted to sit as a member of the Board. Quoracy for the Board shall be three academic members plus the Faculty Academic Registrar or nominee.
- 2.4 The Faculty PGR Special Considerations Board Terms of Reference should be noted on an annual basis at the Faculty Programmes Committee.
- 2.5 The Board may consult and/or take advice from other relevant Faculties or Professional Services. Decisions of the PGR Special Considerations Board shall be made by a simple majority vote, with the Chair having a casting vote.
- 2.6 Requests in the following categories may be considered by an appropriate subset of the Board, which may include **any two academic members of the Board**, who may refer the request to a quorate meeting of the Board as they deem appropriate:
- suspension for circumstances which do not fall under “Special Considerations”;
 - short term requests for Special Consideration (up to a period of three months);
 - time critical requests (defined as being where the date to which the request relates to is within 25 working days of the date of the submission of the request).
- 2.7 The Board shall be responsible for scheduling its meetings as necessary. The Board may meet physically, or discuss and make recommendations virtually. However, scheduled meetings to which all members can attend must be held at least twice per year and always when new members are invited to sit on the Board. Physical meetings of the Board will note and review all requests made since the last physical meeting. The Faculty Director of the Graduate School may be invited to the section of these meetings which reviews the requests which have already been considered. They are not permitted to attend the section of the meeting which considers any new requests.
- 2.8 If required the Board may consult and/or take advice from: the research student; members of the supervisory team; other relevant Faculty staff including those who offer pastoral support; or Professional Services, unless the research student has indicated against this in their request.
- 2.9 The Board is required to keep formal records of its proceedings. This includes virtual meetings, where records of the communication between members in reaching a recommendation must be retained. Online communication must take place in a safe and secure manner, respecting the confidentiality of the process. The purpose of the record of the Board is to note decisions, to summarise any discussion relevant to those decisions (where this is required to give a context or rationale for the decision, or to establish precedents), and to capture for further consideration any areas of discussion or requirements for future action. The outcomes of PGR Special Considerations Boards will be reported in the Faculty Annual Report on Research Degree Provision.
- 2.10 Requests for Special Consideration, meetings of the Board, and its records are confidential. Where it may be appropriate to inform non-Board members of the outcome of a request, all other details, including the circumstances leading to the request, must be kept confidential to the Board.
- 2.11 A PGR Special Considerations Board will usually only consider requests from research students from within its own Faculty. However, in exceptional circumstances, a research student may ask for their request to be considered by the PGR Special Considerations Board and the Faculty Director of the Graduate School in another Faculty. This may be particularly appropriate for requests from research students who are also members of staff.

3. What circumstances are not covered by these Regulations?

3.1 These regulations do not:

- Apply to research students who are already receiving support or reasonable adjustments from the University's [Enabling Services](#) for the specific circumstances raised. It should be noted that, despite a research student receiving support for a long-term condition, they may not be receiving support for a specific episode of that condition. The University's Enabling Services can provide advice and support relating to long-term conditions.
- Apply to situations in which research students can or could have taken reasonable steps either to avoid or to mitigate the impact on their performance.
- Allow for the assessment process or the outcome of an assessment to be adjusted. A request for Special Consideration shall remain distinct from the assessment process and actual outcomes shall be determined solely on the basis of work submitted. However, the PGR Special Considerations Board may recommend that an attempt is disregarded in accordance with Paragraph 4.3 below.

4. Recommendations of the PGR Special Considerations Board

4.1 The role of the PGR Special Considerations Board is to:

- Decide whether the evidence presented supports the case made by the research student.
- Subsequently, make a recommendation for any suitable mitigation to the Faculty Director of the Graduate School or recommend that circumstances are logged for a later request for Special Considerations.

