

University of Birmingham

**The report of the Working Group on Research Masters Degrees  
and proposed amendments to University Regulations  
in respect of Research Masters Degree Provision**

**Topic and purpose of the paper**

1. APRC is requested to **consider** and **approve** the report of the Working Group on Research Masters Degrees, which was commissioned by APRC to carry out a consultative review across the University on the provision of postgraduate research degrees at master's level (Minute 09/37 refers).
2. APRC is requested to **consider** and **endorse** the findings, principles and recommendations contained within the Working Group's report, attached as Appendix 1 to this paper, and to give consideration to the further issues raised by the Working Group, as set out below.
3. APRC is requested to **consider** and **approve** the proposed amendments to the University's Regulations arising from the Working Group's recommendations, as set out below.

**Proposal(s)**

4. That the principles outlined by the Working Group and contained in the attached report, attached as Appendix 1, be endorsed and that APRC give consideration to the further issues raised by the Working Group: namely, the timing of the implementation of the proposals to take account of:
  - The requirements for the production of the University's prospectus.
  - The deadlines for the recruitment and admission of students.
  - The deadlines for applications for funding made by postgraduate research students to the various funding Councils.
  - The necessity of phasing developments in so as not to disadvantage current students or students that may register for MPhil programmes to be replaced under these arrangements, until such time as the arrangements become effective.

In view of these constraints, APRC has to determine whether it is practical for the proposals to be introduced in the 2011/12 session.

5. That in accordance with the proposals of the Working Group, and at time to be determined by APRC, the following proposed amendments be made to the University Regulations (additions underlined, deletions struck through):

### 6.1.3 Research Degree Programmes

6.1.3 (a) The University defines its research degree programmes as follows:

~~(i) One year Master of Philosophy (MPhil)~~

~~Either~~

~~(Mode A): A programme, normally of one year's duration, in which the key activity is undertaking research, combined with appropriate training. Registered Students must produce a thesis containing research work of merit. Any training is expected to involve no more than the equivalent of 10 to 30 credits from a notional 180 credits for the programme; or~~

~~(Mode B): A programme, normally of one year's duration, of training in research with an emphasis on the acquisition of research skills. The programme of 180 credits comprises between 30 and 70 credits of taught modules from a notional 180 credits for the programme together with one or more research report(s) or a thesis.~~

(i) One year Master of Arts/Jurisprudence/Law/Science by Research (MA/MJur/LLM/MSc)

A programme, normally of one year's duration, in which the key activity is undertaking research, combined with appropriate research training (which may be credit-bearing). Registered Students must produce a thesis containing research work of merit.

(ii) MMus

A programme, normally of one year's duration, of training in research with an emphasis on the acquisition of research skills. The programme comprises 60 credits of taught modules from a notional 180 credits for the programme and a research project.

(iii) One year Master of Research (MRes)

A programme, normally of one year's duration of training in research with an emphasis on the acquisition of research skills. The programme comprises between 30 and 70 credits of taught modules from a notional 180 credits for the programme, together with one or more research report(s) or a thesis.

(iv) Two-year Master of Philosophy (MPhil)/Master of Letters (MLitt)

A programme, normally of two years' duration, in which the key activity is undertaking research, combined with appropriate training, which may be credit-bearing. Registered Students must produce a thesis containing original work of merit, worthy of publication. The training is expected to involve no more than the equivalent of 20 to 50 credits spread over the two years from a notional 360 credits for the programme.

### **6.1.4 Research Degree Programmes with Taught Elements**

6.1.4 (a) *The Professional Doctorate (including the EngD), PhD with Integrated Study, MMus, and MRes and MPhil (B) are programmes consisting of a set of modules and a set of one or more reports. The modules have a defined set of learning outcomes including intellectual and practical skills which a Registered Student must complete to the satisfaction of a Board of Examiners in order to be eligible for the Award.*

6.1.4 (b) *For these programmes the following regulations in relation to modules and programme specifications shall apply: 6.1.2 (b) to 6.1.2 (o), above.*

6.1.4 (c) *Programmes may include modules consisting wholly or in part of work-based learning. Such modules shall be specified in programme requirements.*

6.1.4 (d) *All modules should be at level M or above, unless there are specific elements of the programme which make lower level study relevant. In this instance, the number of credits below level M should not exceed 20 credits at Level H or in exceptional circumstances at lower levels. Where any lower level credits are incorporated into a programme this should be added to the programme requirements and a rationale given for inclusion.*

