

PhD PROGRAMME in Fundamentals of Cancer Biology

Regulatory Framework



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1. IFOM and the PhD Programme in Fundamentals of Cancer Biology

Founded in 1998 by FIRC (the Italian Foundation for Cancer Research), IFOM is a private cancer research institute focused on the study of cancer at the molecular level.

Since the beginning, research in IFOM has been pursued thanks to the cooperation of scientists coming from the main Italian national research centres, such as the European Oncology Institute, the National Institute for Tumors study and treatment, the Mario Negri Institute for Pharmacological Research, the San Raffaele Biomedical Science Park and the University of Milan. Here several Principal Investigators, while performing their research activity at IFOM, are also Professors.

Besides the interaction with top Italian research centres, IFOM pursued an international approach as certified by the establishment of the IFOM Asia programme. Through this initiative, IFOM has opened several Joint Research Labs in Asia with world-class research institutes. Today, IFOM has such joint research labs with Kyoto University Medical School (Japan) and RIKEN Yokohama (Japan).

IFOM's main premises in Milan are located close to the city centre within a former industrial area of 12.000 sqm completely renovated and equipped with cutting edge technology. The Institute also has one guesthouse, where students and researchers can be temporarily hosted.

IFOM conducts scientific research through an academic "curiosity driven" approach: research groups are led by a Principal Investigator and are made of postdocs (organized in a Post-Doc association), technicians and PhD students. 26 Research Groups are currently working in the Institute. Research produced in the Institute is top-class, with several researches being awardees of prestigious grants (e.g., ERC), and members of the most important scientific associations (e.g., EMBO members). Many IFOM scientists are active players in the Italian and international scientific debate.

The quality of scientific research in IFOM is supervised by an international Advisory Board, chaired by Caroline Dive. The board also comprises the following eminent scientists: Keith Caldecott, Julian Downward, Giulio Draetta, Gillian Griffiths, Jan Hoeijmakers, Benoit Ladoux, Nuria Lopez Bigas, Patricia LoRusso, Manuel Salto-Tellez, Andreas Trumpp and Matthew Vander Heiden.

IFOM is an Affiliated Research Centre (ARC) of The Open University (OU), and in this framework it organizes a PhD Programme in Fundamentals of Cancer Biology. The Programme is open to students coming from all over the world and aims at training researchers in molecular and cellular biology with particular emphasis on cancer. In parallel and separately from the OU programme, graduate students can pursue their PhD in IFOM in the framework of the European School of Molecular Medicine (SEMM), which manages Doctoral degrees awarded by the University of Milan or in the framework of University of Galway (Ireland) or Pázmány Petér Catholic University (Budapest, Hungary). PIs of IFOM take part in the training, teaching and organizational activity of the Schools.

2. Structure and management of the OU/PhD Programme at IFOM

The PhD Programme is carried out by 4 bodies:

- PhD Coordinator,
- Educational Committee,
- Students' representatives,
- PhD Office.

All IFOM Principal Investigators form the Faculty of the PhD Programme and contribute to the Programme as described below. IFOM offers the doctoral training in the framework of The Open University (OU). Thus, additional details for all topics related with the PhD programme are available in Research Degrees ARC Handbook issued by the OU ([download](#)).

2.1 PhD bodies

The organization of the IFOM unit in charge of handling the PhD Programme is described below.

PhD Coordinator

The PhD Coordinator (Research Degrees Coordinator) supervises the IFOM/OU PhD Programme with the support of the Educational Committee and reports to the Scientific Director. In addition, the Coordinator is the interface between IFOM and The Open University. Finally, the PhD Coordinator monitors students to ensure they make adequate academic progress each year.

Educational Committee

The Educational Committee (EC) is formed by the PhD Coordinator and by three scientists of the Faculty (i.e., IFOM PIs). Each member of the EC is in charge for approximately four years, and is chosen by the Scientific Director after consultation with the PI Strategic Committee of IFOM. All members of the Faculty are expected to be part of the EC in due time.

The EC is in charge of the organization and quality of the PhD Programme, within the strategic plans and priorities identified by the Scientific Direction of IFOM. To this aim, the EC monitors the PhD programme keeping track of applications, registrations, withdrawals, probations and examinations outcomes. The EC also discusses feedbacks from students and writes the annual review of the PhD programme. The EC defines the policies and practice of the programme whose outcome is the periodical reviewing of this Regulatory Framework.

The EC meets whenever needed, and anyway not less than every three months.

The composition of the Selection Board can vary depending on the availability of Faculty members, while always ensuring a fair representation of genders, nationalities and diversity in general.

