University Framework for a PhD by Distance Learning

1. Introduction and principles

1.1. This Framework sets out the requirements and expectations that should be met by a Faculty if they wish to set up a PhD by Distance Learning. The Faculty will be required to demonstrate how these requirements and expectations will be achieved by completing the form *'PhD by Distance Learning: Evidence of Compliance with the University Framework'*. This form is based on the Framework and should be completed and approved at Faculty level by Faculty Programmes Committee as evidence that all aspects of the Framework are being taken into account. The Faculty-approved form should be reported to AQSC for noting. However, any variation to the Framework will require University approval via AQSC (see paragraph 2.1 below). Paragraphs 1.2 to 1.8 outline the main principles behind this Framework, and sections 2 to 13 provide further details of requirements in specific areas.

1.2. The PhD by Distance Learning is governed by the University's Regulations for the degrees of Master of Philosophy and Doctor of Philosophy and the Code of Practice for Research Candidature and Supervision. However, there are particular and specific considerations that must be addressed to ensure that students studying off-site are able to pursue their course of study in such a way that they receive a comparable experience to those of their peers on the standard[1] PhD. This is of particular importance in terms of supervision and support, research environment, research skills and transferable skills training, the fulfilment of progression milestones, and the examination process.

1.3. Unlike the Split-Site PhD or Joint PhDs where formal agreements are signed between two educational institutions in a partnership, it should be noted that for a PhD by Distance Learning programme no formal agreement is signed with any institution, establishment or organisation where the student may happen to be employed. It is therefore the Faculty's full responsibility to ensure that supervisory input to the student's programme of research will be provided by the supervisory team in accordance with paragraphs 37 and 38 of the Code of Practice for Research Candidature and Supervision. In some (but by no means all) cases there may be an additional local support contact who may be based at a student's workplace but who is not a member of the formal supervisory team (see also paragraph 10.1 below).

1.4. It is possible that a Faculty wishing to run a PhD by Distance Learning might recruit students (either individuals or a group of students) who are already based in an environment conducive to supporting their research. For example, the student(s) may already be working in a research institute, laboratory, or educational establishment. In such cases the Faculty should satisfy itself that both the environment and the location of the student(s) is appropriate (see also paragraph 7 below). It should also satisfy itself that employers are supportive of the student to the extent that the student is able to undertake part-time study, and a letter to this effect should be obtained from the employer before an offer is made to the student (see also paragraph 8.2 below).

1.5. It is expected that a PhD by Distance Learning will be offered on a part-time basis. If the Faculty wishes to recruit individual students who are not in employment and who may be in a position to study on a PhD by Distance Learning in full-time mode, particular importance must be placed on ensuring there is a research environment and a remote infrastructure for delivery of the programme (including research training and transferable skills training), as well as regular, planned periods of attendance at Southampton.

1.6. Faculties should not underestimate the effort, time and costs involved in setting up a PhD by Distance Learning, especially if it is for one or two students where the effort and costs may far outweigh any financial or other benefits to the Faculty. The projected set up costs will need to be considered in detail, with appropriate input from the Faculty's finance team, and submitted as a business case to FPC as part of the approval process (see 2. below). Projected costs are likely to include further development of IT infrastructure and on-line learning resources, as well as video-conferencing and other electronic means for ensuring the student has regular contact with their supervisory team, the PGR community, and other sources of learning and support.

1.7. As stated in paragraph 1.3 above, supervisory input to the student's programme of research will be provided by the supervisory team in accordance with paragraphs 37 and 38 of the <u>Code of Practice for Research Candidature and Supervision.</u> The main supervisor, and also normally the co-supervisor, will be Southampton-based and this means that the student will be required to attend the University of Southampton at various points during their candidature. This is set out further in section 5 below.

1.8. In line with students on the standard[1] PhD, all students on a PhD by Distance Learning programme will be expected to access and use the University's PGR Tracker system.

1.9. The following sections 2 to 13 cover the above principles in more depth: they highlight important aspects and details that should be clearly thought through and planned in advance by Faculties. These sections constitute the basis of the form '*PhD by Distance Learning: Evidence of Compliance with the University Framework*' .

