

Guidelines for Research Progress Panels and Reporting ¹

Higher Degrees Committee (Research)

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¹ Approved by HDC(R) 6 April 2011 amended by HDC(R) 3 April 2013

General

Research Progress Panels (RPPs) are a resource for higher degree research students and their supervisors to support high quality research and timely degree completion. They provide both students and supervisors with an opportunity for reflection on student progress and for planning the next phase of a project and how best to bring it to a successful conclusion. The general principle behind the panels is that any problems involving progress, supervision, communication between supervisors and candidates, resourcing issues and so on should be raised and tackled through the panels in the first instance.

Full-time candidates report through their panels twice a year, and part-time candidates do so at least once each year. It is important for students to let their supervisors or panel chairs know if there are any problems that will prevent them completing the progress report on time. Candidates who do not complete and submit a progress report by the due date will be asked to *show cause* why their enrolment should not be terminated. Scholarship holders who fail to submit progress reports by the due date will have their scholarship suspended from the date the report falls due.

The relevant University policies are: *Research Progress Panels Policy* and the *Higher Degrees by Research Milestones, Reporting and Confirmation of Candidature Policy*. Both policies are elaborated by *Research Progress Panels Procedure* and the *Higher Degrees by Research Milestones, Reporting and Confirmation of Candidature Procedure*². These policies and procedures are available from the [policy web site](#).

These guidelines add further detail to those Policies and Procedures, and revisions most recently approved by the Higher Degrees Committee (Research) November 2012.

Managing Progress with RPPs

RPPs make an evaluation of the students' progress for reporting and management purposes. The purpose of RPPs is to support the student's research and study and the student's progress, planning and management of the project. It is particularly important that any concerns about the candidate's potential to complete, or the suitability of the research for, the degree are discussed in the RPP meeting as early as possible. Panels meet regularly to provide the student with feedback, discuss progress with the student, and also have a responsibility to monitor supervision and may discuss any aspect of it. This can include discussion of how often the student and supervisor meet, communication between the student and supervisors and responses to the student's written work.

RPPs may make any recommendation they consider helpful or necessary. However, RPPs do not take the place any other university procedure. The responsibilities of supervisors are not changed by the existence of the RPP. RPPs can recommend and support students changing aspects their candidature but have no authority to approve those changes.

² RPP Policy and Procedure approve December 2010 and the revised Milestones, Reporting and Confirmation of Candidature Policy and Procedure approved November 2012.

RPP Membership

A panel consists of the principal supervisor, co-supervisor and at least one other person (but not more than three others). At least one member of the RPP will be a full-time member of staff of La Trobe University.

The Chair of an RPP is not permitted to be a supervisor of the student concerned, so that the RPP is able to help if necessary in mediating any problems that arise between the student and supervisors. The chair need not have expertise in the student's field of research and need not be from the same department or discipline as the student or supervisors. There are no restrictions on the selection of RPP chairs and staff members, external researchers, honorary staff, postgraduate coordinators and others may agree to chair RPPs. However if a student or staff member wishes to formally question the appointment of an RPP member a review can be requested under the RPP Procedures (see *RPP Failures* below).

To promote communication and transparency, panels will not meet in the absence of the student except in exceptional circumstances.

The membership of the RPP will normally be determined by the postgraduate co-ordinator in consultation with the student, supervisors and Head of School/Department/Unit.

The role of RPP chairs

Chairs of RPPs work with the supervisors and student to regularly review progress, ensure that the research, study and any associated activities are adequately planned, and that problems are addressed. Where a problem arises, RPP chairs may play a role in mediating between the student and supervisor(s).

RPP Chairs ensure an adequate record of the meeting is written and sign it.

Reports

After enrolment, full-time students will fit into a bi-annual cycle of progress reporting. Within the first three months of full-time enrolment, students will (1) have received confirmation of appointment of supervisors and (2) know the names and contact details of members of the Research Progress Panel.

After the initial meeting with the RPP, student and panel reports will normally describe the milestones passed, current work in keeping with the agreed research plan, other significant aspects of the research and any problems that may be impeding progress. Reports will normally refer to papers or conference presentations made by the student or other evidence of research carried out since the previous progress panel meeting.

