Improving research degree submission and completion Rates: action plan and proposals for good practice

Summary
There has been considerable discussion about and investment in building the research student community at City University London and with that a focus on improving the University's research degree submission and completion rates in recent years. Submission and completion rates have been topics of discussion regularly at the City Graduate School Committee and at Senate, as well as within Schools. There are differences in rates across Schools as well as differences in the size and make-up of the research student community but critical to making effective proposals for improving these rates is a better understanding of the data available to the University and in the review and development of policy informed practice within Schools with a view to enhancing these rates for the whole University. The following paper proposes measures to help improve the University's completion rates through the development of a draft action plan and the reasons that underpin the proposed measures.

Graduate School Committee is asked to:

1. **note** the updated data on the mean time to complete for full and part-time research students (Appendix 1)
2. **note** ongoing discussions between colleagues in Academic Operations, the Strategy and Planning Unit and the Graduate School on data collection/analysis
3. **consider** the draft action plan to help improve the University's research degree completion rates (Appendix 2)
4. **note** that the action plan will be updated in light of the discussion and reported to ExCo at its meeting on 05 October 2015 for consideration and approval by Senate at its meeting on 14 October 2015
5. **note** the areas of policy informed, good practice (Appendix 3)

Improving research degree submission and completion Rates: action plan and proposals for good practice

Introduction and background
There has been considerable discussion about and investment in building the research student community at City University London and with that a focus on improving the University's research degree submission and completion rates in recent years. Submission and completion rates have been topics of discussion regularly at the City Graduate School Committee and at Senate, as well as within Schools. There are differences in rates across Schools as well as differences in the size and make-up of the research student community but critical to making effective proposals for improving these rates is a better understanding of the data available to the University and in the review and development of policy informed practice within Schools with a view to enhancing these rates for the whole University. The following paper proposes measures to help improve the University's completion rates through the development of a draft action plan and the reasons that underpin the proposed measures.

Enhancing submission and completion rates: policy informed practice
Ensuring the best environment for our doctoral students at City is critically important to the strength of our research activity; to the activity of our academic staff; our future REF submission strategy; to our continuing to build our reputation in research; and most importantly for the prospects, maturity and career development of our research students. However, the availability of good PhD students, both from the UK and abroad is limited and the positive influence they have on the research buoyancy and strength of an institution are evident from the successes of some of the most research intensive Universities in the UK. In such a highly competitive market, City needs to raise its game and to enhance the rate of completion, a view supported by the City Graduate School Committee. It is clear that this will not happen without attention to the issues involved and a focus on change and this paper seeks to make a series of recommendations which are designed to support Schools to improve the completion rates of their students.

This paper and its proposals are informed by discussions in the last three years at the City Graduate School Committee, at Boards of Studies and at Senate. The aim is to:

- improve submission and completion rates at City
- take action that will have a positive effect on these rates in most, if not all Schools
- do so on a sustainable basis and as quickly as possible
- not to compromise the quality of the student experience and/or the quality of the research they undertake

It is proposed that to achieve this, the whole research student lifecycle should be considered closely, from start to finish, and areas where there is potential weakness addressed. This implies that both students and their supervisors must appreciate and accept the need to plan and manage research projects that are both viable and can be completed successfully, ideally within 4 years (full-time; pro rata for part-time) and within the available resources which should be identified at the outset of the registration. The reasons underpinning the proposals are clear and include:

- funded students typically only receive funding for 3 years (including most City bursaries); after that they are most likely needing to take paid employment to fund themselves – this inevitably impacts on the time and energy they have to progress their research
- students running beyond the 3 years of study may need to be subsidized for ongoing study and this is a drain on resources: physical resources as well as on supervision
- students who fund themselves need to have a realistic idea from the outset of how long they should expect to spend on the work – they may often have contractual commitments for the duration of their study or have to return to employment which has released them to study for a PhD
- whilst writing-up fees after the third year are charged, students may require the most attention from supervisors to complete
- supervizing individual students beyond 4 years reduces the overall research supervision capacity and may inhibit time staff can spend in generating new research.