4.2 The PGR Special Considerations Board can make the following recommendations to the Faculty Director of the Graduate School:

- Recommendation to approve, or approve with adjustment, the suspension of candidature.
- Recommendation to approve, or approve with adjustment, a request for extension of candidature.
- Recommendation to approve, or approve with adjustment, a request to extend a Progression Review Report submission deadline.
- Recommendation to approve, or approve with adjustment, a request to reschedule a Progression Review or, in exceptional circumstances only, a *viva voce* (oral) examination.
- Recommendation to disregard a Progression Review Report and/or Progression Review assessment and allow an additional attempt in accordance with the regulations following this disregard.
- Recommendation to disregard a *viva voce* (oral) examination and allow an additional attempt in accordance with the relevant examination regulations following this disregard.
- Recommendation to approve, or approve with adjustment, a request to extend a thesis corrections deadline (after the *viva voce* (oral) examination).
- Recommendation to accept the request to log circumstances.
- Reject a request.
- No further action.

4.3 Where the approved outcome is to accept the request to log circumstances, a request for Special Consideration may be made by the research student at a later date. Where the approved outcome is to reject the request to log circumstances, a request for Special Consideration may be made by the research student at a later date, but further detail and/or evidence will be required.

5. The Faculty Director of the Graduate School

5.1 The Faculty Director of the Graduate School shall consider recommendations from the PGR Special Considerations Board before making a final determination of the research student's

request. The Faculty Director of the Graduate School will inform the Faculty Graduate School Office of the outcome of the request, and the Faculty Graduate School Office will communicate the outcome to the research student and supervisory team. This decision should normally be communicated within 20 working days of submission of a completed request.

- 5.2 The Faculty Director of the Graduate School may nominate a deputy to consider recommendations and make final determinations in their absence. The deputy must be an academic member of staff, who is not a member of the PGR Special Considerations Board.

6. Conflicts of Interest

- 6.1 All members of staff involved in the Special Considerations process, including Board members and the Faculty Director of the Graduate School or their nominated deputy, are required to declare any conflict of interest connected with a request for Special Consideration. Any individual with a conflict of interest should not read the request for Special Consideration, and should not be party to any conversation, nor make any form of recommendation or decision in connection with that request.
- 6.2 The following is a non-exhaustive list of examples of conflicts of interest which should be declared:
- A member of the supervisory team of the research student.
 - The assessor for the research student's Progression Review.
 - The internal examiner for the research student.
 - The Chair at the research student's viva voce examination.

Section B: The Procedure

1. Type of Request

- 1.1 These Regulations incorporate all requests for suspension of candidature, including those which are not related to Special Consideration. This is because all such requests require consideration by an independent academic member of staff before a recommendation on the request is made to the Faculty Director of the Graduate School, who will then make the final determination of the request. The research student must therefore determine under which category they wish to apply.
- 1.2 **Requests for a suspension of candidature where the request is not related to Special Consideration**
Research students may apply for a suspension of candidature using the SC2: Suspension of Research Candidature Request Form (not related to Special Considerations) available on the [Quality Handbook](#), where the circumstances leading to the request are foreseen, and therefore not extenuating. This may include, for example, to attend a placement, or for parental leave. Further guidance on the types of circumstances and evidence that are likely to be accepted is given on the request form.
- 1.3 **Requests for Special Consideration**
Research students may make a request for Special Consideration using the *SC1 - Special Considerations Request Form for Postgraduate Research Students* available on the [Quality Handbook](#). A request for Special Consideration should be made where there are circumstances outside of a research student's control which have, or may in the future have, a negative effect on their research degree candidature; including their performance in a Progression Review or final viva voce examination, or their ability to meet a deadline for submission of a Progression Review Report or final thesis. The request form provides guidance on the types of circumstances and evidence that are likely to be accepted in a request.

