



HANDBOOK FOR MPhil/PHD Studies

The purpose of this handbook is to explain the responsibilities of Birkbeck College and the Department of Earth and Planetary Sciences and its research students, and to provide general information

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1. INTRODUCTION

Research within the Department of Earth and Planetary Sciences is undertaken within the joint UCL-Birkbeck Institute of Earth and Planetary Sciences (www.ucl.ac.uk/earth-planetary-institute). The Institute for Earth and Planetary Sciences (IEPS) provides a flourishing, dynamic environment in which to pursue our stated aims of research excellence and the beneficial application of knowledge.

Birkbeck College awards research degrees of the University of London. The College's research degree regulations define the conditions that each student must satisfy in order to qualify for the award of this research degree.

We hope that you will enjoy working here and that, in several years' time, you will be proud of the contribution to scientific knowledge embodied in your thesis and feel that you have developed your potential as a research scientist.

2. ADMISSION AND RESPONSIBILITIES

The Department will provide you with an opportunity to gain an MPhil or Ph.D, but we require you to do so within 4 years full-time or 7 years part-time. Government monitors rates and timeframes of completion and may penalise an institution if performance is considered poor. So, please recognize the two-way nature of this contract.

Students are admitted on our assessment of academic potential, in line with the *College Terms and Conditions of Enrolment* and the *College Research Student Admissions Policy*. However, College reserves the right to terminate a student's registration if there is inadequacy of progress or of standard of work.

Each year (normally end of June/early July) the student and principal supervisor are required to submit a report to the Department on the student's progress and any problems encountered during the year. The contents of the annual report are used by the Department to decide whether re-admission should be offered to a student, in accordance with the College's Policy on the *Termination of a Student's Registration*. If the quality and timeliness of your work is inadequate you will not be re-admitted.

3. SUPERVISION

It is practice within the Department of Earth and Planetary Sciences to assign a Principal Supervisor and a Second Supervisor. The Principal Supervisor is the main point of contact for guiding and planning the project as well as pastoral care. The second supervisor should also be available to the student for consultation about the student's research. A second supervisor should also be able to take on the role of principal supervisor during any periods of leave of absence or illness. The second supervisor will also be the first point of contact should any difficulties in the relationship between the Principal supervisor and student begin to jeopardise the successful completion of the thesis. The Departmental Post-graduate Tutor should also be informed of any supervisor issues.

The Principal Supervisor

The Department expects that Principal Supervisors should meet with the student for formal consultation three times a term in the case of full-time students, and twice a term in the case of part-time students. These may be held by telephone or Skype if face to face meetings are not possible.

Core responsibilities of the Principal Supervisor include;

1. To provide guidance about the:

- a) nature of the research being undertaken and the quality and quantity of work required
 - b) planning of the research programme including the timetabling of research, writing activities and deadlines
 - c) help identify any research techniques necessary to undertake the research
2. To assess the student's training needs.
 3. To be available to the student for informal discussions.
 4. To request that written work (e.g., drafts of chapters) be submitted according to an agreed timetable and to ensure that constructive criticism and feedback on written work is provided within a reasonable period.
 5. To encourage the student to participate in research activities (e.g., attend Research Seminars, present papers at conferences) and to make use of external resources and expertise (e.g. contacts with other research groups, specific researchers).
 6. To discuss the annual report with the student (see Section 7).
 7. To keep the Department Postgraduate Tutor aware of any current or potential problems or difficulties.
 8. To advise the student on the 'readiness' of the work for upgrading to PhD and for final submission; to read and comment on a draft of the thesis before final submission.
 9. To ensure that the programme of research is completed within the usual maximum time limits (this is Three-four years full-time, six years part-time for PhD students).

The Second supervisor

Core responsibilities include;

1. Be aware and understand the research being undertaken by the student.
2. To be available to the student for informal meetings and discussions (particularly during times when the principal supervisor is unavailable).
3. To read the annual report prepared by the student and the principal supervisor's comments and, where it is felt necessary or requested, provide comments to the principal supervisor and/or the student.
4. To act as a mentor for the principal supervisor where the principal supervisor is relatively inexperienced.