6.1.4 (e) *The programme requirements for programmes leading to a Professional Doctorate (including the EngD), PhD with Integrated Study, MMus, and MRes and MPhil (B) may provide for the award of a Postgraduate Certificate or a Masters degree upon completion of appropriate modules, unless Senate or delegated authority permits an exception.*

### **6.2.3 Research Degree Programmes**

6.2.3 (a) *The minimum and maximum periods of study permitted for programmes prescribed for research degrees of the University shall be:*

<i>Award</i>	<i>Minimum period</i>	<i>Maximum period</i>
<i>One-year MRes</i>	<i>1 year (full-time)</i>	<i>2 years (full-time)</i>
<i><del>One-year MPhil (Mode A)</del></i>	<i><del>1 year (full-time)</del></i>	<i><del>2 years (full-time)</del></i>
<i><del>One-year MPhil (Mode B)</del></i>	<i><del>1 year (full-time)</del></i>	<i><del>2 years (full-time)</del></i>
<i><del>One-year MA/MSc/LLM/MJur by Research</del></i>	<i><del>1 year (full-time)</del></i>	<i><del>2 years (part-time)</del></i>
<i>MMus</i>	<i>1 year (full-time)</i>	<i>2 years (full-time)</i>
<i>Two-year MPhil</i>	<i>2 years (full-time)</i>	<i>3 years (full-time)</i>
<i>Professional Doctorate</i>	<i>3 years (full-time)</i>	<i>4 years (full-time)</i>
<i>PhD</i>	<i>3 years (full-time)</i>	<i>4 years (full-time)</i>
<i>PhD with Integrated Study</i>	<i>4 years (full-time)</i>	<i>5 years (full-time)</i>
<i>EngD</i>	<i>4 years (full-time)</i>	<i>5 years (full-time)</i>
<i>DDS</i>	<i>2 years (part-time)</i>	<i>6 years (part-time)</i>
<i>MD</i>	<i>2 years (part-time)</i>	<i>6 years (part-time)</i>

## **7.4 Research Degree Programmes – Assessment and Award**

### **7.4.1 Award Requirements**

7.4.1 (c) *The thesis and other assessments for a research degree should demonstrate that the Registered Student:*

*(i) has an adequate knowledge of the discipline within which the research is grounded and of the literature relevant to the research;*

*(ii) is proficient in the relevant method(s) of research;*

*(iii) has undertaken an independent investigation;*

*(iv) can present information clearly; and*

*(v) can put forward arguments in an appropriate and coherent form.*

7.4.1 (d) *A thesis for the two-year MPhil should, in addition to the requirements set out above, contain original work of merit, worthy of publication in part or in whole, representing a significant contribution to knowledge, and demonstrating that the Registered Student can exercise independent judgement.*

### **7.4.2 Format of theses or reports**

7.4.2 (d) *The maximum number of words in the thesis or report, excluding supplementary material such as tables, diagrams, appendices, references, the bibliography and any bound published material is as follows:*

College	One Year MRes	One year MPhil (Mode B)	One year MPhil (Mode A)	One Year MA/MSc/LLM/MJur	Two year MPhil	Professional Doctorate	PhD	PhD with Integrated Study	Eng D DDS MD
Arts and Law; Social Sciences	20,000	<del>20,000</del>	<del>40,000</del>	<u>40,000</u>	60,000	50,000	80,000	80,000	NA
Dentistry, Health Sciences and Medicine; Life and Environmental Sciences; Engineering and Physics	15,000	<del>15,000</del>	<del>30,000</del>	<u>30,000</u>	40,000	40,000	50,000	50,000	50,000

#### **7.4.8 Transfer between Research Degree Programmes**

*7.4.8 In the following Regulation, Masters by Research refers to any programme leading to the award of a Master's degree assessed and awarded as a research postgraduate degree, including but not exclusively MA/MSc/MJur/LLM by Research, MPhil, MRes and MMus (as defined in Regulations 6.1.3 (a) (i-iv)).*

*7.4.8 (a) Transfer from one year Masters by Research to two-year MPhil/MLitt Transfer to the two-year MPhil/MLitt may be permitted by the Senate or under delegated authority, provided that the Registered Student has passed any taught elements and produced a satisfactory report or detailed research proposal in accordance with the requirements laid down by the Senate or under delegated authority. The time limits for the two-year MPhil/MLitt programme will be calculated from the initial date of registration for the one year Masters by Research.*

#### **Background and Context**

6. Since the creation of the Working Group, a number of associated issues have arisen, which were subsequently incorporated into the Group's remit. These were:

- The assessment arrangements for a number of MRes programmes.
- The re-sitting of postgraduate taught modules, where these are taken as the credit-bearing elements of a research degree.
- The transfer between MPhil and PhD programmes.