Students' Representatives

Students' Representatives are elected among enrolled students. They bring the students' point of view regarding potential problems that may arise or make suggestions. The Students' representatives are not part of the EC but can meet the PhD Coordinator and the EC whenever needed to illustrate their problems.

Administration

The administration of the PhD Programme is managed by the IFOM PhD Office (Research Degrees Office). All administrative and financial aspects are managed with the assistance of the IFOM Administrative Direction and Personnel Office.

The PhD Programme also takes advantage of the IT Helpdesk, for all information technology issues, and of the IFOM Digital Media unit for all web-based information.

2.2 Supervisors and Third-Party Monitors

Students have 2 Supervisors: the main Supervisor ("Supervisor" -- the Director of Studies) and one External Supervisor. If required, an internal supervisor can also be nominated. They also have one Third-Party Monitor member of the Faculty as described below.

Supervisor

The Supervisor is appointed among IFOM Principal Investigators, and has PhD or MD and academic competences in the area of the proposed research topic. IFOM PIs can supervise students provided they spend at least 50% of their time at IFOM (Milan). All IFOM PIs have a wide experience in training and mentoring young scientists and PhD students and most of them have served as Jury members of thesis committees in the UK and several European Countries.

Third-Party Monitor

The Third-Party Monitor is a member of the Faculty who is not necessarily an expert of the field of research investigated by the student.

External Supervisor

The External Supervisors should have a PhD or MD. Besides having academic competence in the proposed area of research, it's recommendable they have experience of UK research degree supervision.

As a rule, at least one member of the supervision team has supervised to the successful completion at least one PhD student in the UK academic system.

The Supervisors should not have a close personal relationship with the student they are appointed to supervise. If a relationship develops after the appointment has been made, alternative arrangements for the student's supervision are made by the PhD Coordinator.

2.3 Training of Supervisors

All Faculty members receive from the PhD Coordinator a copy of the Research Degrees in Affiliated Research Centres Guidelines for Supervisors, and a copy of this Regulatory Framework of the PhD Programme. Moreover, the PhD Coordinator ensures that Supervisors are informed of and understand the UK system of Higher Education for training and monitoring of PhD students.

To this aim, all Supervisors are offered a course 'Supervisors how-to guide' covering the following topics:

- Successful procedures to select applicants
- Duties and rights of Supervisors
- Duties and rights of students
- Milestones of the programme (e.g., Mini-VIVA, annual progress reports, thesis)
- Practical examples on how best to organize the training of students
- Practical examples of how best to monitor student progress

Besides the necessary knowledge to run the programme, the professional development of Supervisors is also an integral part of the PhD Programme. To this aim, supervisor has access to the Researcher Development Framework (RDF) ([download](#)), which allows them to evaluate their skills (e.g., mentorship, project planning) and provides a framework to improve them.

3. Supervisors and students' responsibilities

Students enrolled in the PhD programme follow the regulation and code of practices set in place by the OU (e.g., concerning student discipline, etc). Detailed documents can be found on line at:

Code of Practice for Students Discipline ([download](#))

Plagiarism Policy ([download](#))

For additional information, please visit our dedicated [website](#).

Likewise, code of practices for the interaction between students and supervisor are those specified by OU in the *ARC Research Student Handbook*. Hereafter, we emphasize some of the most relevant expectations in the relationship between students and supervisors.

The different levels of supervision do not overlap, with each Supervisor covering a different role in mentoring the students throughout their studies. Complementary to the Supervisors responsibilities there are the Students' responsibilities.

3.1 Supervisors' responsibilities

Support offered by the Supervisor

Supervisors offer counselling and support in:

- identification and elaboration of a research project
- planning, design and organization of the laboratory experiments
- critical revision of the experimental results
- identification of encountered problems and elaboration of alternative strategies
- collection and presentation of the data
- training to give oral scientific presentation in public
- training in writing the thesis, scientific reports and scientific articles
- ensure that the level of English language of the Student is good enough
- support and advise students in developing student's weaker areas

Concerning this last point, within one month from the enrolment, students and their supervisor perform a skills audit benchmarked to RDF, available at the OU's PGR Manager System - DEVELOPMENT section, where all relevant information about the PhD record of each student can be found. The skills audit pinpoints at soft skills that need to be improved on the side of the student. The Supervisor throughout the PhD programme advises and supports the student in improving the skills identified by RDF.

The Supervisor has frequent contacts with the student and is always available for guidance in solving scientific and technical problems. Formal meetings between students and the Supervisor, be it one-to-one or lab meetings, take place periodically, at least 10 times per academic year. Students are expected to take written records of their meetings with the Supervisor, emphasizing the state of the art of their research project and the future plans. It is required that, at the end of every month, the student summarizes the state of the project and expected plans and submit it to their supervisor via PGR Manager for their approval.

