**HELPING CANDIDATES UPGRADE FROM MASTERS TO PHD**

**by Simon Moss**

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| **Introduction** |

Occasionally, after about 9 to 12 months of their candidature if full time or twice as long if part time, Masters by Research candidates will apply to upgrade their course to a PhD. This document offers some guidance to supervisors on how they can help these candidates achieve this goal as efficiently as possible.

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| **Criteria that candidates must fulfill** |

The first column in the following table outlines the criteria that candidates must fulfill before they can seek this upgrade. The second column clarifies these criteria

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| Criteria | Clarifications |
| **Completed work.** Candidates need to have completed work that is comparable in scope to an Honours thesis—with a standard that resembles a H1 or H2A | For example, the candidates might have   * submitted a systematic review or empirical report to a journal, or * completed about 15 000 words of their thesis that refers to at least some empirical or research work |
| **Progress report.** On their progress report, supervisors need to indicate they are satisfied or very satisfied with the progress of this candidate | In the support letter, supervisors who had identified concerns should indicate how the candidates have addressed these problems |
| **Research plan.** Candidates need to have developed a feasible and detailed plan of the research they will conduct to achieve the PhD | The support letter the supervisor writes should outline this plan |
| **Achievable plan.** Candidates need to demonstrate they can achieve this plan within the allocated time of a PhD—that is, within 4 years full time, including the time they have already consumed |  |
| **Supervision approval.** All the supervisors must support this upgrade. |  |

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| **Support letter** |

To seek an upgrade, candidates need to complete the relevant application. Attached to this application should be

* evidence of their progress—often an attached paper or draft chapter
* a letter of support from their supervisor or supervisors.

To help you construct this letter of support, the following table specifies the main sections you should include as well as some examples. You may choose to copy and then adust these examples.

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| Sections to include | Examples |
| Specify purpose of letter | I am writing to convey my support for John Smith’s request to upgrade from a Masters by Research to a PhD. |
| Specify what the candidate has achieved | In his first year, John has   * developed a significant research question and designed the methodology and methods * written and submitted a systematic literature review * implemented and submitted a preliminary study |
| Summarize the research the candidates had planned to complete, or had completed, for the Masters by Research | The purpose of his study was to explore the effects of mindfulness meditation on the frequency, severity, and duration of colds. His preliminary study was quasi experimental and provided prima facie support for the hypothesis that mindfulness meditation is negatively associated with the frequency and severity of colds. |
| Summarize how the candidates would extend this work if enrolled in a PhD | If his application to upgrade is successful, he can then extend this preliminary study by conducting a randomized control trial and then a qualitative study that applies constructivist grounded theory. |
| Specify the benefits or significance of this extension | The randomized control study would show the benefits can be ascribed to mindfulness meditation rather than other characteristics that might correlate with such meditation. The qualitative study would explore how mindfulness meditation affected the subjective experience of colds. This study could thus unearth other benefits of mindfulness meditation. |
| Specify the qualities the candidate has demonstrated that would enable this individual to complete a PhD—perhaps alluding to efficiency, motivation, research skills, and writing skills | I believe that John has demonstrated the requisite skills to complete a PhD. He is remarkably organized; he has developed and fulfilled a comprehensive plan of how to proceed. In addition, John is very dedicated to this research; he reads extensively on both his topic and research skills in general. He has also attended many optional workshops on research methods and research practices. Furthermore, during his candidature, he has developed advanced skills in multilevel modeling and grounded theory. Finally, his writing has improved extensively: the last drafts he sent did not need to be corrected |
| If the candidate had not progressed satisfactorily in the past, indicate how this individual has addressed the source of these problems | In his first three months, John’s progress was hampered by PTSD. He then sought assistance to manage and alleviate the symptoms. For the last nine months, his symptoms have not affected his studies. His progress since this time has been outstanding. |
| Belief the candidate will finish within the allotted time | Because of his motivation, project management skills, research skills, and writing skills, I believe John Smith is now in a position to complete his thesis within another two years. |

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| **Possible outcomes** |

Whenever candidates demonstrate they are likely to complete the PhD within the allocated time, the Dean of Graduate Studies will most likely permit the upgrade. Otherwise, the Dean will reject the application. If the application is rejected

* the supervisors could, if necessary, arrange to meet with the Dean or Assistant Dean of Graduate Studies to clarify the reason this application was rejected
* the candidate could reapply in the future

Candidates can apply after 12 full-time months of their candidature. However, if the candidates apply too late, the Dean of Graduate Studies may be less inclined to conclude they will finish within the allocated time.

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| **The updated support letter** |

If candidates decide to reapply, the supervisors will need to revised the support letter. The following table summarizes the key sections that supervisors should include in the updated letter

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| Sections to include | Example |
| Specify purpose of letter | Same as previous letter |
| Indicate the candidate is reapplying | John did apply for this upgrade in the past. However, since this time, he has progressed significantly on his research and has developed key skills |
| Specify what the candidate has achieved | Same as previous letter—but include additional achievements if applicable |
| Summarize the research the candidates had planned to complete, or had completed, for the Masters by Research | Same as previous letter |
| Summarize how the candidates would extend this work if enrolled in a PhD | Same as previous letter but extend if necessary |
| Specify the benefits or significance of this extension | Same as previous letter but extend if necessary. |
| Specify the qualities the candidate has demonstrated that would enable this individual to complete a PhD—perhaps alluding to efficiency, motivation, research skills, and writing skills | Same as previous letter but extend if necessary |
| Indicate how this individual has addressed the source of these problems | To improve the efficiency of his work, John has now completed a short course on project management—a course that could help him circumvent some of the obstacles he experienced during his first year. |
| Belief the candidate will finish within the allotted time | Same as previous letter but perhaps with more evidence |