Reporting Process in Outline

- Student and supervisor are informed of arrangements, including dates, for HDR reporting in the School or Department/Program/Unit.
- The student writes his/her report by the required submission date.

- Supervisor normally reads the report, discusses it with the student and provides written feedback. (There is no requirement for the student and supervisor to agree in their respective progress reports.)
- Students may, if desired, provide feedback on supervision (this may be done in confidence to the RPP chair)
- RPP meets and
 - considers the student's and supervisor's reports, any work provided for inspection (including any papers or conference presentations made by the student), any additional comments by the student about supervision and School, Program or Department support for the project.
 - addresses any problems raised by the student or supervisors
 - makes recommendations on any aspect of candidature or the research project.
 - agrees with the student setting and amending milestones and timeframes.
 - assesses the student's progress as 'satisfactory', 'satisfactory, but delayed due to circumstances outside the student's control', 'problematic' or 'unsatisfactory'.
 - recommends whether or not candidature should continue.
- RPP chair completes a record of the meeting and all its decisions
- All documentation is forwarded to Research Services to maintain records of progress through the degree and copied to the student, all members of the RPP and Postgraduate Coordinator.
- PG Coordinator reads reports and records of the meeting and ensures that the School is informed of the student's progress and of any issues that require the attention of the Program/Department/Unit, School or Faculty.

Milestones

Progress through the degree is measured against milestones negotiated between students and their panels. At the first RPP meeting, students present and agree with their panel the target dates for meeting milestones. Common milestones are as follows:

- *Significant Work Presentations*

Significant work presentations occur at a graduate research conference, or another public occasion, where the RPP members are present along with a wider audience. Work presented may include a paper prepared for publication, or for presentation at a national or international conference. Early in the candidature, such a presentation may be a literature review, or an outline of the research program. In the last stages of candidature the presentation may describe some of the research outcomes, how problems encountered in the research have been overcome, or, where appropriate, it may introduce a creative work.

- *Confirmation of Candidature*

Confirmation of candidature is required by the *Conditions of Candidature Policy and Procedure*, and the *Higher Degrees by Research Milestones, Reporting and Confirmation of Candidature Procedure*. After six months of study, and before the conclusion of 12 months, candidates are assessed for confirmation of candidature. The confirmation recommendation is made by the RPP, sometimes supplemented for the purpose by extra members who can assist in the assessment of oral and written material. Except for creative arts candidates, it will normally require (a) assessment of a written research project proposal of between 3,000 to 10,000 words, (b) a presentation of the research project proposal before a graduate seminar, staff seminar or the like, (c) defence of the project before the RPP (and supplementary members where co-opted) and (d) an assessment by the RPP of the feasibility of successful completion of the project within the normal timeframe and within the constraints of the resources available. In the case of creative arts candidates, and certain other cases, the RPP will review a proposal deemed appropriate for the project in question, and items (c) and (d) above will be addressed as part of the confirmation process.

- *Ethics approval (human or animal)*

This milestone refers to students' obtaining of the ethics approvals for either human or animal research.

- *Literature Review, and Draft Dissertation Outline*

A review of the literature in the field and outline of the proposed dissertation will normally be required. Depending on discipline norms, these milestones will take place as agreed between the student and the panel.

RPP Timing

Full-time students normally meet with their RPPs twice a year and part-time students at least once (see *Higher Degrees by Research Milestones, Reporting and Confirmation of Candidature Procedures*, 2).

If a student's research progress is disrupted in any way that causes the target dates for the milestones to be unrealistic then the student should revise them and obtain the RPP's agreement.

Students are obliged to meet with their RPPs as required by the *Procedures*, and failure to do so can result in termination of candidature and loss of scholarship. Chairs of RPPs and Postgraduate Coordinators are able to require that an RPP meeting occur within one month of the student's return from any period of leave or suspension.

RPP Meetings

RPP meetings are primarily focused on providing support for timely completion of the degree (*Higher Degrees by Research Milestones, Reporting and Confirmation of Candidature Procedures*, 3).

