
Academic Appeals Procedure for Research Programmes

1. Introduction

- 1.1. Imperial College is committed to providing a high quality educational and student experience. This procedure reflects the commitment of the College to deal with issues at the earliest possible opportunity and, where necessary, to conduct investigations which are thorough, fair and ensure that decisions are made on the basis of the verifiable facts for each individual case.
- 1.2. This procedure applies to all registered students of the College, including any members of staff who are registered as students, on research programmes as defined in the College Academic Regulations. In practice this means the assessments as listed at paragraph 2.2 that take place as part of a PhD, MD(Res), MPhil, MD¹, MS¹, decisions regarding the award of DSc², and the final thesis or portfolio of an EngD. Taught elements of the EngD will be considered under the [Academic Appeals Procedure for Taught Programmes](#).
- 1.3. Students registered on collaborative provision will be advised within their student handbook which academic appeals process they should follow, in accordance with the Memorandum of Collaboration which governs the provision.
- 1.4. Students should receive a written report which outlines the decision that has been made with regards to their continued research/ examination outcomes under paragraph 1.2 in order to fully understand how the outcome has been reached, and what action needs to be taken. Students are encouraged to ensure they have received and understood this feedback before making a formal academic appeal.
- 1.5. This procedure is aligned to the [UK Quality Code \(QAA\): Advice and guidance for concerns, complaints and appeals](#), and the [Good Practice Framework: Handling Academic Appeals and Student Complaints](#) (Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education).
- 1.6. The College adheres to the principles of natural justice, and as such aims to ensure procedural fairness as part of these appeals procedures. Procedural fairness is defined by the OIA as following the College's own procedures correctly when conducting the process and acting fairly. Therefore:
 - (1) A student should receive copies of all information considered by the decision maker(s);
 - (2) Any staff involved in the academic appeals process are required to be free from the reasonable perception of bias.
 - (3) Clear reasons will be given for the decision that has been made.
- 1.7. Every reasonable effort will be made to deal promptly and efficiently with all academic appeals, to investigate them thoroughly and objectively and to seek to

¹ Former Degrees of the University of London.

² Doctor of Science, see *Regulations for the Award of the Doctor of Science (DSc) Degree* available at <https://www.imperial.ac.uk/about/governance/academic-governance/regulations/>

solve them satisfactorily. Academic appeals will be dealt with positively and constructively. If an academic appeal is upheld, the College will seek to provide an appropriate response and take action as necessary. If an academic appeal is not upheld, then the reasons for that decision will be clearly communicated to the student.

- 1.8 All academic appeals are dealt with confidentially but under the proviso that enquiries will have to be made in order to investigate the matters that are the subject of the academic appeal.
- 1.9 The time limits set out in this procedure will be followed. Where for good reason this is not possible, the student will be provided with an explanation for the delay and a revised timescale for completion.
- 1.10 Where the circumstances of the academic appeal are considered to be exceptional, the College may amend the procedure where it considers that this would be beneficial to the student. The reasons for any amendment to the procedure as set out in this document will be communicated to the student and recorded in the outcomes letter, and the Completion of Procedures letter where one is issued.
- 1.11 Where a student making an academic appeal believes that they should receive reasonable adjustments to the procedures on the grounds of disability, this should be clearly stated in the submission. This would include the reason for requesting the adjustment and any suggestions of what this may mean, for example an alternative format to a hearing or an extended deadline.
- 1.12 If at any point in this procedure it is found that an academic appeal should be upheld, for example it is found during the investigation stage that there has been a clear error in the interpretation of the relevant regulations or new evidence is accepted by Examiners/Reviewers, immediate action will be taken to rectify the error without the need to hold an appeals panel hearing.
- 1.13 Students are strongly encouraged to seek advice and support should they be considering, or make, an academic appeal submission, such as from the Imperial College Union Advice Centre, Disability Advisory Service or Senior Tutor (PGR) as appropriate.