Support offered by the External Supervisor

The External Supervisor, identified at the time of registration, is in direct contact with the PhD student (e.g., via email). The External Supervisor's role in training the student is obviously more limited due to logistic problems.

At least one meeting between the External Supervisor and the student should be organized each year. In lieu of face to face meetings, also meetings by video conference are accepted. IFOM fully covers the expenses for these meetings. The external supervisor evaluates the upgrade report, make assessment for the annual progress reports and supports the student in writing their thesis.

Support offered by the Third-Party Monitor

The Third-Party Monitor offers an 'external' point of view both on the research carried on by the student and on any possible problems which may arise during the course of studies. The Student should meet the Third-Party Monitor by the fifth month of registration and at least once every year.

3.2 Students' responsibilities

The PhD Coordinator and Supervisor ensure that students are aware of their duties and responsibilities within the Programme, as detailed below:

Responsibilities of the PhD student:

- Work conscientiously and independently within the guidance offered
- Keep a systematic record of all experimental work attempted and accomplished via the electronic notebook
- Inform Supervisors on their research
- Participate fully in the educational activities provided by IFOM.
- Follow all the milestones of the programme (reports, seminars, etc) within the expected deadlines
- Ensure that their English is good enough for the presentation of a thesis

Supervisors can also reasonably expect students to:

- Inform their Supervisors about other people with whom they discuss their work
- Take the initiative in raising problems or difficulties, however elementary or trivial they seem
- Students should hand in work in good time and give adequate notice if they ask Supervisors for unscheduled meetings

More exhaustive description of the code practice expected by students and supervisors is available in the *Research Degrees Regulations* of the OU, Appendix 2 The code of practice for supervisors and research students ([download](#)) and in the *Research DegreeARC_Handbook* ([download](#)), to which the IFOM/OU PhD programme adheres.

4. Students selection

The number of enrolled PhD Students may vary from year to year depending on the requests of individual laboratories and thus on the availability of resources (fellowships, space in the laboratory, etc).

Recruitment is open all-year round and positions are advertised on the institutional web page. In accordance with the relevant European and Italian legislation, and the "equal opportunity

employer” status of IFOM, no distinction is made as to gender, nationality, health status or religious and political opinion.

Students with undergraduate degrees are eligible for admission to the PhD programme, provided they would be eligible for the PhD degree in the UK. The UK National Recognition Information Centre (NARIC) will be contacted to solve issues related with the comparison of qualifications of candidates who did their undergraduate studies outside of the UK. Cases of students with lower qualification but holding other relevant experience will be handled case by case by The Open University.

Only full-time students are accepted in the Programme.

4.1 Application procedure

The applicant finds all documents relevant for the call on the web page of the IFOM/OU PhD Programme, and they submit their application by e-mail to phd-desk@ifom.eu.

The application requires the submission of a dossier including

- CV
- a record of their university exams with the relative score
- certificate of the last degree
- experiences in countries different from where they obtained the undergraduate degree
- list of publications or poster presentations, if any
- 2 letters of recommendation (candidates should arrange for recommendation letters to be sent directly to phd-desk@ifom.eu)
- a short paragraph on their interests and goals in applying to the programme
- Where English is not the applicant’s first language, the applicant must submit IELTS (English Language Testing System) certificate with a minimum score of 6.5 with no less than 6.0 in any of the four categories (or approved equivalent). Only the certificate issued in the last two years will be accepted.

In the application form, students must express their preference for Research Laboratories in IFOM.

4.2 Evaluation of applications

All applications are subjected to evaluation by IFOM, while the final acceptance of the students in the programme is made by The Open University. Applications are first checked by the IFOM PhD Office under the supervision of the PhD Coordinator in order to ensure that the required eligibility criteria are met. All inadequate or incomplete submissions are discarded.

First Selection

The dossier of the applicants is evaluated by at least one of the Supervisors indicated by the applicant. The dossier is scored based on the dossier, and particularly: CV, letters of recommendation and the statement of interest by the applicant. Each of these three elements are given a score between 1 and 10. Only applicants who total more than 18 points are admitted to the oral exam.

First Evaluation Form ([download](#))

Oral Interviews

Typically, the oral interviews are carried out by components of a Selection Board plus at least one of the Supervisors indicated by the applicant (at least 3 members in total). The selection board includes three members of the Faculty. It performs interviews and selects future candidates that apply for the PhD Programme. It is elected for each round of selection. The composition of the Selection Board can vary depending on the availability of Faculty members, while always ensuring a fair representation of genders, nationalities and diversity in general.