Underpinning the considerations are the following:

- for both research students and supervisors to have realistic expectations from the outset, of which both are aware and which are recorded and reviewed regularly
- for research students' progress to be tracked more effectively through Research and Progress (RaP)
- for the University's existing procedures to be implemented consistently and effectively and recommendations for good practice acted upon across the University
- for procedures reflecting good practice to be instituted and implemented across all Schools, with a view to enhancing the student experience and submission and completion rates

Internal data on the number of full and part-time research students registered in the University between 2007/08 and 2013/14 and the "mean number of years to complete" are provided in Appendix 1 of this report. Data have been provided by colleagues in Strategy and Planning and Academic Operations to support the discussion at the Graduate School Committee. Appendix 2 provides a draft action plan with proposed measures designed to help improve the University's completion rates and Appendix 3 provides an overview of good practice – much of already agreed policy at City – but where more consistent implementation could enhance the student experience and completion. The Graduate School Committee is asked to:

1. **note** the updated data on the mean time to complete for full and part-time research students (Appendix 1)
2. **note** ongoing discussions between colleagues in Academic Operations, the Strategy and Planning Unit and the Graduate School on data collection/analysis
3. **consider** the draft action plan to help improve the University's research degree completion rates (Appendix 2)
4. **note** that the action plan will be updated in light of the discussion and reported to ExCo at its meeting on 05 October 2015 for consideration and approval by Senate at its meeting on 14 October 2015
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Dean, City Graduate School

N Hammond
Head of City Graduate School Office   September 2015

Appendix 1

Full-time research degree students: mean years to complete/number of students

	Mean years to complete, Full Time students							Average over 8
School	2007/8	2008/9	2009/0	2010/1	2011/2	2012/3	2013/4	Years
Cass	5.3	5.7	4.4	5.3	3.7	5.7	5.6	5.0
Law	2.0	#N/A	#N/A	#N/A	#N/A	#N/A	4.3	3.8
SASS	5.2	3.8	4.9	4.2	5.1	4.8	4.3	4.6
SHS	6.6	6.3	6.3	5.8	6.2	7.4	7.4	6.5
SMCSE	4.4	5.6	6.1	5.7	6.1	6.3	5.7	5.8
City University	**5.1**	**5.0**	**5.3**	**4.9**	**5.0**	**5.6**	**5.0**	**5.1**

	Number of students who completed, Full Time only							Average over 8
School	2007/8	2008/9	2009/0	2010/1	2011/2	2012/3	2013/4	Years
Cass	16	20	16	16	27	21	13	129
Law	1						3	4
SASS	19	28	38	33	44	48	32	242
SHS	5	7	8	4	5	10		39
SMCSE	11	15	21	21	22	23	22	135
City University	**52**	**70**	**83**	**74**	**98**	**102**	**70**	**549**

SHS 2013/14 no data, 2012/13 data projected forward

Part-time research degree students: mean years to complete/number of students

	Mean years to complete, Part Time students							Total over 8 Years
School	2007/8	2008/9	2009/0	2010/1	2011/2	2012/3	2013/4	
Cass	7.0	#N/A	3.0	6.5	9.0	7.0	1.0	6.4
Law	#N/A	#N/A	#N/A	#N/A	10.0	#N/A	10.0	10.0
LEAD	20.0	#N/A	#N/A	5.5	#N/A	7.0	7.0	9.5
SASS	5.9	5.3	5.7	6.4	7.3	7.5	7.6	6.8
SHS	10.3	6.4	7.0	8.0	7.4	5.2	6.7	7.1
SMCSE	8.3	7.3	7.0	6.6	8.3	8.4	8.3	7.7
City University	**8.1**	**6.6**	**6.1**	**6.5**	**7.8**	**7.4**	**7.3**	**7.1**

	Number of students who completed, Part Time students							Total over 8 Years
School	2007/8	2008/9	2009/0	2010/1	2011/2	2012/3	2013/4	
Cass	5		1	2	2	1	1	12
Law					1			1
LEAD	1			2		1		4
SASS	7	4	15	21	13	26	14	100
SHS	4	7	8	2	5	5	7	38
SMCSE	6	10	4	11	11	8	6	56
City University	**23**	**21**	**28**	**38**	**32**	**41**	**28**	**211**