- 6.1 Having regard to the MRes programmes, it had recently emerged that some MRes programmes were not being assessed as required by the Code of Practice on the Assessment of Research Degrees, but were being assessed in a similar manner to postgraduate taught masters degrees, which was incorrect.

- 6.2 Under current arrangements, research students have been able to take credit-bearing postgraduate taught modules as an integral part of their research programme, and with some programmes, i.e. MPhil Mode B, this has been a requirement. However, because the assessment of research degrees is carried out in accordance with the Code of Practice on the Assessment of Research Degrees, an issue arises if the student fails the module because this eventuality is not covered by the afore-mentioned Code of Practice, so further clarification is required on this point.

- 6.3 With regard to the transfer between research degrees, an example arose from discussion of current practice in the College of Medical and Dental Sciences. In cases where a student studying for a PhD whose performance has been judged at the end of their first year to be insufficient to enable them to make further progress on the PhD programme, they will be offered registration for an MPhil (Mode A) instead. This enables the student to leave with an exit qualification by writing up in the form of a thesis the research they have undertaken during the first year, and this is assessed in accordance with the Code of Practice on the Assessment of Research Degrees (see point 3.7 of Appendix 1 for further details).

### **Arguments in Support of the Proposal(s)**

7. The unanimous view of the Working Group was that the current MPhil provision was the cause of confusion to students, external examiners and other stakeholders
8. In reviewing the various models of provision, and the issues arising from each, the Working Group noted that:
  - 8.1 A one-year MA/MSc by Research was provided in the Business School. As this programme did not require students to have completed any credit-bearing modules, it was suggested by the Working Group that this represented a module that could replace the current MPhil (Mode A), and by doing so resolve the issue outlined at 6.3 above.
  - 8.2 By reference to the Regulations, there was little difference discernible between the current MPhil (Mode B) and MRes qualifications and, therefore, the MPhil (Mode B) could be withdrawn and replacement programmes designated as MRes degrees.
  - 8.3 The current two-year MPhil programme was consistent with the MPhil programmes offered by the majority of comparator institutions. As such, this qualification did not require any amendments to be made to the Regulations.
9. The Working Group has also referred to the provisions of the recently issued QAA document *Master's degree characteristics (March 2010)*
  - 9.1 The PGR leads for each of the five Colleges of the University have consulted colleagues within their respective Colleges and the following comments have been received:

#### **College of Engineering and Physical Sciences**

The EPS PGR Committee sought views on the notes of the Research Master's Working Group from the Schools in EPS. Of the responses received, all were generally supportive of the recommendations made under Section 5 of your notes.

One School raised the issue of visa restrictions affecting MPhil / PhD registration for overseas students. In particular, there is some concern with regard to offering an overseas student an MPhil in the first instance with a view that if the student did well they could continue onto a PhD. There is concern that this may be problematic under new visa rules; the student would only be given a visa to cover the MPhil and would then need to apply for a second for the PhD, and to do that they might have to return to their home country. It is suggested that the committee confirms the situation before finalising the "upgrade" policy.

#### **College of Medical and Dental Sciences:**

The principles as set out in your attached document are supported by this College.

I understand that at the meeting that the preference for students to be registered immediately for a doctoral programme was expressed. Currently, this College registers students on MPhil\*/PhD basis and the students are required to show satisfactory academic progress before being considered suitable for upgrade to PhD. Going forward, this College would want this process to remain in place as it is of key importance that the 1<sup>st</sup> year is seen as a qualifying year by the student and progress to PhD is not a right unless recommended by the supervisors and the School.

It is recognised that a number of overseas funding bodies require their overseas candidate to be registered immediately for a PhD and do not accept MPhil\*/PhD offers. The College would address this on a case-by-case basis as it represents a minority of the offers made over the course of an academic year.

\*(to be replaced by MSc by research)

### College of Social Sciences

The recommendations of the Research Masters Working Group were discussed today by the College of Social Sciences (CoSS) Doctoral Research Board. I provide a summary of the comments below:

1. The Board felt that the rationalisation of the current MPhil provision was welcome and overdue and there was broad agreement with the proposals for change and the proposed timescales.
2. In response, the Board proposed that the current MA in Social Research (the core RT provision in CoSS) should become an MRes in Social Research. This proposal will be taken to the next meeting of the MA Social Research programme board this Thursday.
3. Concern was expressed about the knock-on effect of the changes on 3 current M.Phil (B) programmes in Education:

We offer an MPhil(B) Educational Studies which requires completion of our three core 20 credit research training modules and a 20,000 word thesis.