Meetings can be held at one location where students meet all the members of their panel, or they can be mediated by telephone, video or internet links across locations. In a year, one of

the two RPP meetings for full-time students may be a *virtual* meeting (see the *Virtual Meetings Section*). Where progress problems are identified in a virtual meeting (see *Virtual RPP meetings* below), a face to face, telephone or internet panel meeting with the student is held as soon as possible.

When progress problems are identified, RPP meetings provide an important forum for discussing how to overcome these – for example, whether the aims or methodology of the research program should be modified, whether some extra training will be needed to support the student’s work, or whether there are problems in the relationship between student and supervisor that need to be tackled.

The Chair is able to convene special meetings of the RPP if these are needed to give additional support to students or supervisors. When requested by the student the chair may hold a separate meeting with the student and the non-supervisory members of the RPP (if any); when requested by a supervisor the chair may hold a separate meeting with the requesting supervisor and any non-supervisory members of the RPP; and the chair may hold a separate meeting composed at the chair’s discretion. Records of special meetings are sent to Research Services to add to the student’s file.

RPPs determine their own procedures (within the University’s Policy, Procedure and Guidelines). An RPP may delay the conclusion of a meeting to another date when necessary. Alternatively, it may conclude the meeting and agree to meet at another time before the next scheduled meeting of the RPP. RPPs may adjourn to request the attendance of another staff member or researcher or other person necessary for it to complete its business.

Confidential Feedback

As noted in the *Reporting Process in Outline* section above the student may provide the chair with confidential feedback. When that occurs the chair will normally discuss the issues raised with the student in private. Possible outcomes of that discussion include: the student deciding the matters are resolved; the student’s raising the issues for discussion in the RPP meeting; the student’s addressing the issues with the principal and/or other relevant supervisors; or the student taking the issues to other University staff such as postgraduate coordinator, Head of School, student support service, etc. Part of the discussion between the Chair and student will address the confidentiality of the feedback.

RPP decisions

RPPs do not direct the student, supervisor or others and have limited powers. RPPs have authority with respect to Confirmation of Candidature (*Conditions of Candidature for Higher Degrees by Research Policy*, as amended November 2012), Milestones and some variations. RPPs do not supersede the responsibilities of supervisors, postgraduate coordinators or other staff.

RPPs can recommend variations of candidature and recommendations are required for extensions, suspensions, and changes of topic. (Variation forms are available from <http://www.latrobe.edu.au/researchers/forms-and-resources>).

If misconduct becomes apparent in the course of an RPP meeting the appropriate staff (usually the Principal Supervisor) are required to act in accordance with the *Academic*

Misconduct Statute and related policy, procedure and guidelines. A department, program or unit decision to require that a student *show cause why his or her enrolment should not be terminated* can be made without an RPP recommendation. When the *show cause* procedure is considered it is sometimes useful to hold an RPP meeting to assist the student and supervisor.

Note that a student may request a review of an RPP's decision under the *Higher Degrees by Research Milestones, Reporting and Confirmation of Candidature Procedure*, section 6.

