

Research Degrees: Guidance notes series

4. PROJECT APPROVAL

Author Research, Innovation & Enterprise

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Key words: Project approval, research project, RD1PA, panel review, research integrity, ethics, risk

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Related documents

Policy 2R: Regulations for Postgraduate Research Students
<http://portal.solent.ac.uk/documents/academic-services/academic-handbook/section-2/2r---regulations-for-pgr-students.pdf?t=1534525946909>

Intellectual Property Rights at Solent University
<http://portal.solent.ac.uk/documents/academic-services/policies-procedures-guidelines/intellectual-property-rights-policy.pdf?t=1534437839680>

Academic Handbook 4S: Procedures for the ethical approval of research / enterprise projects
<http://portal.solent.ac.uk/documents/academic-services/academic-handbook/section-4/4s-procedures-for-the-ethical-approval-of-research-enterprise-projects.pdf?t=1535102214698>

Academic Handbook 2S: University ethics policy
<http://portal.solent.ac.uk/documents/academic-services/academic-handbook/section-2/2s-university-ethics-policy.pdf?t=1535102287891>

Academic Handbook 2L: Student Academic Misconduct Policy
<http://portal.solent.ac.uk/documents/academic-services/academic-handbook/section-2/2l-student-academic-misconduct.pdf?t=1535126909597>

UK Research Integrity Office: Good practice checklist for researchers
<http://ukrio.org/wp-content/uploads/UKRIO-Recommended-Checklist-for-Researchers.pdf>

RD1PA form available on line

Further reading

Intellectual Property Office
<http://www.ipo.gov.uk/>

UK Research Integrity Office
www.ukrio.org

Solent Researchers library guide on Reference Management
<https://libguides.solent.ac.uk/c.php?g=657980&p=4665038>

GENERAL PRINCIPLES

Review timeframe

1. Project approval is the first significant milestone in the MPhil and PhD programme of study for most doctoral research students. Students who are registered for a PhD by prior publication will not undergo a project approval.
2. Where a project proposal is not approved by the relevant scrutiny panel, the student may be offered a period of probation during which to redraft and resubmit their proposal. If, after a student has been given an opportunity to remedy defects, the proposal remains unsatisfactory, the scrutiny panel will normally withdraw the student's registration.
3. Project approval takes place 6 months following registration for full-time students and 12 months following registration for part-time students.
4. When appropriate project proposals will be considered as one of the standard points in the annual monitoring cycle. Where the project proposal is submitted as part of the annual monitoring process, this review will normally take the place of the annual monitoring progress review report, except where the Director of Studies recommends that the progress review take place. This will not exempt the student from undertaking the independent review element of the annual monitoring process. (*see Guidance note #6*)

MPhil	Project approval date	Probationary period
Full-time	6 months	2 months
Part-time	12 months	4 months
MPhil/PhD		
Full-time	6 months	2 months
Part-time	12 months	4 months
PhD Direct		
Full-time	6 months	2 months
Part-time		4 months
PhD by prior publication*		
Part-time	n/a	n/a

* only available to staff of the University

Context of review

5. It is expected that in the first phase of their programme of work students will have reviewed their research proposal, examining:
 - a) the theoretical underpinning of the research, through a preliminary critical review of existing literature in the field(s) of study,
 - b) the rigour of the planned methodology, through methodological consideration of the merits and design of the proposed method(s),
 - c) the ethical implications of the research, including consideration of good practice in research integrity,
 - d) health and safety and any other risks which may arise from the research, and
 - e) any additional training, access to facilities or resources required to complete the research.
6. It is important that doctoral students undertake this early in their registration in order to test and confirm the direction, relevance, viability and rigour of their initial research proposal and make any necessary revisions to ensure the feasibility of completing their thesis in good time within their registration period.

7. Supervisors guide and advise newly enrolled students in this, and its relationship to preparation for the first project approval milestone. The supervisory team and student should agree a schedule for completing the work necessary to support their submission for project approval, factoring in sufficient time for the supervision team to provide timely feedback on interim write-ups and to advise on drafts of the project approval form (RD1PA).