However, we also offer an MPhil(B) Sports Coaching (both FT and PT) which has its own taught element (i.e. not from our research training programme).

We also have three MPhil(B) routes that include a subject module in place of one core research module that then defines the route (Dance, Maths or Science), although the final award is MPhil(B) Educational Studies.

**University of Birmingham**

**Research Master's Working Group - Wednesday, 24 March 2010**

**In Attendance:**

Dr Brian Ford-Lloyd, Director of the University Graduate School (Chair)  
Dr John Bridgeman, College of Engineering and Physical Sciences (for Professor Roy Johnson)  
Professor Leslie Brubaker, PGR Lead in the College of Arts and Law  
Ms Rachel Bruton, Research Officer, College of Medical and Dental Sciences (for Professor John Gordon)  
Mrs Claire Evans, Assistant Manager (Research Student Administration), ASA  
Mr Paul Fantom, Academic Policy and Curriculum Development Officer, ASA (Secretary to the Working Group)  
Professor Marilyn Martin-Jones, PGR Lead in the College of Social Sciences  
Dr Catherine Mills, University Graduate School Manager, ASA  
Mr James Piggott, Solicitor, Legal Services  
Professor Chris Thomas, PGR Lead in the College of Life and Environmental Sciences

**Apologies:**

Professor John Gordon, PGR Lead in the College of Medical and Dental Sciences  
Professor Roy Johnson, PGR Lead in the College of Engineering and Physical Sciences  
Ms Clare McCauley, Assistant Director (Academic Policy and Quality), ASA

**Notes of the Meeting**

**1 Welcome and Introduction**

- 1.1 BFL opened the meeting with introductions and then outlined the background to the working group being established and the purpose of this meeting.
- 1.2 In brief, a number of comments had been received from external examiners indicating that there was some degree of concern and confusion over the University's current MPhil provision. Namely, that there were a number of routes for students to gain a University of Birmingham Master of Philosophy degree. Dependent upon whether the students had registered on the MPhil Mode A, MPhil Mode B or Two-Year MPhil, they could spend either one or two years carrying out a programme of research and study (which may or may not be credit-bearing) in order to produce a thesis of between 15 000 and 60 000 words.
- 1.3 PF had undertaken some preliminary research around this issue and a paper had been prepared, which had been considered by the University's Academic Policy and Regulations Committee (APRC). This paper had been circulated to the working group and set out the current position in terms of the University's Regulations, its position in relation to comparator institutions, and identified the relevant aspects of guidance from the QAA. APRC had determined that a working group should be established to review the situation and formulate a strategy for resolving the issues, which would report to the next meeting of APRC in May 2010.

**2 Terms of Reference**

- 2.1 Proposed terms of reference for the Working Group and its membership had been agreed by APRC.
- 2.2 BFL also noted that since these terms of reference had been produced, a number of other related issues had arisen that related closely to the purpose of the Working Group that it was proposed that they be incorporated accordingly. These additional issues were:
  - The assessment arrangements for a number of MRes programmes.
  - The re-sitting of Postgraduate taught modules, where these are taken as the credit-bearing element of a research degree.
  - MPhil/PhD upgrade



It was agreed that these additional matters would also be considered by the Working Group.

### **3 Review of the Current Position/QAA Guidance/Best Practice**

3.1 With reference to the current University Regulations and the APRC paper, the present position in respect of MPhil provision was as follows:

- 1 Year FT MPhil Mode A
- 1 Year FT MPhil Mode B
- 2 Year FT MPhil

Each of these routes to the MPhil qualification has different requirements in terms of the combination of teaching (and whether this is for credit-bearing modules or is non-credit bearing research methods) and research needed to produce a thesis, the length of which also varied depending upon the mode.

3.2 PF noted that practice in comparator institutions tended to be that two types of master's level research degree were being offered, i.e. a 1 year MRes and a 2 year MPhil. Reference was also made to the relevant QAA documents that had been circulated.

3.3 LB pointed out that the reason for the original decision to create MPhil degrees with taught elements of the type described was that a more favourable funding regime existed at HEFCE at the time, but as this was no longer the case, there was no incentive to persist with a model that was causing such confusion.

3.4 CT indicated that the criteria for attaining the degree were of the greatest importance. The timescales for achievement were of less importance, however, especially when it was considered that part-time provision also needed to be accounted for in future developments.