Law and LeAD 2013/14 no data, previous data projected forward

Appendix 2: Improving research degree submission and completion rates: action plan

Proposal	Action(s)	Theme	Responsibility	Deadline date	Comments
1. Strengthen policies and processes to improve oversight of admissions' decisions	Introduce more rigorous screening of applicants, involving a broader group of experienced academics	Admission and Registration	Schools/Departments	TBC	
2. Strengthen policies and processes to improve upgrade from MPhil/PhD to PhD	Undertake review of current upgrade procedures across the University	Progression and assessment	Schools/Departments in partnership with City Graduate School Committee	TBC	
	Consider revising existing Policy on Transfer from MPhil/PhD to PhD for all research students to be assessed before the end of their first 12 months of registration		City Graduate School Committee	TBC	
3. Strengthen policies and processes on the maximum period of candidature and writing-up to align more closely with those in research-intensive Universities	Implement a policy at City for the maximum period of candidature that more closely matches that at research intensive Universities	Progression and assessment	City Graduate School Committee	TBC	
	Clarify the extent of supervision provided during writing-up				
	Consider reduction in the length of time a student may be permitted to stay on writing-up before further action is taken				

Proposal	Action(s)	Theme	Responsibility	Deadline date	Comments
4. Ongoing development and improvement of RaP	Provide regular briefing sessions Undertake staff/student usage monitoring and address issues arising from its use Work with system developers at Manchester to improve RaP for both students and staff	Progression and assessment	Schools/Departments in partnership with City Graduate School and Information Services	TBC	
5. Ongoing enhancement through response to the University Research degree annual programme evaluation exercise	Support actions in each School on measures to improve completion rates	Monitoring and evaluation	Schools/Departments in partnership with City Graduate School Committee	TBC	Such as targeted incentives to complete earlier (e.g. SHS); and development of placement opportunities (e.g. Cass).
6. Continual improvement in the provision of quality supervision and research into best practice in research supervision	Ongoing review of implementation of Policy on Approval of Doctoral Degree Supervisors and annual review by BoSs of Category A/B status Development of workload allocation model, to take into account supervision loads	Supervision	Schools/Departments in partnership with City Graduate School Committee Schools/Departments	TBC	

	Undertake proposed project on doctoral supervision under Research and Practice Informed Education Hub of Education and Student Strategy		PIs with guidance from the Graduate School Committee		
7. Review and develop mechanisms for regular research degree data collection and analysis	Create standard management information reports to support Schools in monitoring completion rates	Management Information	Academic Operations/Information Services in collaboration with Graduate School Office and Strategy and Planning Unit	TBC	Engagement with the Operation Board as appropriate

Appendix 3: Enhancing Submission and Completion Rates: areas of good practice

Areas of good practice
The proposals outlined below are designed to stimulate discussion at Senate and at School level – following that comments will be considered by the City Graduate School Committee and if required a formal set of recommendations will be made to Senate. However, they point to need for change in some areas – and to do so at different points across the Institution – as it is critical that City is to be seen as competitive in the research student training and success that it offers.
A review of current practice, and where appropriate proposals for good practice, are grouped into three major themes relating to:

- progression monitoring
- supervision
- registration period

Progression monitoring
One of the key aspects of improving the submission and completion rates is keeping accurate records of students' progress - this is essential for audit and funding purposes (HESA, HEFCE, Research Councils etc). From the point of view of the progress of the work and interaction between the research student and the supervisor, it will help to identify problems and flag the need for appropriate action by students or staff (or both). The prime mechanism agreed for this at City is through the Research & Progress (RaP), a software tool developed by the University of Manchester and purchased by City. Regular seminars have been presented to staff on the use of RaP and proposals for changes and improvements received following these meetings have been passed to the Manchester researchers, and change implemented. RaP is also the agreed mechanism for monitoring of international students on Tier 4 visas, to respond to government requirements. Annually, a student's progress is monitored and reviewed through the Annual Progress Report, which is incorporated within RaP.