2.   Approval Process

2.1. The '*PhD by Distance Learning: Evidence of Compliance with the University Framework*' must be completed by the member or members of staff proposing the PhD by Distance Learning to show how the requirements of the University Framework are being met. This should be done in consultation with all members of the Faculty Graduate School Directorate. The form must be completed regardless of whether it is a group of students or an individual student being accepted onto the programme. The Director of the Faculty Graduate School should sign off the form (which will include the business case – see paragraph 1.5 above). The form must then be presented to Faculty Programmes Committee (FPC) for discussion and confirmation that the University Framework is being adhered to. Once approved by the FPC, the form should be sent to AQSC's next meeting for noting. However, any variations to the Framework should be submitted to AQSC for full approval. If the Faculty has already approved a PhD by Distance Learning in the academic discipline, there is no need to complete a new '*PhD by Distance Learning: Evidence of Compliance with the University Framework*' form: only the elements that sit outside the Framework will need AQSC approval.

2.2. In addition, each student must sign an 'individual arrangements' document setting out all the arrangements covered by the Faculty-approved '*PhD by Distance Learning: Evidence of Compliance with the University Framework*' form. The Director of the Faculty Graduate School must also sign each 'individual arrangements' document.

3.   Award

3.1. Successful students will receive an award from the University of Southampton.

4.   Registration and Enrolment

4.1. Students accepted to study for a PhD by Distance Learning will be registered on a separate programme code so they can be easily distinguished from students on the standard[1] MPhil or PhD programme. The PhD by Distance Learning is not merely a doctoral pathway or mode of study; it is sufficiently different in many practical aspects to warrant this separate identification. Faculties will need to request new codes through the normal SAA Registry process.

4.2. Faculties should state whether the PhD by Distance Learning being offered can be studied full-time, part-time or both.

5.   Residency requirements and periods to be spent at Southampton

5.1. The <u>minimum</u> residency requirement at Southampton for PhD by Distance Learning students should cover the following:

- A period at the beginning of the degree (enrolment and induction) – this is likely to be at least two weeks so that induction and in-depth supervisory arrangements can be discussed and agreed (in writing)
- Attendance at any research training or generic skills training events where these are not available by electronic means and where these have been identified as a requirement for the student, or any compulsory training events
- Confirmation of PhD registration/Upgrade/transfer from MPhil to PhD
- Final examination: the *viva voce*

5.2 In addition, Faculties are strongly advised to require distance learning students to spend at least 2 weeks per year of study in Southampton so they can meet supervisory team members face to face and, if appropriate, take part in an agreed PGR student event. Ideally, a residency visit to Southampton would also provide an opportunity for a face-to-face formal progress review. In the event of exceptional circumstances (e.g. visa denial, illness, etc.) such reviews may be carried out via other means, for example Skype or similar (see paragraph 11.2 below).

5.3 Where there is a group of students based at one location, it may be practical for a member or members of the supervisory team(s) to visit the students at their location rather than the students attending Southampton for face-to-face meetings. Such arrangements must be fully described in the '*PhD by Distance Learning: Evidence of Compliance with the University Framework*' form and submitted to AQSC for approval (see paragraph 2.1 above).

5.4 It is expected that the student will attend all periods of residency by their own arrangement and at their own expense. Residency visits are not covered by the fees for the programme, and this must be made clear in all programme information, and in communications to the student. Faculties should clearly communicate to students the possible consequences of failing to attend for the stipulated periods of residency.

5.5 When setting residency requirements, Faculties should take into account the position regarding visas for international students, the terms of which may vary according to the country concerned. Full documentation will need to be supplied by the Faculty for each application for a visa. Guidance must be sought from the SAA Visa Compliance Team as part of the planning process for a PhD by Distance Learning.

6. Fees
6.1 Faculties should set fees and communicate these to prospective applicants and to the Fees Office at the earliest opportunity. Fee levels will be determined by factors such as the set up costs incurred by Faculties (for development of IT infrastructure, on-line resources etc.), and the extent to which students will be using facilities and services at Southampton. Faculties should also recognize that students are normally expected to attend conferences during their period of candidature, and this should be taken into account when setting fee levels for a PhD by Distance Learning.

7. Research environment
7.1. It is crucial that an appropriate research environment is made available for all students on a PhD by Distance Learning. Paragraphs 1, 2 and 51 of the [Code of Practice for Research Candidature and Supervision](#) describe the range of support and opportunities for participation and interaction that form a robust environment within which students can progress their research studies. A student may be based at a research institute or place of work that can help provide this environment, but this will not always be the case. However, where this is the case, Faculties should seek advice from the University's Research and Innovation Services (RIS) regarding any potential Intellectual Property issues. Although it is accepted that a distance-learning student cannot have the same experience of the PGR community as they would if they were on the standard[1] PhD programme at Southampton, Faculties will need to consider in depth how each student can access a suitable research environment that offers a comparable experience, including opportunities to interact with, and discuss research with, their peers.