3.5 CE noted that when awarded, both the MPhil Mode A and 2 Year MPhil programmes certificates are of a generic nature, whereas the certificates provided to students successfully completing the MPhil Mode B (and the MRes) are for a named degree in the form: *Master of Philosophy in ...* as these are designated as discrete programmes of study.

3.6 In discussing the external examiners' comments, CM also noted the subjective nature of the requirements for publication of the thesis. BFL pointed out that the requirements for the thesis to be of publishable quality were not as stringent as at PhD level.

3.7 RB raised the issue of current practice in the College of Medical and Dental Sciences, where a student studying for a PhD whose performance has been judged at the end of the first year to be insufficient to enable them to progress further on the PhD will be offered an MPhil instead. This would be the case where the student has been admitted to the PhD programme on the basis of their undergraduate degree and they have not taken a master's level award. As there are no credit-bearing modules involved, this would be an MPhil Mode A. Therefore, any proposals would also need to account for this scenario, in the College of Medical and Dental Sciences, and other Colleges that admit PGR students on the basis of them achieving at least a class 2:1 degree, but not requiring them to have taken a master's qualification, which was the case in some of the other Colleges (Arts and Law and Social Sciences).

JB indicated that similar arrangements also existed in his College, whereby graduates with good first degrees (2:1 or higher) were recruited onto PhD programmes, and did not have to possess a master's degree as a requirement for entry to the programme.

3.8 MMJ noted that ESRC students in the School of Education followed a 1+3 model, where at the end of the MRes they would be 'upgraded' from MRes to PhD – so that this was the equivalent to completing an MPhil and upgrading. There was also discussion of the potential disincentive to prospective students of the 'upgrading' process, which had been emphasised in a note to BFL from Tam Milner, the Assistant Director in ASA responsible for student records.

- 3.9 CE reported that a 1 year MA/MSc by Research was provided in the Business School, and that this could contribute to the solution to the issues raised, since it did not have any credit-bearing modules and could be a replacement for the MPhil Mode A programme.

#### **4 Other Issues and the Next Steps**

- 4.1 PF and CE outlined the position of the MRes programmes and problems that had recently come to light in relation to the assessment mechanisms, i.e. some MRes programmes were not assessed correctly, i.e. on the basis of the Code of Practice on the Assessment of Research Degree thesis, but incorrectly, as per taught Master's programmes under the Code of Practice on the Assessment of Taught Programmes and Module.

It was agreed that PGR leads would consult within their Colleges to ascertain whether the current MRes provision conformed to the Research Degree Code of Practice and, if not, to identify what changes in practice could be made to ensure conformity with the appropriate and relevant assessment and examination arrangements.

It was agreed due regard should be taken of this under the proposals for change, so that the Regulations could be considered and adjusted to take account of this.

- 4.2 PF indicated that another issue related to the re-sitting of taught modules that students completed as a taught component of their research degree, and the most effective way of dealing with this associated issue within the context of other changes.

#### **5 Proposals for Change and Timescales**

- 5.1 The working group agreed the following points in principle:

- That the current MPhil provision was the cause of confusion to students, external examiners and other stakeholders and should therefore be revised.
- That use should be made of the MA or MSc by Research degree, as currently offered by the Business School, which could provide a model for use by other Schools and Colleges of the University.
- That the University's master's research degree provision would be as follows:  
  
MRes (1 year with credit-bearing modules) [This would replace MPhil Mode B]  
MA/MSc/LLM/MJur by Research (1 year non credit-bearing) [This would replace MPhil Mode A]  
MPhil (2 year and non credit-bearing) [As per the current 2 year MPhil]
- That any changes should be introduced for the 2010/11 session, so that would be ready for the October 2011 student intake, but this would be dependent upon the receipt of feedback and other constraints (see 5.2 to 5.4 below).

- 5.2 The next stage would be for these notes to be circulated by the PGR leads within their own Colleges to ascertain whether the principles as set out would be supported, or if there were any comments, further points or criticisms that needed to be taken into account.

- 5.3 In terms of the timescales for instituting these changes, it was recognised that due regard needed to be taken of a number of factors, including:

- Admissions
- Prospectus
- Funding arrangements
- Committee approval for any proposed changes

Therefore, it is requested that PGR Leads consult with colleagues in their Colleges and provide feedback on the points set out in these notes, so that a report may be drafted and submitted to the relevant Committees of the University for approval. Feedback is requested by no later than the end of business on Wednesday, 28<sup>th</sup> April 2010.

- 5.4 Following this, amendments to the current Regulations and other University legislation could then be formulated and presented for approval to APRC, before onward transmission to the Senate.

Paul Fantom  
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Academic and Student Administration  
April 2010