How the Research Degrees Regulations are used to help with PGR progress and completion

We would like to take the opportunity to clarify the available options available to aid student progress prior to and during the pandemic. We have cross-referenced the options to the Research Degrees Regulations and, of course, we welcome questions:

- Graduate School Director (Lindsay.O.Dell@open.ac.uk)
- Chair, Research Degrees Committee (sarah.sherlock@open.ac.uk)
- Head of Research Degrees (sara.spencer@open.ac.uk)
- Senior Manager, Research Degrees (susan.etchells@open.ac.uk)

It is important to understand that the regulations apply to all students – regardless of study mode, and regardless of whether a student is self-funded, or funded (and regardless of funding source). They also apply to students that have Visas.

There are three types of aid for PGRs:

- Study break
- Extension to funding
- Extension to registration

**Study breaks** (Relevant regulations: RD 9.1 to RD 9.7; PD 8.1 to PD 8.6) are to compensate for periods of time when a student is unable to work at their normal intensity, or is unable to work at all. We need to ensure that study break requests are made as soon as possible to ensure that students are helped when it is needed, and not at a later date when the need has passed. There are several reasons for this, over and above providing prompt aid. For UKRI-funded students, the Je-S system requires prompt updating over study breaks so that they can monitor end-registration dates and funding budgets.

The study break is a means to providing students with a period of time where they are not studying and this may be for a period of illness, caring duties or for many other reasons. These are for blocks of periods of 1-month. For full time students the maximum period of these ‘continuous’ study breaks during the 4-year registration period is 12 months, and for part time students it is 24 months. In addition to this mode of ‘continuous’ study break there has been a process in place to accommodate COVID disruption, and these do not count towards the maximum study break – they are over and above.

During the pandemic it is very well understood that there are periods of study disruption that are ‘bumpy’ – perhaps not prolonged disruption but periods of disruption in any given month. The study break regulations account for this but in order to offer maximum flexibility the Research Degrees Degree, and subsequently the Research Committee, agreed that study breaks could be accumulated. How this works is that students, in consultation with their supervisors, make an estimate of how much quality study a student has managed per unit of time – this could be weekly (e.g. “I think I’ve worked well for 50% of this week” and realistically this is likely to be a ‘ball park’ figure). Or it could be monthly, again with a ‘ball park’ figure. The important numbers are those days or weeks where study is not possible or is of a ‘lower quality’ than a student would normally be capable of. These need to be noted so that when the number reaches 1 month in time, a study break is requested using the standard form and citing COVID disruption as the reason (we know what this means so just stating it is sufficient). You don’t need to complete a new form each time you can use the same form, add the new period of disruption and the date and tick the ‘continuation’ box.
**Extensions to registration** (Relevant regulations: RD 10.1 to RD 10.3; PD 9.1 to PD 9.3) are for students that are not able to submit their thesis by their end-registration date (or, maximum submission date). Cases for extensions to registration can be made to the Graduate School Director (Dr Lindsay O’Dell) who will consider each case – each case must be based on an ‘exceptional circumstance’ and requires support from supervisors and endorsement by the Faculty before reaching the Graduate School. Appendix 7 in the Research Degree Regulations sets out the definition of an exceptional circumstance and provides examples of what is considered to be an exceptional circumstance, and examples of what is not. It is important to note that ‘pandemic’ is explicit in bullet point k) in Appendix 7. For final year students we accept that the pandemic will become very important as they near their end registration date. It is expected that during the final year, funding extensions and study breaks will be used as required – of course a study break will automatically move the submission date onwards. RD 10.1 and PD 9.1 states that cases for extended registration must be submitted more than 1 month before the end registration date. To make an accurate assessment of how much time is needed for the extension to registration, students and supervisors will need to make a note of all periods of disrupted time since their last study break.

**Extension to funding** is not linked to study breaks and does not feature in the Research Degree Regulations as it is a School/Faculty matter. The University and UKRI have provided COVID contingency funds and the University has initiated a hardship fund to which all PGR students can apply. There have been separate communications detailing the available funding to which students and supervisors should refer. If these communications have not been received please contact the Graduate School.

To recap:

- Study breaks are the regulatory way to ensure that disruption to study is compensated for, including for pandemic (Appendix 7). The forms are initiated by students and supervisors and need faculty endorsement before transmission to the Graduate School. The relevant regulations are: RD 9.1 to RD 9.7; PD 8.1 to PD 8.6.
- For students in their final year, and even with study breaks, may need extra time due to pandemic disruption. They can apply for an extension to registration via the normal process as set out in the Research Degree Regulations citing COVID as the exceptional circumstance. The relevant regulations are: RD 10.1 to RD 10.3; PD 9.1 to PD 9.3.
- Extensions to funding are managed by the School/Faculty and the Graduate School is managing the University COVID funding to ease financial difficulties for those that have reached/are reaching the end of their funded period. There are no relevant regulations as funding sits outside of the regulations.
- For information regarding fee liabilities you should contact the Senior Manager, Research Degrees ([susan.etchells@open.ac.uk](mailto:susan.etchells@open.ac.uk)) for individual advice.

The process (additional steps, locally, may be part of the process):

1. Students and their supervisors discuss and complete the relevant form.
2. The form is endorsed by the Faculty.
3. The Faculty send it to the Research Degrees Team in the Graduate School (research-degrees-FASS; research-degrees-FBL; research-degrees-STEM, research-degrees-WELS, research-degrees-EdD).
4. The Research Degrees Team pass all forms to the Graduate School Director who will make a decision.
5. The Research Degrees Team update the student file and CIRCE and send approval back to the student, their supervisors, the Faculty and the School (there are some local variations).