Year 1
An effective and productive first year is key to successful progression for a research student and it is important to have a set of expectations or requirements of what a student should have achieved within the first year that can be applied across the University (and thus are 'subject-independent') as well as subject-specific requirements. The Good Practice below simply makes explicit what should already be happening at present and is designed to assist supervisors and students to track progress within the first year, to enable early identification of any issues which could then be addressed.

Good Practice 1 – *all research students must, within their first year (first 2 years for part-time)*

- *be registered on RaP which will be used by student and supervisors to monitor progress*
- *agree and record on RaP all the key elements of their supervision meetings with their supervisor(s)*
- *attend an approved research student induction programme*
- *undertake such elements of the Doctoral Studies Framework as is agreed with their supervisor(s)*
- *complete and record on RaP a research proposal or plan of work which the supervisor(s) approve as appropriate and viable*
- *agree a projected completion timetable with their supervisor(s)*
- *for students undertaking teaching within the University, undertake an approved programme of training before commencing teaching duties*

MPhil – PhD Transfer

Almost all research students will be registered initially for a MPhil, with the expectation of transfer to PhD. Only successful students, with the expectation of completing a doctorate successfully will be transferred to registration for a PhD. Thus this initial registration is important to identify those students who are not making progress and to take appropriate action – it is not simply a formality. The outcome of the MPhil – PhD transfer process may include the recommendation for the student to undertake further formal training, to change the direction of the project (and if appropriate the supervision team) or indeed termination of the student's registration.

The way the MPhil-PhD transfer process currently varies between Schools/Departments in a number of important ways, such as when it occurs, what evidence supports it, and how panel members involved in the assessment (and indeed students) view the relevance and importance of the event. It must be recognized by all that this is an important decision point for both student and staff and an early indicator that satisfactory completion may be compromised. In addition if a student is to leave the programme of study at 12 months, the negative effect on the cv is minimized and the scope for another student to take up the project is enhanced.

Good Practice 2 – *all research students will have an assessment on whether to upgrade from MPhil to PhD before the end of their first 12 months of registration*

- *any research student who does not demonstrate satisfactory progress (against the agreed criteria) within the first 12 months full-time (pro rata part-time), should be carefully monitored and supported, informed about any reasons for concerns and set clear objectives with a view to enhance progress and this recorded on RaP*
- *students making satisfactory progress will be upgraded to PhD registration*
- *students judged not to be making satisfactory progress will not be transferred to PhD registration and the project plan of work revised in light of a future MPhil submission or the student's registration terminated at this point*

Progression to Year 2 and beyond

Once a research student has progressed into the second year full-time (pro rata for part-time), the student should be confident in the viability and direction of the project, that the resources needed are (or will be available) to complete the project and in the skills of the supervisor(s) to support the work. The expectations and requirements of what a student should have achieved within successive years will flow from the research proposal and plan of work, as updated and noted on RaP.

Good Practice 3 – *continued registration of each research student in years 2, 3 and 4 should be conditional upon:*

- *submission of an annual progress report, involving input from the student and supervisor(s)*
- *evidence, confirmed in this report, that is judged as satisfactory and reflects sufficient progress that the student has made with their research/thesis*
- *the timetable to submission and completion underpinning the project plan is updated and thus realistic*

Progression in Year 3 and beyond

A research student from the third year of the study should be in a position to be confident to discuss and agree a completion timetable with the supervisor(s) – the details of this should be recorded on RaP. This should be reviewed and updated every 6 months, until submission, to aim to support the student to complete on schedule. It is recognized that slippages and delays can arise for a variety of reasons and these should be actively managed by the student *and* supervisors until submission is achieved.