2. What is an academic appeal?

- 2.1. The College has defined an academic appeal as:

“A request for a review of a decision of an academic body charged with making decisions on student progress, assessment and awards”

This definition is in accordance with the definition provided in the Quality Code (QAA, March 2018), *Advice and Guidance: Concerns, Complaints and Appeals* (QAA, November 2018), and the *Good Practice Framework: Handling Academic Appeals and Student Complaints* (OIA, September 2015).³

³ *Good Practice Framework: Handling Complaints and Academic Appeals*, Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education [available at <https://www.oiahe.org.uk/resources-and-publications/good-practice-framework/handling-complaints-and-academic-appeals/complaints-and-academic-appeals/>]

2.2 For the purposes of this procedure a decision that is eligible to be considered under this procedure, subject to the grounds presented, are as follows:

- Early Stage Assessment
- Late Stage Review
- MPhil to PhD transfer examination⁴
- End of programme thesis submission and/or viva voce examination
- Decisions of the DSc committee regarding the award of DSc

2.3 The College does not accept academic appeals challenging academic judgement. Academic judgement is defined by the OIA as “*a judgement that is made about a matter where only the opinion of an academic expert is sufficient*”.⁵ For example the decision of the standard of research submitted for examination, subsequent to the adherence to College procedures, is an academic judgement.

The academic appeals procedure in summary

2.4. Where students are unclear about the outcome of their review or examination, they should first contact their department to seek further information and guidance. Where a student remains unhappy with the outcome, they can submit an academic appeal where there are demonstrable grounds. There are two formal stages to the academic appeals process, Formal (stage one) and Request for Review (stage two).

2.5. Grounds for making a formal academic appeal (paragraphs 3 to 4)

2.5.1. A student can only make an academic appeal following the formal publication of results on the following grounds:

- (1) that there has been a material procedural irregularity in the conduct of the examination or review meeting (including administrative error)
- (2) that there is evidence of procedural unfairness in the conduct of the examination or review meeting (for example bias or prejudice of the examiner/reviewer).
- (3) a request for the consideration of late mitigating circumstances which could not reasonably have been brought to the attention of the College prior to the examination/review meeting under the Late Case Request process.

2.5.2. All students are expected to use the Late Case Request process, or request an interruption to their studies, if their personal circumstances limit their ability to successfully complete their studies. Appeals will only be considered under the grounds of mitigating circumstances where the student also provides a clear and plausible rationale for failing to follow College procedures at the appropriate time and, where appropriate, also provide supporting independent documentary evidence.

2.5.3 A student cannot make an academic appeal which questions academic judgement as described in paragraph 2.3. However, the College can consider academic appeals on the grounds of procedural irregularity, which refers to “*an inconsistency in or a variance from the prescribed set of procedures that are usually followed*”. Where there is evidence of a procedural irregularity, the Research Appeals Panel will

⁴ Where a student has enrolled on a research programme with the specific requirement to be on an MPhil and then to transfer to PhD.

⁵ On-line glossary, Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education [available at <https://www.oiahe.org.uk/information/glossary/>]

consider whether, in their opinion, it was likely to have had a significant adverse effect on the outcome for the student.

2.5.4. Reasons that are not normally considered valid grounds for an appeal:

- Appeals against academic judgement
- Retrospective reporting of mitigating circumstances that could have reasonably be made known to the College at the time (see 2.5.2).
- Financial circumstances
- Housing/living arrangements
- Lack of awareness by the student of the special case process or of interruption of studies procedure
- Complaints regarding the level of service provided (see [Student Complaints Procedure](#))
- Allegations of Bullying or Harassment by a member of staff (see [Harassment, Bullying and Victimisation policy](#))
- Requests to review the decision to require a student to withdraw from their studies that is not the result of academic failure (see [Withdrawals for unsatisfactory progress](#))

2.5.5 The College will not investigate appeals which it considers to be vexatious. The decision of the Academic Registrar that an appeal is vexatious is final, the appeal will be closed, and a Completion of Procedures letter will be issued. A student making a vexatious submission may be referred to the [Student Discipline Procedure](#).