2. Submitting a Request for Suspension of Candidature/Request for Special Considerations

- 2.1 A research student must submit form SC1 or SC2 (see paragraphs 1.2 and 1.3 above) with accompanying evidence to their Faculty Graduate School Office. Contact details for the Faculty Graduate School are listed at the end of each request form. The request forms provide guidance on the types of circumstances and evidence that are likely to be accepted in a request. A request must be made as soon as circumstances are known, and in advance of any assessment or deadline which may have been affected. In exceptional circumstances, requests may be accepted up to five working days after any assessment or deadline.
- 2.2 Requests which are incomplete in any material aspect and do not enclose evidence in support of that request will not be considered by the PGR Special Considerations Board until rectified.
- 2.3 It is important and usual practice that members of a research student's supervisory team are aware of requests for Suspension of Candidature and Special Considerations. However, research student may request that members of their supervisory team are not given sight of the request and supporting evidence. This must be stated by the research student on the request form. The Chair of the PGR Special Considerations Board (or other academic member in their absence), will consider if this request is reasonable on grounds of confidentiality. If the Board does not deem this to be reasonable, it will communicate this to the research student via the Faculty Graduate School Office, and, if necessary, arrange to meet with the research student before proceeding. All members of the supervisory team will be made aware of the outcome of a request if there is an action arising (e.g. adjustment to candidature, or disregard of Progression Review).
- 2.4 In exceptional circumstances, a research student may ask for their request to be considered by a different Faculty to their own. This must be stated by the research student on the request form, and submitted, as a complete request to their own Faculty Graduate School. The Faculty Director of the Graduate School will consider if this request is reasonable on grounds of confidentiality, and arrange, via the Faculty Graduate School Office, for the request to be considered in a different Faculty. Relevant members of staff in the research student's own Faculty will be made aware of the outcome of a request if there is an action arising.

3. Considering the Request

- 3.1 Requests will normally be considered by a quorate meeting of the Board within the standard timeframe. However, requests which fall under the categories detailed below may be considered by an appropriate subset of the Board. Any requests made for the second time for the same circumstances, should be considered by a quorate meeting of the Board.
 - 3.1.1 ***Requests for Suspension of Candidature where the request is not related to Special Considerations***

Requests for a suspension of candidature where the request is not related to Special Considerations, for example for a fixed term work placement or in connection to parental leave, will be considered by a subset of the Board. If the subset of the Board deems that that the request relates to Special Considerations, or is in some other way more complex, they may refer the request to a quorate meeting of the Board.
 - 3.1.2 ***Basis for request***

Short term requests for Special Consideration (up to a period of three months) for personal reasons e.g. as a result of illness, accident, or bereavement, may be considered by a subset of the board. If the subset of the board deems that the request is more complex, they may refer the request to a quorate meeting of the Board.
 - 3.1.3 ***Urgency***

Time critical requests (defined as being where the date to which the request relates to is within 25 working days of the date of the submission of the request), may be considered by a subset of the Board.

3.2 For all other requests

Before the Board makes a recommendation, and bearing in mind any particular requests for confidentiality, it may deem it appropriate to offer the research student the opportunity to attend a meeting with a senior member of academic staff to discuss the request and the evidence they have submitted. The research student is strongly advised to attend this meeting but if they do not attend, the request will be considered on the written evidence only.

4. PGR Special Considerations Board Recommendations

- 4.1 The PGR Special Considerations Board will make a recommendation according to the options set out in Section A, paragraph 4 of the Policy.

5. Determination of Outcome by the Faculty Director of the Graduate School and Notification

- 5.1 The Faculty Director of the Graduate School shall consider recommendations from the PGR Special Considerations Board, determine the outcome of the request, decide how to implement any mitigation, and communicate the final decision via the Faculty Graduate School Office to the research student and the supervisory team. This decision should normally be communicated within 20 working days of submission of a completed request.
- 5.2 Time critical decisions shall be communicated, via the Faculty Graduate School Office, to the research student and supervisory team. This decision should normally be communicated within 15 working days of submission of a completed request.

6. Appeals

- 6.1 Research students wishing to appeal the outcome of a request for Suspension of Candidature or Special Consideration should refer to the [Regulations Governing Academic Appeals by Students](#). Research students may only appeal if they can show, on a balance of probabilities, one or more of the grounds specified in the Regulations Governing Academic Appeals by Students.

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