7.2. On-line aspects of delivery for this type of programme will be significant. These will help create the research environment. Faculties must consider how they will ensure that a sound and reliable IT base with on-line and interactive functionality is made available to students, irrespective of whether they are located in the UK or abroad. Arrangements will also need to be put in place to enable students to receive appropriate and timely IT training and support if and when needed.

8. Facilities
8.1. Paragraph 52 of the [Code of Practice for Research Candidature and Supervision](#) sets out the University's requirements regarding the provision of facilities and equipment for research students.

8.2. If distance-learning students require particular facilities in order to conduct their research, consideration should be given to this at a very early stage. Moreover, Faculties may determine that there are certain academic disciplines that are not suited to the PhD by Distance Learning model, for example subjects requiring specialist scientific or laboratory facilities.   However, where it is envisaged that the facilities at a student's place of work are suited to the research project, it must be established and confirmed in writing (before an offer is made to the student) that these facilities are at the student's disposal and arrangements for their use are acceptable.

8.3. Paragraph 7.2 above refers to the importance of IT and on-line resources for students studying on a PhD by Distance Learning programme.   Students should be informed clearly and in writing about the resources that will be available to them and the IT equipment they will be expected to provide for themselves in order to access the resources on offer. Any constraints on accessing electronic information systems (including the Library) should be explained. It is possible that some electronic resources may only be accessible from University-based systems (e.g. for licensing or territorial (legal) reasons). In these circumstances students who require access to these geographically-constrained resources should be informed, and it may be they can be asked to access them during their residency periods in Southampton. Information about IT helplines, support, and training should also be clear and comprehensive, with as much IT information and practical help as possible being given to students whilst in Southampton at the time of their induction.

8.4. During periods of residence at Southampton, access to appropriate space to work and to equipment should be made available in line with the Faculty's policy and the student's academic needs.

9. Research training and transferable skills training
9.1. All doctoral students undergo an academic needs analysis at the beginning of their candidature. Paragraphs 28 to 31 of the [Code of Practice for Research Candidature and Supervision](#) give further details. Once the student's training needs (research skills, transferable skills, subject-specific knowledge) and any additional learning needs including English language support have been identified, it must be clearly set out in writing how these needs will be met and where and when any training will take place. This should include whether the training will be delivered on-line or if the student will physically attend a course during a period of residency at Southampton.   Particular attention should be paid to any compulsory training courses, and to opportunities for distance-learning students to practice skills learnt, for example presenting their research.

10. Supervision
10.1. As stated in paragraphs 1.6 and 1.7 above, a supervisory team will be assigned to a student on a PhD by Distance Learning programme in accordance with paragraphs 37 and 38 of the Code of Practice for Research Candidature and Supervision. However, depending on the student's research project, and if the student is based in an organisation where it is appropriate and feasible, arrangements may be made by a member of the supervisory team (usually the main supervisor) for a local support contact to be available for the student. If

this is the case, it should be made clear to all parties that this is an informal arrangement and the local support contact is not a member of the supervisory team.

10.2. The workload of individual supervisors should always be taken into account (in accordance with paragraph 39 of the <u>Code of Practice for Research Candidature and Supervision).</u> This is particularly significant when assigning supervisors to students on a PhD by Distance Learning programme. An academic unit must satisfy itself that in allocating a student on the PhD by Distance Learning programme to a particular supervisory team, the Faculty's policy on supervisor workload is adhered to for each member of the team, particularly the main supervisor.

10.3. The responsibilities of the supervisory team are set out in paragraph 40 of the <u>Code of Practice for Research Candidature and Supervision.</u> Supervision arrangements for distance-learning PhD students, including the frequency and type/mode of supervision meeting must be discussed and agreed with the student at the outset. The arrangements should be formally documented. Regular supervisory meetings should take place face-to-face during periods of residency, and by email, telephone, Skype or similar when the student is not at Southampton. Wherever possible, the timing of, and arrangements for, any supervisory visit(s) to the student must be agreed in writing at the start of the student's programme. The distance learning student should see his/her main supervisor face-to-face at least once in any 12-month period, and more often in the first year whilst the student's work programme is being established.

