

University of Cambridge logo

Document cover sheet

Policy name	Postgraduate course length policy
Purpose	To set out the requirement for calculation of course length, for all postgraduate courses.
Contact	educationalpolicy@admin.cam.ac.uk
Approved by	General Board's Education Committee
Approval date	3 February 2021
With effect from	3 February 2021
Next review due	Policy reviewed annually as part of EQPO Policy review process
Version	1.0 final

Postgraduate course length

This document sets out the requirement for calculation of course length for postgraduate courses, both taught and research. It outlines the general definition of course length, as well as specific cases which may affect the final determination of a course's duration.

Questions about this document, or additional specific cases not covered here, should be addressed in the first instance to the Education Quality and Policy Office; you should either contact your assigned Liaison Officer or email the team at educationalpolicy@admin.cam.ac.uk.

Implications

As defined in this document, the course length or duration will be used for the following purposes:

- In advertising material for the course, such as the central prospectus;
- On the student record system, CamSIS;
- For visa and immigration purposes, in generating visa supporting documentation and communicating with the Home Office;
- In student offer letters;
- For the calculation of grants for funding and maintenance purposes;
- When returning information on the University's courses to regulatory or reporting bodies, such as HESA or the Office for Students.

It is therefore important that the institution comes to a common definition of how this information will be calculated and reported. Incorrect reporting of course length may lead to inappropriate student expectations or sanctions by government or regulatory bodies, and potentially legal action from students.

Course Directors who feel that there is a special requirement for the calculation of their course length must make a reasoned argument to the General Board's Education Committee for consideration.

General definition

The General Board's Education Committee (GBEC) defines the course length in relation to the amount of minimum required engagement by all students. It is distinct from the examination process, award of the degree, or 'active' student status; that is, a student may have completed the assigned length of his/her course but still be under examination, and the award may not have been agreed or awarded.

The length of the course will be set in relation to the date in which a student engages in the last mandatory element of assessment for the course as a whole. When an oral examination is compulsory, as determined by the Special Regulations for that course, the date of this examination will be the date used for calculation of the course length (see also [Research degrees](#), below). When an oral examination is discretionary or may be waived, as

determined by the Special Regulations for that course, the course length will be calculated using the date on which the candidate submits the last piece of work to be assessed, be it a dissertation, coursework, practical assessment or examination; any period allowed for oral examination is not counted towards the formal length of the course.

Course length will be calculated from the period 1 October until the end of the month in which the last engagement, as determined in this document, falls (see also [Pre-sessional periods](#), below)¹.

It is acknowledged that candidates may be required to extend further effort or engagement on an individual basis after the end date of their course; for example in submitting corrections to a thesis or by attending a discretionary oral examination. However, this engagement is fundamentally different from that expected of the majority of candidates to meet the course learning outcomes and should not be used in the calculation of a course's length for the purposes in this document (see [Implications](#), above).

GBEC expects that all students will receive their results as soon as possible following the final submitted element, and not later than two months from the course's formal end date. Extending this period could jeopardise continuation of study, as well as risk complications with student visas and funding.

Research degrees

Research degrees are those assessed solely by thesis². In these courses, an oral examination is compulsory for all students and may only be waived in very exceptional circumstances³. By the definition above, the formal course length is the date of the oral examination; however, individual arrangements for examination will be required for each candidate, and these arrangements may need to take account of a variety of factors. The General Board's Education Committee has determined that it is unnecessarily granular to set and record unique end dates for each student, provided that the overall expectations for these degree types are clear.

For research degrees, the University standard lengths by term⁴ as outlined in University Ordinances ([Chapter VII, Section 13, Regulation 1, p.506](#)) will be used as the formal course length for the purposes outlined in this document, in order to capture the anticipated length of engagement. For the avoidance of doubt, for postgraduate research students the Easter Term ends on 30 September, and courses may therefore more clearly be advertised to prospective students in years rather than terms or months.

¹ An equivalent length will be provided to research students starting in January or April

² The Ph.D., M.Sc., M.Litt., M.Phil. by Thesis, Ed.D., Bus.D., Vet.D., Eng.D, M.D.

³ In such instances an alternative mode of assessment may be used in lieu of the oral examination.

⁴ Note that students are required to have "kept term" as defined in the University Ordinances, [Chapter II, Section 12, pp. 172](#); *Residence and precincts of the University*

Students should be notified that the examination process for research degrees may not conclude within the identified course duration. GBEC expects faculties and departments to ensure that this does not result in large discrepancies from the anticipated length of these courses and therefore there will be no detrimental implications for visas or funding; where discrepancies arise, this should be discussed with the Student Registry and the Education Quality and Policy Office to resolve.

See also [Pathways or optional choices](#), below, for courses offering both taught and research variants.

Taught postgraduate programmes

The course length for taught postgraduate programmes⁵ will be calculated in months as follows:

- For programmes with a compulsory oral examination, from 1 October in any year until the end of the month in which the date of the oral examination is scheduled.
- For programmes where the oral examination is discretionary or may be waived, from 1 October until the end of the month in which falls the submission or completion date for the last required assessment (e.g., dissertation, coursework or examination). These dates are reported annually to the Student Registry and must align with any previously-agreed dates, e.g., those agreed when the programme was approved by the University, and used in the Postgraduate Prospectus or other documentation. Dates which do not align will be reported to the Education Quality and Policy Office for follow-up, and departments will be required to adjust the submission date accordingly.

See also [Pathways or optional choices](#), below, for courses offering both taught and research variants.

Part-time programmes

Where programmes have both full- and part-time variants, it is normally expected that the part-time variant will be equivalent to that of the full-time course, pro-rata, and excluding any periods of non-engagement⁶. Exceptions to this may be approved, upon presentation of a reasoned case to GBEC.

⁵ The M.Phil. by Advanced Study, M.St., M.Res., MBA, M.Fin., M.Acc., M.C.L., LL.M., M.Ed., M.Mus.

⁶ While there is no formal “summer break” for postgraduate students, some part-time courses are scheduled to include a summer period in which students are not required to attend taught sessions, plan research, or undertake placement activity.

Pre-sessional periods

A pre-sessional period is one in which candidates are encouraged, or required, to arrive in Cambridge before 1 October⁷. The precise details of any pre-sessional period must be advertised to students at the time of application, and may not be amended post-offer.

Pre-sessional courses do not count towards the calculation of course length for the purposes outlined in this document. GBEC has determined that pre-sessional courses are in addition to the formal period of study or engagement required to complete the course, notwithstanding that individual courses may require students to attend.

Pathways or optional choices affecting length

Some courses offer multiple pathways which result in different assessment types, or are offered as both a taught and research (thesis-only) option. Where this is the case, the course length for all options must be identical, whether or not students are admitted independently to both programmes. That is, a course may not offer a pathway with an end date in June if another pathway has an end date in July. This is because, for the award to be offered fairly, students should have the same timeframe within which to demonstrate that they meet the programme's learning outcomes, regardless of the way they are being assessed.

Further information

For further details about this policy, or any queries regarding specialist cases not covered here, please contact the Education Quality and Policy Office in the first instance, educationalpolicy@admin.cam.ac.uk.

⁷ Or the approved formal start date of the course, for research students starting in January or April.