Good Practice 4 – *each student should agree a realistic completion timetable with the supervisor(s), review/revise it every six months, flagging any reasons for concern and noting what remedial action is being taken on RaP*

Supervision

Good supervision of a research student underpins student success and the University reputation for the quality of the research student experience. The quality of this experience stems from good supervision and its support at School level and the sharing of good practice across Schools and the sector more generally. The recent PRES 2015 for City shows the very high level of confidence that students have in their supervisors: in the skills and subject knowledge to support the student's research (92% agree), in providing feedback that helps the student to direct the research activities (89% agree) and in providing feedback that helps the student to direct the research activities (88% agree). Students also understand their responsibilities as a research degree (90% agree) and students are aware of their supervisors' responsibilities towards them as research degree students (87%). This provides clear evidence in the confidence students have in their supervisory staff and thus an excellent basis on which good submission and completion rates can be built. However practices relating to the supervision of research students vary across Schools and reflect the different ways they approach and manage the research student experience. Differences in practice can impact on the nature and quality of the student experience and good practice should be shared across the University to enhance this. In order to ensure that there is the consistent good supervision practice that underpins excellent PRES responses in these areas being maintained and thus good completion rates, it is useful to make explicit the nature and extent of how good practice at School level and acknowledgement of key responsibilities.

Good Practice 5 – *in the context of supervising research students, the Dean (or nominee) will ensure that:*

- *appropriate supervision is provided for research students and replacement supervision is made available if supervisors are absent for long periods or leave the University*
- *successful supervisory experience and support for enhancing the research student experience are taken into account in staff appraisal, reward and promotion*
- *supervision loads are taken into account in workload allocation models*
- *the progress of each of their research students is routinely monitored through RaP, annual progress reports are submitted on time and appropriate developmental action is agreed where it is needed*
- *the effectiveness of supervisory practices and experiences (including the Category of Supervisor) are regularly reviewed by the Board of Studies, that transfer to and from Category A and Category B is reviewed annually, that problems that arise with particular supervisors are dealt with appropriately and supervisors are encouraged (or indeed may be required) to engage in appropriate professional development activities*
- *supervisor support, through which supervisors can provide peer support and experienced supervisors can mentor less experienced colleagues, should be encouraged through the 'research divisions' of the School (research groups, Research Centres or Departments as appropriate)*
- *students are actively involved in building the research culture of the School through the 'research division'*

Registration

Research students are normally admitted for MPhil with the possibility of transfer (upgrade) to PhD subject to satisfactory progress, as discussed earlier.

Maximum period of registration

Most research-intensive HEIs have a maximum period of registration of 4 years full-time (pro rata part time). In many cases, there is little incentive for students to complete before this maximum

period of registration is up and supervisors may not always encourage students to complete in a timely way. To move towards what is normal at most research-intensive HEIs, yet recognize the journey that City is on to enhance completion rates, it is proposed to seek the views of Schools to reduce the maximum period of registration and if agreed to put a proposal to Senate as follows:

Good Practice 6 – *a research student should be able to complete the PhD degree within the maximum period of registration*

- *Schools will be asked to comment on the proposal that extensions beyond the maximum will only be allowed in exceptional circumstances and if approved in advance by the Dean of the City Graduate School*

Extension of registration

The extension of registration beyond the above proposed period would be exceptional, although students often seek a period of suspension[1] or an extension[2] for legitimate reasons. Problems can arise with this if:

- there are no explicit criteria against which requests for suspensions/extensions can be evaluated
- requests are not supported by appropriate evidence (i.e. they are based on claims not evidence)
- suspensions and extensions are often sought retrospectively

An essential ingredient for timely submission & completion is the clear management of this aspect of the research student experience, including explicit monitoring of progress, anticipating potential requirements for suspensions & extensions and taking action early to support students appropriately.

Good Practice 7 – *requests for suspensions and extensions will only be approved if they meet agreed criteria, are supported by appropriate evidence, and are formally submitted in advance.*

- *Suspensions and extensions will only be granted retrospectively in exceptional circumstances, where they could not reasonably be foreseen.*

Summary

The improvement of submission and completion rates is an important target for City in meeting its aspirations for a higher level of research activity. The above Good Practice is commended to Schools and comments will be sought on the seven Good Practice notes above, as well as wider consideration of the reduction of the maximum period of registration.

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[1] A student's registration is extended by the same period.

[2] Students can extend for an agreed period of time beyond their maximum period of registration by approval.