Postgraduate Tutor

The Postgraduate Tutor takes an overview of the progress of research students in the Department of Earth and Planetary Science, and acts as liaison between you and Birkbeck College. The Postgraduate Tutor may also provide logistic, pastoral or financial assistance to students when it is needed. Academic guidance is a matter for supervisors and the supervisory panel, unless exceptional circumstance warrant otherwise.

Students who find themselves in severe financial difficulties may be eligible to apply for assistance. For further details in PhD funding visit: <http://www.bbk.ac.uk/student-services/financial-support/phd-funding>

4. STUDENT'S RESPONSIBILITIES

1. To establish, through discussion with the principal supervisor, the nature of the guidance required and preferred ways of working (e.g., numbers and types of meetings).
2. To keep the supervisor informed of work in progress.
3. To take the initiative in raising current and anticipated difficulties and problems with the principal supervisor.
4. To participate in external research activities (e.g. present papers at conferences) and to make use of external resources and expertise (e.g. contacts with other research groups, specific researchers).
5. To attend any research training programme agreed with the principal supervisor.

6. To complete the annual report.
7. To keep the Director of Doctoral Research aware of any current or potential problems or difficulties.
8. To ensure that the programme of research is completed within the usual maximum time limits

5. PROGRESSION AND REVIEW ARRANGEMENTS

Progress is monitored regularly through your meetings with the supervisor and by completion of an Annual Report. All MPhil/PhD researchers at Birkbeck are also expected to complete Training Needs Analysis on an annual basis. For further details visit; <http://www.bbk.ac.uk/research/bgrs/training-needs-analysis>

Supervisor meetings

Throughout the academic year regular consultation between supervisor and student is used to establish and maintain an agreed view of the direction and progress of the research and to identify any remedial action necessary to redirect the student's work. If at any time your supervisor forms the view that the direction and rate of progress is inadequate (including quality of work and/or timeliness) they will write to you formally pointing out the main deficiencies. You will then meet with the supervisor to discuss a plan to improve performance.

As Students are admitted on our assessment of academic potential your first year is when supervisors really get to see in detail the quality and rate of your work. Occasionally a supervisor may feel that, despite repeated meetings and plans to improve performance, there remain sufficient serious deficiencies in the quality of work that they feel it is not realistic for you to progress to an MPhil or a PhD degree. The supervisor will then write to you formally pointing out the main deficiencies and suggest termination of registration. If you object to this decision you may submit a written document of your work, content to be guided by the supervisor, to be assessed by an independent panel of academics chaired by the Post-graduate Tutor. The panel decision will be final. If the work is deemed unsatisfactory the Department will proceed in accordance with the College's Policy on the Termination of a Student's Registration.

Annual Review

Departments are required to monitor the progress of their research students, to ensure that they are progressing satisfactorily towards completion. The Annual Report provides a mechanism for both the Student and Supervisor to provide feedback on progress The Annual Report is used to identify any supervisory issues as well as to make sure the work is progressing adequately. The report helps the Department Re-admissions panel decide on whether a student is re-admitted and allowed to register for the next Academic year.

6. FEEDBACK

It is expected that your supervisors provide you with feedback during your regular meetings. You can also provide feedback on your experience to your supervisors at these meeting or if you prefer to the Post-Graduate Tutor or Head of Department.

Student-staff exchange meetings

Student-Staff Exchange Meetings (SSEMs) offer an opportunity for students to talk frankly about their experience at Birkbeck and to raise any issues of concern directly with members of the teaching staff. The meetings take place once a term and all elected class representatives are expected to attend.

Points raised in the SSEM are discussed at departmental meetings and responded to in turn. Decisions are recorded, and summarised in the Report on the Student-Staff Exchange Committee and discussed in the following SSEM.

7. WHAT ARE THE REQUIREMENTS OF A THESIS?

For a PhD the thesis must:

a) consist of the candidate's own account of his/her investigations, the greater proportion of which must have been undertaken during the period of registration under supervision for the degree and must indicate how they appear to him/her to advance the study of the subject;

[The part played by the candidate in any work done jointly with the supervisor(s) and/or fellow research workers must be clearly stated by the candidate and certified by the candidate and supervisor.]

b) form a distinct contribution to the knowledge of the subject and afford evidence of originality by the discovery of new facts and/or by the exercise of independent critical power and / or creative investigation and achievement;

c) be an integrated whole and present a coherent argument;

