

PhD and MPhil Progress Reviews in Mathematics and Physics: Information for students

Progress Reviews are a process in which students must demonstrate their knowledge of their research topic, outline progress so far and present detailed plans for the remainder of their candidature. It offers students an opportunity to develop their planning, writing, speaking and listening skills and develop their working relationships with the advisory team. It gives students an opportunity to present their work in both oral and written forms to an audience, and receive feedback on their preparedness, progress and research plans. In addition, it provides a forum for any needs or problems to be raised or identified, and resolutions sought. This process should help prepare students and their advisors for a successful candidature, including paper submissions, talks and the thesis submission.

The main requirements for all three progress reviews are

- The submission of a confirmation report and an individual development plan
- The presentation of a seminar
- Attendance of an interview with a staff confirmation committee

For general information, please consult the Grad-School website:

<https://my.uq.edu.au/information-and-services/higher-degree-research/manage-my-candidature/my-progress-reviews>

and the relevant website outlining the SMP procedures, available at:

<https://graduate-school.uq.edu.au/school-mathematics-and-physics-progress-review-guidelines>

Procedure

Preparing for your progress review will take some time, so start your preparation at least two months before the due date. For PhD students progress reviews are due at the end of the research quarter that begins one year after they have started. For MPhil students the due date is half this time. Since you may need to revise your progress review documents and attainment of a progress review will only be achieved after the committee is satisfied with all aspects of the candidature, you should have your review organized two months before your progress review is due and consider giving your progress review seminar one month before that time. Undergoing the progress review process in a timely manner will improve your chances of also completing your degree on time. Organizing a progress review will consist of the following steps:

- Discuss with your advisory team the status of your project and think about a suitable chair for your progress review committee. The committee chair should be an independent staff member at UQ who is knowledgeable about your general area of research but is not directly involved in your project, not part of your research group and involved in your supervision. The chair for the first progress review (Confirmation) should also chair all subsequent progress reviews as well as your oral examination. This excludes fixed-term staff members from being a committee chair since the time between Confirmation and oral examination normally exceeds the duration of fixed term contracts. If you have any questions about the suitability of a chair or other aspects arising from your progress review, you can discuss them with your DHDR coordinator.

- After deciding on a chair, your chair will choose two examiners for your progress review committee. Once the review committee has been decided, find a suitable date and time when your advisors and committee members are available for the seminar/interview. Ideally this step should be done about a month before your planned progress review seminar.
- Book a seminar room for your progress review and interview. Allow 1.5 hours for the whole process. Your seminar for the first progress review (Confirmation) should be advertised to your discipline (physics/math) in an email that should be sent out about a week before the seminar. Use the maths-all or physics-all mailing lists to advertise your seminar. Your email should include the date, time and place of your seminar as well as a title and abstract. Send a reminder email on the morning of your seminar. The seminars for progress reviews 2 and 3 can be given in front of your research groups with the committee members also present and do not need to be advertised to the maths-all or physics-all mailing lists.
- Prepare a report according to the guidelines below (use the templates provided on our website) and discuss drafts with your advisors. Send your report to the chair for a brief check at least 10 days before your seminar. Once approved, email the final version to all members of the progress review committee about a week before your seminar. Late reports might result in the seminar/interview being postponed.
- Prepare a seminar of 20 minutes duration. We recommend that you practice this in front of your advisors / other group members. Keep in mind that your progress review committee could include people from a variety of fields, so prepare a talk that is understandable for non-experts.

After the progress review interview is over, the committee chair will give you written feedback from the committee, along with its recommendation, which is usually one of the following:

- a) The candidate has fulfilled all the requirements and passes the progress review immediately, possibly with suggestions to be implemented before the next progress review.
- b) The candidate is asked to make some revisions to their report. The candidate will be confirmed once the revisions have been completed to the satisfaction of the chair of the committee.
- c) Where substantial concerns have been expressed, the committee may specify tasks that need to be completed during a time of extended provisional candidature. Attainment of the progress review would follow once these tasks have been completed to the satisfaction of the committee and advisors.

Report

Your report must conform to the rules given in the SMP progress review documents. We strongly recommend that you give the details as outlined in the provided templates. This structure will help you to think about and articulate the 'big picture' associated with your project and to prepare for the questions often asked by the committees. It will also be useful training for the kind of writing needed in grant applications and 'broad interest' journal articles. It is expected that the reports will be written in a commensurate style with high-quality exposition. The committee should be assured that your project is worthwhile and feasible within the time frame of your PhD or MPhil.

The page limit for your reports is 10 pages (A4 with 12 point font, single line spacing and standard margins) for the first progress review and 5 pages for the second and third progress reviews. You should discuss drafts of your report with your advisors. Please distribute your report at least a week before the interview to each member of the committee (via email, unless a committee member requests a paper copy as well), as well as to your advisors. The reference list should include authors, full title & publication name, year, volume and page range.

Good examples of past confirmation reports can be obtained from your DHDR advisor. The procedures in this document were adopted by SMP in 2022, but they are similar to the procedures used previously in our School.

Seminar

The seminar must be presented publicly and should be of no more than 20 minutes duration including questions for reviews 1 and 2 and 30 minutes for review 3. These time limits will be strictly enforced.

As in the report, you should aim to convey the significance and scope of your project to a broad audience, giving a summary of progress to date and plans for completion. A good presentation will make the subsequent interview go more smoothly.

Interview

The interview normally takes place immediately after the seminar. It is essential that the candidate's advisors are present, as well as all committee members. The interview will be conducted in three stages. With the student and advisors present, the committee will ask questions to clarify the research project and overall directions, such as:

What are the “big questions” in your field, and how might your project shed light on these?

What are the particular scientific objectives of your project?

What plan do you have for achieving these? How do you know when you have succeeded?

How does your work relate to what others are doing in the field? Who are your competitors?

What written work have you produced? What has been your contribution to any published papers?

What are your plans after you have finished your PhD at UQ? What steps still need to be done until thesis submission? (for the third progress review)

There will then be an opportunity for you, without your advisors present, to raise any concerns about the relationship with your advisors and the support you are given. This is your main formal opportunity to raise such concerns and seek to have them addressed.

The committee may ask you about:

- Do your advisors provide you with appropriate guidance with respect to literature in your research area?
- Do you feel comfortable raising issues with your advisors that concern you?
- Have you and your advisors worked out the degree to which they will be involved in the research?
- Are your advisors available for discussions/consultations when needed? Do you have regular scheduled meetings with your advisors?
- Do your advisors engage you in constructive discussions about your progress?
- Do your advisors read your work in a timely manner and give you useful feedback?

Finally the committee will have a short discussion with just your advisors. If the committee feels that any aspects of the progress review document require revision, they will communicate these to you via subsequent emails, meetings and/or annotated drafts. These should be attended to as soon as possible, checked by your advisors, and then sent back to the committee (along with any drafts).

After your Interview

Following the interview, the chair will provide you with a report summarizing the feedback of the review committee within 5 working days. No matter the outcome, you should always submit an Outcome of Progress Review request.

Although many students find the review process somewhat stressful, most agree afterwards that it is a very useful exercise that accelerates their progress towards successful completion of the degree.

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