Exams are conducted in English language. Poor knowledge on English is basis for non-acceptance in the programme. The selected candidates are evaluated in an individual oral interview and the date should be agreed with the candidate after the positive outcome of the first selection. IFOM supports the travel and lodging expenses (1 night) of all interviewed students. For students outside Europe, the oral interview can be conducted by video or telephone interview arranged by IFOM.

Candidates are evaluated upon i) their dossier, ii) the knowledge of their undergraduate research and iii) their ability to think critically through the discussion of a scientific paper. The paper for the oral interview is proposed by the PI and it should be communicated to the student at least two weeks before the interview. Each of these three elements is ranked between 1 and 10 by the selectors. Each member the Selection Committee scores independently the applicants, and then all scores are averaged to come to a common assessment of the student. Depending on the final ranking, students are recommended for registration to The Open University.

Exception to this process is allowed for candidates that have spent considerable time in the lab before joining the program. In such cases, PIs are already well acquainted with the student, and they can decide to accept the student without undergoing an official interview. Also in this case, the PI is required to compile an evaluation form, similar to what described above.

Oral Interview Evaluation Form ([download](#))

For students evaluated positively, the PhD Coordinator, together with the Supervisor who opened the position, identifies the supervisory team (External Supervisor and Internal Supervisor if required). IFOM then seeks approval for the candidate from The Open University. The IFOM PhD Office transmits the documentation necessary for submitting the registration applications to the OU. Once the OU assessing panel has accepted the registration, the student is given a copy of the OU formal acceptance letter by the IFOM PhD Office and enters the upgrade (ex-probationary) period. The assigned registration date is the first day of the month.

Newly enrolled students receive from the OU a personal identifier, which they will use throughout the course of studies, and all personal data are available on the OU website (www.open.ac.uk/students). Additional information can be found in the Research DegreeARC_Handbook ([download](#)), available on line or at the IFOM PhD Office.

5. Milestones of the PhD programme

Successful candidates are accepted to the PhD programme, which consists of the following milestones:

- Induction (formal entrance into the programme)
- Upgrade (upgrade report and Mini-VIVA).
- Annual progress reports
- Public Seminar
- 3rd year mini-paper
- Thesis writing
- Final Examination

Throughout the studies, all scientific and training interactions are in English, which is the language used in basically all formal and informal instances in IFOM.

5.1 Students induction

Induction Day

During induction, students are introduced to the life of IFOM. Introduction to the Institute is given by the scientific leadership. The PhD coordinator or a member of the Educational Committee explains the milestones of the programme and the relevance of the period of their post-graduate studies for the development of their scientific career. Newly enrolled students also familiarize with the laboratories, the different facilities, and all offices relevant for IFOM scientific life. The day also includes a lunch at the cafeteria with members of the PostDoc association that explains the social and professional activities running at IFOM.

First interaction with the Supervisor

The first meeting between students and their Supervisor is particularly important in establishing a provisional framework for future support. The following areas are to be covered in the first meeting:

- Milestones of the PhD programme
- Role and responsibilities of each Supervisor
- Student responsibilities
- Frequency and possible timetable of future meetings.
- Financial matters
- Safety on specific procedures

During the first meeting, the Supervisor informs the student that they should take the skills audit through the PGR Manager system within the first month since induction. Each student should keep the record of their skills development.

5.2 Upgrade (Mini-VIVA)

The upgrade period is the first 10 months after registration and serves as a means of assessing the student's scientific and personal skills. During this time, the Supervisors monitor the progress of the student and take a final decision about their progression through the programme. In addition, the student has the opportunity to evaluate the scientific environment in which they operate and the overall feasibility of the scientific Programme.

Upgrade report

The student, with the help of the Supervisor, prepares a report where they discuss:

- the topic or area to be investigated in the thesis project
- the problem or hypothesis to be tested
- the methods and techniques to be used in the investigation
- the relationship of the proposed research to the published literature
- future plans with a possible time-table

The upgrade report should be 10/20-pages long and <4MB including figures and bibliography. It should contain the time table of the successive 3 years and the 4th year should be dedicated primarily to the thesis writing up.

Skills development

At the time of the upgrade report, the student is asked to compare the development in their weaker areas, as identified in the skills audit taken at the beginning of their PhD. By using the dedicated section of the PGR Manager, the student reports about their progresses in these key areas during the upgrade period.