[A series of papers, whether published or otherwise, is not acceptable for submission as a thesis. Research work already published, or submitted for publication, at the time of submission of the thesis, either by the candidate alone or jointly with others, may be included in the thesis. The published papers themselves may not be included in the body of the thesis, but may be adapted to form an integral part of the thesis and thereby make a relevant contribution to the main theme of the thesis. Publications derived from the work in the thesis may be bound as supplementary material at the back of the thesis]

d) give a critical assessment of the relevant literature, describe the method of research and its findings, and include a discussion on those findings, and indicate in what respects they appear to the candidate to advance the study of the subject; and, in so doing, demonstrate a deep and synoptic understanding of the field of study, (the candidate being able to place the thesis in a wider context), objectivity and the capacity for judgement in complex situations and autonomous work in that field;

e) be written in English and the literary presentation must be, in the judgement of the examiners, satisfactory;

f) not exceed 60,000 words (specific to Geology). Under exceptional circumstances an application may be made to the college registrar to extend to 100,000 words, normally 6 months before submission.

[Note: the bibliography is excluded from the word count; footnotes are included within the word count; appendices are excluded from the word count and should only include material which examiners are not required to read in order to examine the thesis, but to which they may refer if they wish]

g) be of a standard to merit publication in whole or in part or in a revised form (for example as a monograph or as a number of articles in learned journals).

The Thesis for the MPhil degree is similar to the above except that it does not require evidence of the discovery of new facts and/or by the exercise of independent critical power and / or creative investigation and achievement. It does require evidence that the field has been surveyed thoroughly. It should give a critical assessment of the relevant literature, describe the method of research and its findings and include a discussion on those findings. There is no requirement that the work be of a standard to merit publication in whole or in part or in a revised form.

8. TRANSFER FROM MPhil TO PHD DEGREE REGISTRATION

All graduate research students are initially registered for the MPhil degree and are expected to upgrade or transfer to PhD degree registration. Departments are required to have a formal procedure for considering the transfer of students' registration from MPhil to PhD as follows;

1. Students are required to apply for upgrades no earlier than 18 months and normally no later than 30 months after their initial registration (part-time) or within 12-18 months (full-time), subject to satisfactory progress. The student's Principal Supervisor will advise if the student is ready.
2. Assessment is based upon an examination, which involves the submission by the student of a written report and an oral examination on the report. Examination is by a panel that include the Post-graduate Tutor and an academic from the IEPS. At least one member of the panel should have some specialist knowledge of the project subject area (not the principal supervisor). If this is not available within the IEPS an external evaluator may be sought. The panel will meet with the student to discuss the contents of the report and the project in general. This meeting should last no longer than 1 hour.

The size and scope of the transfer report should be discussed in advance with the principal supervisor but would normally have a length (excluding references and appendices) of 40 - 60 pages and include;

Structured contents listing (Chapter and Section Headings)

Introductory Chapter 1: This chapter is the most important in any thesis as it explains the motivation for study, defines the program of research and sets out the thesis structure. This chapter should explain the context of the research problem (background), establish the relevance of the research (rationale), define the research problem (project aim) and explain how you are going to solve the problem i.e. objectives (typical length 5-10 pages).

Chapter 2: A full account of the background literature. This can help reinforce the motivation for study as set out in chapter 1 by highlighting the context of the research problem e.g. gaps in the research area, furthering previously developed research, proposing alternative, simpler, solutions to current research problems, etc. (typical length 10-20 pages).

Chapter 3: Describe the methods and approach (typical length 10-15 pages).

Chapter 4: Examples of results achieved so far with some preliminary interpretations. This is the most important chapter in the transfer report as the main purpose is to convince the examiner that you are capable of doing original and significant research work at PhD level (typical length 10-20 pages).

Conclusions/Summary: You can summarise the significance of your findings so far and briefly discuss their implications (typical length 2-3 pages)

Schedule for completion: A plan of the thesis structure and schedule for completion. Show work already done and work remaining. For the latter include target dates to completion (typical length 1-2 pages).

References and Appendices (e.g. sample locations, raw data)

Students will submit their thesis upgrade documents to their supervisors in the first instance in order to get feedback before formal submission to the panel.