Virtual RPP meetings

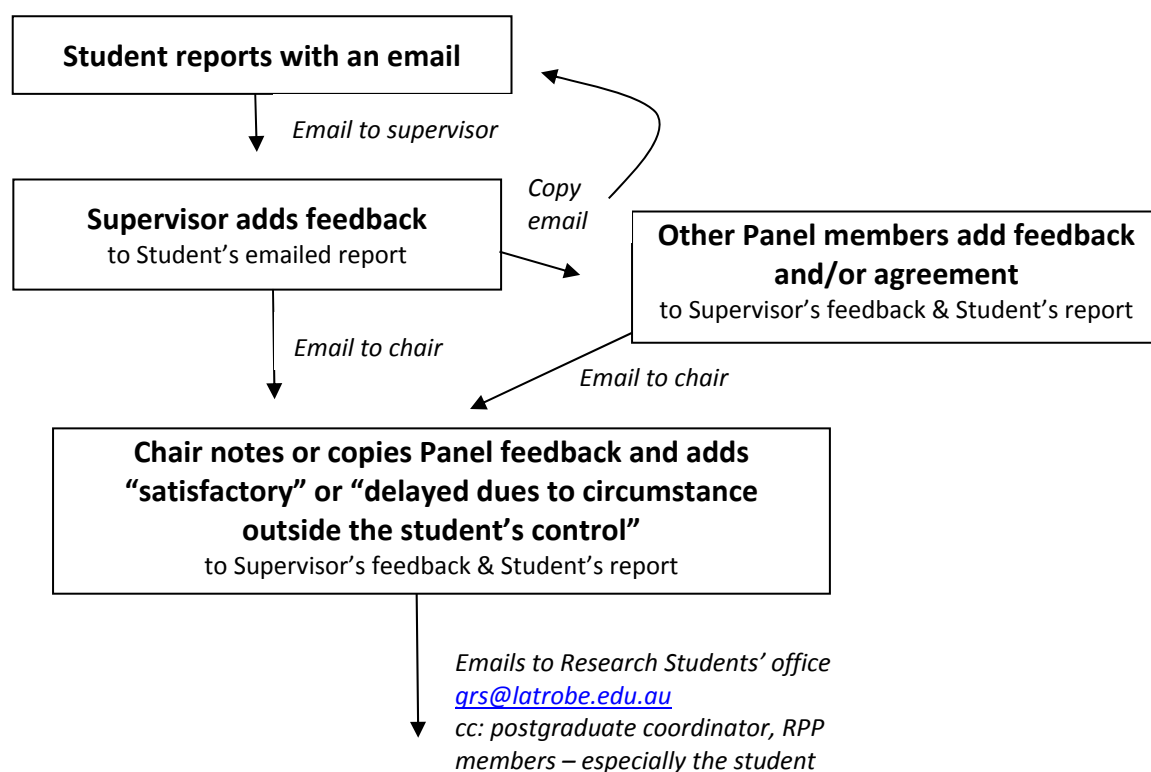
Virtual meetings are **not** normally to be held when a student requests a face-to-face RPP meeting or when a supervisor or other staff member, such as a Postgraduate Coordinator, considers that the student is not making adequate progress or producing work of a standard appropriate for the degree, taking into account the remaining duration of candidature.

Virtual meetings have the same components as any other RPP meeting: report from the student, feedback from at least one supervisor (usually the principal supervisor), any feedback the student wishes to make about the research training and support provided by the University, and the meeting's evaluation of progress and recommendations.

A virtual meeting will commonly consist of the following:

- An email from the student to the principal supervisor with a report (either attached or in the body of the email) that: includes a brief outline of work since the last RPP; addresses any matters under discussion with the RPP, and notes dates of any milestones passed since the last RPP. The report may include other relevant matters such as conferences attended, and seminar or similar presentations. Students are encouraged to make evaluations of their progress.
- A reply email from the principal supervisor and copied to all RPP members with brief general feedback including an evaluation of progress, with a summary statement: "satisfactory" or "delayed due to circumstances beyond the student's control"
- The panel members (but not the chair) *reply all* with feedback for the student and/or supervisor. The reply may be very brief – for example, indicating agreement.
- The chair attaches or copies feedback from other Panel members to the student's email with the Principal Supervisor's feedback, and forwards the email to the postgraduate coordinator and grs@latrobe.edu.au (Research Students section of Research Services) with copies to the panel members and student. When forwarding the email the chair will note that progress is "satisfactory" or "delayed due to circumstances beyond the students control" and may add further feedback or comments.

Diagram of emails for a Virtual RPP:



If the feedback for the student has raised concern that the quality of work or progress is inadequate for the degree at that time in the candidature, this is not forwarded to the Research Students' Office. Instead, the chair tries to arrange a face-to-face RPP meeting (or if the student is off-campus, a telephone or video conference or internet – e.g. Skype - discussion).

It is important that the subject line of the emails clearly identify them as part of a virtual RPP e.g. "[student name]'s progress report for RPP"

Progress Problems

At each RPP meeting, the panel will make a recommendation regarding the student's continuing the candidature. A recommendation that candidature is not continued is not normally made unless the problems with progress have been identified by a previous meeting of the panel.