10.4. The Faculty is advised to give consideration to paragraph 40 b (first and second bullet points) of the <u>Code of Practice for Research Candidature and Supervision</u> in the context of distance learning; specifically, what constitutes 'reasonable' access and times if a student requires advice and input outside pre-arranged supervisory meetings. This has a bearing on supervisor workload (see paragraph 10.2 above).

10.5. The member of the supervisory team who is the Co-ordinating supervisor (usually the main supervisor) is responsible for ensuring that the administrative processes are completed in a timely manner throughout the student's candidature. The Co-ordinating supervisor, in conjunction with the Faculty Graduate School, should consider whether any administrative arrangements or adjustments may be required, specific to a student on a PhD by Distance Learning programme.   For example, this may include greater frequency and type of communication with the student.

11.   Monitoring and review

11.1. The supervisory team is responsible for ensuring that student progress is monitored throughout candidature, both formally and informally (paragraphs 64 to 69 of the <u>Code of Practice for Research Candidature and Supervision</u>).   Arrangements for progress monitoring and formal progress reviews must be agreed at the outset in writing with each distance learning PhD student, including requirements for attendance at Southampton (see paragraph 11.2 below and paragraph 5.1. above).

11.2. Students undertaking a PhD by Distance Learning will normally be in attendance at Southampton for all formal progress reviews (see paragraph 5.1 above).   It is recommended that formal progress reviews take place face-to-face in Southampton (see paragraph 5.1 above). However, where this is not possible due to exceptional circumstances, such reviews may be carried out via other means, for example Skype or similar (see paragraph 99 of the <u>Code of Practice for Research Candidature and Supervision</u>).

11.3. Supervisory teams and research students should establish a mutually agreed series of meetings, both formal and informal, to discuss progress and any problems arising. Due to the nature of distance learning, with the remote location of the student necessitating contact mainly via electronic means, it is imperative that progress and the direction of the student's studies are kept under review, with appropriate support identified and provided where needed.   Supervisory meetings must be fully documented, and should involve appropriate communication between members of the supervisory team, so that all parties are able to identify if there are any issues arising, and any actions to be taken. Regular supervisory

meetings will also contribute to the record of the student's progress, whether face-to-face, or by email, Skype (or similar), telephone, video-conference, etc. PGR Tracker is an important mechanism for recording supervisory meetings and informal progress reviews, as well as recording formal progress reviews (see 11.2 above).

12.   Confirmation of PhD status/Upgrade/Transfer

12.1. Confirmation of PhD status/Upgrade/Transfer to the PhD stage of the research project is a formal milestone and will require attendance at Southampton by the student (see paragraph 5.1 above). The standard[1] confirmation/upgrade/transfer process should be followed, according to paragraphs 70 to 79 of the Code of Practice for Research Candidature and Supervision. The requirement to be at Southampton for the confirmation/upgrade/transfer stage (see paragraph 5.1 above) should be made clear in any promotion of the programme, as well as to applicants, and to students at the commencement of their studies; this is because the student is expected to bear the costs of periods of residence at Southampton.

13.   The PhD examination

13.1. Faculties should ensure that students are made aware of all relevant training, information and guidance on the preparation of a thesis.   Consideration should also be given to the practical arrangements for submission of the three soft-bound copies of the thesis for examination purposes (bearing in mind that it is possible for students to order bound copies electronically directly from the Print Centre).

13.2. Arrangements for the examination are set out in paragraphs 90 to 104 of the Code of Practice for Research Candidature and Supervision.   The PhD examination *viva voce* for a student on a PhD by Distance Learning programme will normally take place at Southampton (see paragraph 5.1. above), and be in accordance with paragraph 97 of the Code of Practice for Research Candidature and Supervision . The student should be informed well in advance of the date to enable travel and residency arrangements to be made.   Again, as with other milestones, the requirement to be at Southampton for the examination should be made clear in any promotion of the programme, as well as to applicants, and to students at the commencement of their studies. Training for the viva should also be made available and easily-accessible to the student.

13.3. The Faculty should be clear about the process for submitting the final version of the thesis after the examination (and following approval of any amendments made at the request of the examiners).   Students on a PhD by Distance Learning programme should be given guidance and information about submitting the hard copy of the final version of the thesis (soft-bound), the *Permission to Deposit a Thesis* form, and the electronic version of the thesis for ePrints.

Endnote:
[1] *Students on a 'standard' PhD are those studying at a University of Southampton campus*

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