Assessment criteria: A successful transfer report must contain a satisfactory level of literary presentation, clearly stated aims and objectives, a critical assessment of the relevant literature, and the research should form a distinct, original contribution to knowledge of the subject. The student should have a deep and synoptic understanding of the subject and provide evidence for the exercise of independent critical thinking and / or creative investigation. The timetable for completion should be realistic and within the normal period of study.

Appeals

If the application is unsuccessful, the student will be informed within 10 working days in writing and given the reasons for its rejection. In appropriate cases, the student should be given detailed guidance on the measures to be taken before any further application for transfer would be considered.

A student whose application for transfer is unsuccessful and who disputes the decision on grounds other than the academic judgement of the panel making the decision should have the right of appeal within one month of notification of the decision. Appeals should be made in writing to the Postgraduate Tutor within the Department of Earth and Planetary Sciences and should be considered by the Postgraduate Tutor in consultation with the Assistant Dean with responsibility for the Department. The outcome of the appeal will be conveyed to the student in writing. There will be no further right of appeal.

9. WRITING UP STATUS AND EXAMINATION ENTRY

Reduced Fees for Writing-up Status

Each research student at the College is currently placed on one of three fee status categories; that of fully enrolled (for which the normal fee applies); "*write-up*" status (for which a nominal fee applies) and "*examination only*" (for which no fee applies).

The purpose of "*write up*" status is that, as students who have finished the research part of their programme and are now engaged in writing up the results have minimal use of supervisory facilities or library and IT access. A Student's move to *write up* status is at the discretion of the supervisor, dependent on progress, rather than on the time elapsed since beginning the programme. Students moving to *write up* status are given one year (full time) and two years (part-time) to move to submission.

Where a Department considers that a student is making insufficient progress in writing up their thesis they can, at any time, institute the College's Policy and Procedure for the Termination of a Students' Registration.

Examination Only status is for those students who have submitted their thesis for examination, and who therefore have no further use for the facilities of the College other than for the examination itself.

Examination Entry & Appointment of Examiners

When the end is in sight, at least 4 months before submission of the PhD (or MPhil) thesis, an examination entry form must be completed and submitted, and examiners must be nominated. The supervisor will advise on the appropriate choice of examiners, one of whom must have examined a PhD for the University of London.

The form and specific information and regulations on the format, binding and submission of theses can be found at;

[Regulations for the degree of MPhil and PhD.](#)

Once you have submitted the form your thesis must be submitted within 18 months.

10. SUBMISSION OF THESIS

Procedures and requirements for written submission

The details for what is required in the final thesis should be discussed with the supervisor. Forms for submitting the thesis for examination must be obtained from the Department six months before the submission. Three bound copies of the dissertation must subsequently be submitted to the Examinations Office. It should be typed or word-processed on A4 pages, double-spaced and with generous margins. Only one side of the paper should be used. The thesis should have a single, continuous pagination. Further information on the specific requirements of the University of London for the submission of Doctoral and MPhil Theses can be found at

<http://www.bbk.ac.uk/about-us/policies/research-policies>

11. USEFUL WEBSITES

My Birkbeck guide for PhD students: <http://www.bbk.ac.uk/mybirkbeck/guides/phd>

Bloomsbury Postgraduate Skills Network: <http://courses.grad.ucl.ac.uk/bloomsbury/>

Disability and dyslexia support:

<http://www.bbk.ac.uk/student-services/disability-service>

The Birkbeck Graduate Research School (BGRS)

On registration, Birkbeck graduate students become members of the Birkbeck Graduate Research School (BGRS). Information on the training courses and other resources provided by the BGRS can be found on the following web site: <http://www.bbk.ac.uk/research/bgrs>

All students are strongly encouraged to attend the BGRS courses, which are generally free of charge.

Details of the college code of practice for Postgraduate training and research for the MPhil and PhD degrees can be found at; <http://www.bbk.ac.uk/about-us/policies/research-policies>

Research Seminars

Undertaking research should not isolate you from the wider issues in earth science. You should use the opportunity to hear about those wider issues and to communicate your research ideas and results to a wide audience. To assist you we recommend that graduate research students attend the IEPS Research Seminars held in the Garwood Lecture Theatre most Tuesdays at 5.00 p.m. Seminars are given by specialist speakers, usually from other universities, and provide a glimpse of exciting and controversial developments in Earth Science research. Details of the seminars are advertised within the IEPS.

12. Contact details for the Postgraduate Tutor

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