2.6. Review of the outcome of the academic appeal (Paragraph 5)

2.6.1. If a student is dissatisfied with the outcome of the formal stage of the academic appeal procedure, they can request a review. This can only be done on the following grounds:

- (1) a student believes that there has been a material procedural irregularity in the academic appeals process;
- (2) a student believes that a decision on their academic appeal has not taken account of all relevant information;
- (3) additional material information has come to light that could not reasonably have been provided previously;

FORMAL ACADEMIC APPEALS PROCEDURE

3. Submission of the academic appeal and initial filtering

3.1 Students must submit their academic appeal to the Registry within 20 working days of the formal publication of the result(s) against which they are appealing. Requests must be submitted using the approved research academic appeal form (available from the [website](#)) and emailed to student.appeals@imperial.ac.uk.

3.2 It is a student's responsibility to ensure that they submit their academic appeal in accordance with the published deadlines and that they attach all relevant documentary evidence to support the submission with the academic appeal form. Where a student is unable to provide all the documentary evidence they wish to be taken into account by the deadline, they should advise of this with their academic

appeal form and give an indication of the timescale when the evidence will be made available. The student casework team member will acknowledge the submission of the appeal and, where appropriate, will provide a final deadline by which all the evidence should be provided. The academic appeal will then be processed in accordance with procedure. Where it is felt that there is no valid reason for the non-submission of the evidence, the student will be advised that they must either meet the deadline as set out in 3.1 above or that the academic appeal is ineligible under this procedure and cannot be considered.

- 3.3. When an academic appeal is received, the Registry will undertake an initial review that the academic appeal form has been submitted within the published deadline, that there is relevant evidence attached and that there are valid grounds citing and described for an academic appeal. Where these conditions are met, the academic appeal will be formally acknowledged and the student will be advised of the indicative timescale for the consideration of their academic appeal in accordance with the procedure.
- 3.4. Where an academic appeal has been submitted beyond the published deadline and the student has not provided a reasonable explanation of the reason for the late submission, with evidence where appropriate, the receipt of the academic appeal will be formally acknowledged and the student will be given one opportunity to update their submission. If the updated submission does not provide a reasonable explanation and/or have supportive evidence the student will be advised that their academic appeal is late and cannot be considered. The student will be issued with a Completion of Procedures (CoP) letter which explains any further steps that may be taken in relation to the case.
- 3.5. In the event that the Registry believes that a student has submitted an academic appeal which might be more appropriately considered under an alternative procedure, such as a complaint, the student will be contacted and advised of this decision, provided with further information, and the appeal will be closed.
- 3.6. Where a student has submitted a case that could be dealt with in part as an academic appeal and in part as a complaint for example, the student will be contacted to explain how this will be done and provided with the indicative timescales for each procedure to be completed, as it may not be appropriate to deal with both issues concurrently.
- 3.7. Where the initial review of the academic appeal identifies that there is no evidence of grounds for academic appeal or the grounds cited are not eligible for consideration the student will be written to within five working days and advised of the decision and provided with an explanation of why it was not accepted. They will be given one opportunity to update their submission. If the appeal is still considered to be ineligible following the updated submission, the student will be informed that the appeal is not accepted, and of their right to request a review of the decision under section 5 of this procedure.
- 3.8. If it is clear that the student is expecting an outcome which cannot be reasonably provided by the College, the student will be advised of this at the time their academic appeal is acknowledged.
- 3.9. Where the conditions of the initial review are met (on time, citing and explaining relevant grounds and with supporting evidence) the case be considered in accordance with the formal stage described on Section 4.