If a full-time student has not developed an adequate research proposal within 16 months of commencing a doctoral degree or eight months of commencing a masters degree the RPP will address this matter with the student, not confirm candidature and discuss the student's withdrawal. If the student and RPP cannot agree about withdrawal the matter may be referred by the Postgraduate Coordinator to Research Services for a request to show cause why candidature should not be terminated.

Where the RPP considers that a student's progress is *problematic* or *unsatisfactory* it will discuss the problems with the student, agree and document strategies for tackling them with

the timeframes for getting the research back on track. The issues that gave rise to a report of *problematic* or *unsatisfactory* progress will be revisited at the following RPP meeting, which is normally convened no more than three months later. If those issues have not been satisfactorily addressed, the RPP may then recommend that candidature is not confirmed, or be discontinued (as appropriate).

RPPs are bound by the University's policies on discipline and misconduct. If academic misconduct is discovered in the course of reporting, the RPP will report the matter as required by the *Academic Misconduct Statute 2009*.

Termination of Study

When the RPP is not willing to recommend the student's continuing his or her candidature, the student will normally withdraw from studies at the University. Where the student wishes to contest the panel's recommendation, the Postgraduate Coordinator will refer the matter to Research Services and the candidate will be required to show cause to the Faculty Higher Degrees or Research Committee why the candidature should not be discontinued. The Faculty decision on this matter will normally be final.

Candidates who do not complete and submit a progress report by the due date will be asked to show cause why their enrolment should not be terminated. Unless the relevant faculty Higher Degrees or Research Committee is satisfied that the candidature should be confirmed, the enrolment will be terminated.

Scholarship holders who fail to submit progress reports by the due date will have their scholarship suspended from the date the report falls due. The scholarship will be restored once a meeting with the RPP has taken place and candidature is confirmed.

A student who has completed all written progress materials but fails to attend an RPP will be asked by the Faculty Higher Degrees or Research Committee to provide a formal explanation of non-attendance. Lack of an adequate explanation may lead to the decision to discontinue candidature.

In the case where a student attended as required for an RPP meeting, but the RPP failed to meet or conclude its proper responsibilities, the Postgraduate Coordinator or Head of School must ensure that the student is not penalised and that his/her progress is adequately supported. (*Higher Degrees by Research Milestones, Reporting and Confirmation of Candidature Procedure*, 8)

RPP Failures

RPPs provide feedback both to students and supervisors. If there are problems between the student and supervisor, RPPs are required to address them and if possible resolve them. If resolution is not achievable, RPPs have a responsibility to report *Possible Problems with Supervision* ([Supervision of Research Students Procedures](#)) to the Head of School or to the Faculty Associate Dean (Research) for further action.

If an RPP cannot come to agreement on a required matter – particularly the student's progress – then the failure will be reported to the relevant Head of School and Postgraduate Co-ordinator. The Head of School and Postgraduate Co-ordinator will either act to resolve the problem or appoint a senior member of staff to review and report on the panel's problems.

A report that an RPP is *unsatisfactory* in any way may be made by a student, chair or any member of the RPP, to the Head of the relevant School. Where the Head of School and Postgraduate Co-ordinator consider that the report about the RPP warrants further investigation, then they will ask the Faculty's Associate Dean (Research) to convene a Supervision Assessment Committee (SAC). The SAC may dismiss a report as being unfounded and initiate support processes for the complainant(s) to resolve the issues that prompted the complaint in the first place; conclude that the RPP can be managed readily, and provide the RPP with advice aimed to improve its practices; or require that a member, or some members, resign from the RPP and be replaced. (*Higher Degrees by Research Milestones, Reporting and Confirmation of Candidature Procedure, 7*)

Administration

RPP reporting is managed by faculties and Research Services.

The University's Higher Degrees Committee (Research) is ultimately responsible for RPPs and research progress reporting policy, procedures and operation (along with all other aspects of Higher Degrees by Research). Matters which cannot be resolved through panels themselves will be referred to Schools and Faculty committees in the first instance. Issues that cannot be resolved at that level, and matters involving misconduct provisions, will be referred to the University's Higher Degrees Committee (Research). It may be contacted through its secretariat (Colleen Cocks, Manager Research Students, Research Services).