Ethics, risks and health & safety

8. Many projects pose potential risks to the investigator or research participants, or other ethical implications.
9. It is the student's responsibility throughout their registration to ensure that no research or fieldwork is undertaken for which ethical approval has not been obtained. Students who breach this principle will be subject to the University's Academic Misconduct Policy (*see related documents above*).
10. Before fieldwork or other exceptional activities necessitating off-site activity takes place, student and supervisors should agree a statement about how regular communication between them is to be maintained, including arrangements for submitting and commenting on the student's written work. An outline of these measures should be provided in the RD1PA plan of work.
11. Where overseas fieldwork is envisaged, a risk assessment must be drawn up by the student and DoS and submitted to the Hub Coordinator for approval prior to starting the fieldwork.

PROJECT APPROVAL PROCESS

Submitting the RD1PA and associated documents

12. It is the student's responsibility to complete the following actions;
 - a) Download the Project Approval Form (RD1PA, available online);
 - b) Liaise with their supervisory team to finalise content;
 - c) Complete parts A, B, C, E, F and G;
 - d) Obtain appropriate ethical approval in support of part F
 - e) Submit the research proposal to Turnitin via Solent Online Learning (SOL) <https://learn.solent.ac.uk>;
 - f) Forward the final version of the form to each supervisor to receive their signature (or confirmatory email) in parts H (DoS confirmation of Turnitin submission) and I;
 - g) Forward the form with parts A, B, C, E, F, G, H and I completed to Doctoral Student Administration in RIE (via research.degree@solent.ac.uk) for completion of part D;
 - h) Prepare a brief presentation (10 minutes) in preparation for the panel review
13. It is the Supervision Team's responsibility to complete the following actions:
 - a) Provide academic advice and guidance in support of the student's preparation for the project approval process
 - b) Guide the student in reviewing the potential risks or ethical issues associated with their research
 - c) Complete Part H, Director of Studies or nominee must confirm that they have checked the Turnitin electronic copy of the project proposal and that no issues have been raised;
 - d) Sign (or confirm by email) Part I, Director of Studies and Co-supervisor(s) and return to the student for submission to Doctoral Student Administration;

14. It is Doctoral Student Administration's responsibility to complete the following actions:
 - a) Complete part D;
 - b) Forward the completed RD1PA to the Doctoral Hub Coordinator;
15. Students are advised to plan ahead, submitting drafts for feedback, applications for ethical approval and requests for signatures in a timely manner to ensure their review is scheduled on time. (e.g. students should allow at least 15 working days for the ethical approval process).
16. If an RD1PA is submitted to Doctoral Hub Administration incomplete (i.e. with information missing or incorrect, or missing signatures or attachments; e.g. an ethical approval confirmation) it will be sent back to the student for revision.

THE RDIPA

The form

17. When completing form RD1PA, applicants are asked to take particular care not to alter the layout of the form or delete sections.
18. In any section of the form where there is no applicable information, student should insert a 0 (e.g. if there are no collaborating establishments).
19. Supervision teams will conduct a training needs analysis with new students and any training appropriate to the research project should be addressed in Part C.

Completing part E

20. The '*title of the proposed investigation*' will normally appear on the front of the final thesis. However, the student will have the opportunity to amend it before submitting their final thesis.
21. The '*aims of the investigation*' should be as few and succinct as possible. Ideally the student should be able to express each aim of their research project in a single sentence.
22. The '*proposed plan of work*' section should normally be around 2,500 words. It is recognised that there may be some variation in word length appropriate to different disciplines, however, it is intended that this should be a concise and economical document. This section may be submitted on the form or as an attached document.
23. The '*proposed plan of work*' is the section of the form that must be submitted to Turnitin prior to submission of the form for supervisor signatures.
24. The content, approach and structure of the '*proposed plan of work*' will vary from project to project and discipline to discipline, but the Scrutiny Panel will normally expect to see the following addressed in some manner:
 - a) A rationale for the project - what research objectives the project will address, why they are important, and how they follow on from previous work by researchers in this field or subject area.
 - b) If the student is registered for the PhD Direct, or on the MPhil with possibility to transfer to PhD registration, they should include a brief summary of why they think the final thesis will make an original contribution to knowledge;