4. Formal consideration of the academic appeal (Stage 1)

- 4.1. Where an appeal has been considered eligible, the case will be investigated by a member of Registry staff who has had no previous involvement with the matter. Where appropriate, additional evidence which might assist the understanding of the case will be sought. This is expected to include statements from the Faculty or Department where the student is based, the formal report of the review/examination, and supervisory records where appropriate to the case. The investigation might also seek additional evidence from the student if deemed necessary. This additional evidence, along with the submission from the student, will form the basis on which the appeal is considered.
- 4.2. As stated at paragraph 1.12, on receipt of the academic appeal for response, if the department considers that the case warrants being upheld without further continuation with the appeals process, they should contact the caseworker to close the appeal and take the necessary action for the student.
- 4.3. The initial investigation and collation of evidence should be completed within 15 working days of the receipt of the appeal under normal circumstances. The collated evidence will be provided to the student with a deadline of 5 working days to provide final comment prior to the consideration by the Research Academic Appeals panel.
- 4.4. Following the deadline for comment by the student of the collated evidence, the case will be considered by a Research Academic Appeals Panel that will be made up of:
 - An experienced member of the designated list of the Student Casework Panel Members list approved by Senate to serve as Chair
 - A Director of Postgraduate Studies (or equivalent)
 - A further member drawn from the designated list of the Student Casework Panel Members list approved by Senate

None of the members of the panel will be from the student's home department and will normally be from a different Faculty though this may not always be possible.

The panel will be supported by a member of Registry staff to act as secretary to the panel.

- 4.5. The Research Academic Appeals Panel will consider the student's appeal submission and the collated evidence. The Chair of the Panel will determine with the secretary how the work of the Panel will be conducted and who, other than the members of the Panel, needs to attend a meeting (or respond, if the consideration of the academic appeal is conducted via correspondence).
- 4.6. The Academic Appeals Panel will not normally meet with the student at this point in the procedure but should they consider it beneficial, or the student requests a full hearing with a representative of the department present, a formal hearing will be convened. The student would normally be expected to attend the meeting in person, but where necessary this may be by alternative means (for example by a telephone or video conference call).
- 4.7. The student will also be advised as part of the appeals procedure of the support mechanisms that are available to them and advised that they can bring a 'friend' with them to the meeting if they wish to. A 'friend' may accompany the student for moral support but may not be a solicitor or barrister acting in a professional capacity. For the purposes of this procedure, a 'friend' is defined as either; a registered student of

Imperial College London, an officer or advisor of the Imperial College Union or a current member of staff at the College. With agreement from the Chair of the Academic Appeal Panel, the 'friend' may speak on behalf of the student.

- 4.8. The student will normally be given at least 10 working days' notice of any request to attend a meeting with the Research Academic Appeals Panel. If a student is unable to attend, they will be provided with one further opportunity to meet the Panel. If a date cannot be agreed with the student, the Panel may proceed with their consideration of the case and the evidence provided in order to make a judgement. This is to ensure that the appeal can still be considered and concluded in a timely fashion. The meeting will, under normal circumstances, be held within 40 working days of the receipt of the appeal. Where a student's individual circumstances require an earlier resolution of the appeal, every effort will be made to facilitate this.
- 4.9. The Research Academic Appeals Panel will, on the basis of the evidence provided to them, decide that *either*
 - (1) the appeal should be upheld and make a recommendation(s) to remedy the situation.

or

 - (2) the appeal is rejected as the grounds are not proven, that is that there is insufficient evidence to support the grounds.
- 4.10. The outcome of the formal stage will be communicated to the student in writing within 5 working days by Registry and will provide a clear explanation of the reason for the decision. If the appeal has been upheld, the student will be advised of the action that will be taken by the College and, where appropriate, advised who they need to contact in their Department or Faculty.
- 4.11. If the student is not satisfied with the outcome of the formal stage of their appeal, they will be advised of their right to escalate their concern to the review stage and will be provided with information on the procedure, timescales, and support available to them.
- 4.12. If the student does not escalate the academic appeal to the review stage, the College will close the appeal. The College will only issue a Completion of Procedures letter at this stage if the student requests one. This request must be made within six weeks of the student receiving notification of the outcome of their stage 1 appeal. The letter will make clear that the student has not exhausted the College's internal academic appeal procedures. The outcome letter from the formal stage will explain this to the student.

5. Review of academic appeals (Stage 2)

- 5.1. If a student is dissatisfied with the outcome of the formal stage, including a decision that the case was not eligible (see paragraph 3.7), they can request a review in accordance with the grounds set out in paragraph 2.6.1 of this procedure. Any request for review must be made within 15 working days of the receipt of the academic appeal outcome letter.
- 5.2. Requests for a review of an academic appeal should be made in writing using the Request for Review form, and sent to the Head of the Central Secretariat (copied to student.appeals@imperial.ac.uk). The submission must clearly state the ground(s)

and should include the reason/s why the outcome of the formal stage was insufficient and any additional evidence which the student wishes to be considered. The Head of the Central Secretariat, or nominee, will evaluate the request for the review to ensure that it falls within the grounds as set out in paragraph 2.6.1 of this procedure. Upon completion of this evaluation, the Head of the Central Secretariat, or nominee, will acknowledge the request for review in writing within 5 working days of receipt.

- 5.3. Where a request for review is eligible, a Research Academic Appeals Review Panel will be convened, normally within 15 working days, to consider the submission. The Panel will be constituted in the same way as the Research Academic Appeals Panel (see para 4.4) and will be supported by a member of Registry staff as secretary. The Review Panel will not include any member of the panel from stage 1 that considered the appeal under these procedures.
- 5.4 The student will be invited to attend a meeting with the Research Academic Appeals Review Panel under the same arrangements set out in paragraphs 4.4 to 4.7 above. Where necessary a member of the Research Academic Appeals Panel, normally the Chair, will also be invited to attend to answer any queries on the decision-making process at the formal stage. If it is not possible to agree a date which the student or the member of the Research Academic Appeals Panel can attend, the Review Panel will convene without them and undertake the review on the basis of the evidence available.
- 5.5. The Research Academic Appeals Review Panel will be provided with documentation on the request for review and the supporting evidence provided by the Student. The Panel may request additional evidence from the Faculty/Department, seek additional clarification from the student, or from the Research Academic Appeals Panel.
- 5.6. The Academic Appeals Review Panel will decide that *either*
 - (1) the original decision in respect of the academic appeal should be overturned and the Review Panel should make a recommendation for resolution (request for review is upheld).

or

 - (2) that there are no valid grounds for review and thus the decision of the Academic Appeals Panel stands (request for review is rejected).
- 5.7. The student will be advised of the outcome of the review in writing within 5 working days and provided a copy of any additional documentation that has been considered at this stage by the panel.
- 5.8. Where the Research Academic Appeals Review Panel upholds the request for review, the outcome letter will include the action that will be taken in response to their appeal.
- 5.9 Where the request for review has been rejected, the outcome letter will clearly explain the decision that has been made, and the reasoning for this.
- 5.10 As this is the final stage of the Research Academic Appeal procedures, regardless of the outcome the student will be issued with a Completion of Procedures (CoP) letter. This will inform the student of their right to escalate their case to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA) if they remain dissatisfied.

6. Record keeping

- 6.1. A confidential record will be kept of the appeal and of the outcome of the case in order that themes in appeal submissions can be identified, addressed and improvements can be introduced.
- 6.2. The Registry will hold the full academic appeal file in line with the [College retention timescales](#).

7 Monitoring and Enhancement

- 7.1. The Registry Quality Assurance Team will prepare an annual report which will inform Senate of the number, nature and outcomes of academic appeals during an academic session. The report will also record any corrective action taken, identify any themes emerging from the submissions, and make recommendations for enhancements to the academic appeals procedure or to College policy, procedure or practices.
- 7.2. An annual report will also be produced to reflect on any cases which have been considered by the Office of the Independent Adjudicator.

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