- c) A timetable for the project showing, when and in what order, the student proposes to conduct the different stages and parts of the project. Use of a Gantt chart or other visual representation of the project schedule may help with this. If the student has registered for the MPhil with transfer to PhD then they should indicate the stage at which they propose to apply for the transfer of registration to PhD in this timetable;
 - d) An indicative methodology, describing the methods to be employed - why they are appropriate, how they will be used and an understanding of their limits. Students are asked to be as precise as possible about the principles underpinning their research design, sampling methods, etc... It would be helpful to give a brief indication of the questions to be addressed at each stage of the research and how they relate back to the research aims.
 - e) A statement of sources / resources to be used - for example, if the project depends on access to external organisations or facilities, confirmation of access is critical and must demonstrate confidence that within reason there will be no issues with access;
 - f) Consideration of research integrity, including discussion of ethical issues raised by the research methods and how these issues will be addressed (supported by a confirmation of ethical approval document); and
 - g) An indicative bibliography should also be appended to the '*proposed plan of work*'. This will not be included in the 2,500 word count.
25. Students should give reference to any work mentioned, or referred to, in their proposed plan of work using the Harvard system, i.e. (author, date: page number) with the list of references in alphabetical order at the end. For information regarding referencing systems see the University Library Guide (*in further reading above*).
26. Failure to observe referencing conventions is considered a very serious breach of research integrity at this level of study and this is reflected in the investigation of any reported case of academic misconduct by a doctoral research student.

THE PANEL REVIEW

The panel meeting

27. It is the Doctoral Hub Coordinators' responsibility to complete the following actions:
- a) Arrange, in liaison with the Director of Studies, a meeting between the student and a panel comprising a Chair (normally the Hub Coordinator) and two members of the relevant Scrutiny Panel or co-opted academic staff with relevant expertise.
 - b) Review the recommendation of the panel assessors and confirm approval / termination of the student's programme of study.
28. At the meeting the student will make a short presentation (10 minutes) to the panel and must be prepared to answer any questions put to them.
29. The student may request one of their supervisors to be present at the panel meeting as an observer, but the supervisor must not contribute to the meeting. A student must confirm in writing to Doctoral Student Administration if they are requesting to have a supervisor present. Doctoral Student Administration will issue the invitation to the named supervisor.

30. In reviewing the project proposal the scrutiny panel must be satisfied with:

- a) The appropriateness and viability of the proposed programme of work;
 - i. Is it clear how the project relates to the work of previous researchers in this field? What are the theoretical underpinnings?
 - ii. Are the aims of the research project suitably ambitious? Is it credible that the final thesis will contain original, independent work of a publishable standard?
 - iii. Is the project manageable within 3 years (full-time) or 6 years (part-time)? Does the proposal demonstrate that there is a feasible and coherent plan of work?
 - iv. Are the methods proposed for the research clear and appropriate? Does the proposal reflect a sound understanding of these and other possible methods, including their limitations?
 - v. Does the proposal fully and accurately acknowledge the range of resources/facilities that will be needed to complete this project satisfactorily, and does it demonstrate that they can and will be made available?
 - vi. Has appropriate consideration of ethical issues and health and safety been undertaken in the design and conduct of the research? Are the measures to mitigate these outlined in the proposal satisfactory?
- b) The suitability and qualification of the supervisory team; and
- c) The relevance and appropriateness of research training and other academic support mechanisms in place. In particular does the proposal identify any specialist training that this project will need, over and above the generic provision of research skills support? and
- d) Where a research degree project is part of a piece of funded research that the terms on which the research is funded do not detract from the fulfilment of the objectives and requirements of the student's research degree.

Outcomes of the project approval panel

31. The panel can decide whether to recommend approval of the project immediately, or ask for minor or major revisions. Students will receive formal notification of the decision in writing as soon as possible after the panel meets.
32. If the student invited a supervisor to attend the meeting, it is recommended that they informally discuss the issues raised in the meeting. The Doctoral Hub Coordinator, who chairs the meeting, will also be happy to advise the student regarding any further work that needs to be carried out following the meeting.
33. The panel may set minor or major revisions, or major revisions with a further panel meeting.
 - e) Minor revisions (typographical, organisational etc.) will be submitted to the Hub Coordinator for approval.
 - f) Major revisions will be submitted first to the panel and then the Hub Coordinator for approval.
 - g) Resubmission will require a new presentation by the student to the reconvened panel following major revision of the proposal.
34. If, after the student has submitted revisions, the panel concludes that the proposal remains unsatisfactory they will normally recommend that the student's registration be withdrawn.
35. Where a project has not been secured within the first 6 months of registration for a full-time student, or 12 months for a part-time student, the Scrutiny Panel may deem this, in itself, to be evidence of unsatisfactory progress and recommend that the student be withdrawn.

36. A student seeking to change a research project after the project approval has been granted must apply in writing to the relevant Doctoral Hub Coordinator to request Scrutiny Panel approval of the changes.