Oral presentation with Mini-VIVA examination

The project, as well as the results obtained in the first year, are presented in a public presentation in the presence of two independent Assessors to be chosen by the PhD Coordinator in accordance with the Supervisor among IFOM PIs and/or from external institutes/universities. The supervisor and the external supervisor can attend the presentation as 'observer'. Neither the student's supervisors, nor the third-party monitor may form part of the panel, although one or more supervisors may attend the Upgrade VIVA as 'observers' at the request of the student. During some extraordinary condition (e.g., pandemic) it can be held by video conference upon student's written consent. The Student presents during the seminar an overview of the thesis project, early results and future plans. A Mini-VIVA follows, with the Assessors, discussing the project with the student.

The Supervisor, the External Supervisor and Mini-VIVA assessors give their assessment using the PGR Manager. Here, they specify their recommendation to the PhD Coordinator. The possible outcomes are:

- the student meets the required probation benchmarks and should be registered for a PhD;
- the student should remain registered for a Master of Philosophy (MPhil) within the OU.
- the probation benchmarks have not been achieved and remedial actions are required. The Supervisor is required to plan and schedule the remedial work of 2 months. A report written by the Supervisor is provided to the PhD Coordinator which assesses the outcome of the remedial work. If successful, the student registration to the PhD Programme is confirmed. Otherwise, the PhD Coordinator shall recommend the deregistration of the student from the programme.
- the student should be deregistered on the grounds of insufficient academic progress.

The PhD Coordinator presents the final recommendation to the Research Degrees Office of the OU which takes the final decision regarding the evaluation of the probationary period.

From April 2021, the entire process of Upgrade is exclusively on the PGR Manager system.

5.3 Progress reviews (reports)

For the second and third year, each student has to complete the Progress Review via the PGR Manager. This report is meant to formally record the student's progress. It should include an accurate record of progress and achievements, and areas for development. The annual Progress Report includes 11 months from the registration day, which will be considered the starting day of the academic year for the student in the following years as well. The student should submit their (a) report, (b) at least 10 supervision meetings and (c) skill assessment and training plan & record on PGR Manager by the 15th day of the 10th month from the registration day. After the student's submission, the full supervision team will give their assessment on PGR Manager. It will be finally approved by the PhD Coordinator and submitted to The Open University by the first day of the 11th month.

Progresses made during the first six months from the registration anniversary is recorded in a *Half-year Progress Report* ([download](#)). This is an informal and internal document which will provide the basis for the official *Annual Progress Review*. The PhD Office should receive the *Half-year Progress Report* within the last day of the 6th month from the registration anniversary.

Copies of all reports are shared with the students and their supervision team including the TPM and are filed at the IFOM PhD Office.

5.4 Third-year mini-paper

In addition, by the last day of the third year, the student is required to submit a “mini-paper”. This document is paper-like, with Abstract, Introduction, Results, Discussion and Material and Methods. It should also include Figures and a bibliography. The report is meant to provide the Supervisor and the External Supervisor the opportunity to evaluate the progress of the work of the student. If deemed satisfactory, the student can ask to start writing the thesis.

5.5 Public seminar

Within the 4th months of the third year, the student presents their results to all IFOM research groups during a public seminar.

5.6 Thesis writing

During the fourth year the student can start preparing their written PhD thesis. The Supervisor meets with the student and an outline of the thesis work is organized on the basis of the mini-paper. The Supervisor also checks that the student is aware of the appropriate scientific sources necessary for preparing the thesis and helps providing the student with additional necessary material. Then, the student is required to give an official notification via PGR Manager about their intention to submit the written PhD thesis including the submission date, the title of the thesis and, if necessary, a request of embargo at least 3 months prior to the submission date.

As described in OU Examination Guidelines, the thesis should not exceed 65.000 words, including footnotes, bibliographies and references but excludes appendices, and is organized in introduction, results, discussion, and materials & methods including of a contents list and list of figures. The Supervisor provides continuous feedback to the student throughout the writing of the thesis. A check against plagiarism is performed through appropriate software before final submission. The External Supervisor also supports the student during the writing of the thesis. The decision to submit a thesis rests with the candidate alone. Although a candidate would normally be unwise to submit the thesis for examination against the advice of the supervisor(s), it is the candidate's right to do so. Equally, a candidate must not assume that submission with supervisory agreement guarantees a successful outcome of the examination.

From the notification of intention to submit to the final deposition of the thesis, the full process is taken place via OU's PGR Manager and ORO.

5.7 Final examination

The PhD Coordinator, in accordance with Supervisors, identifies the names of potential examination panel which could be composed of one examination panel chair, one internal and one external examiner or two external examiners. As a minimum, two qualified examiners are appointed and at least one of them is external to the student's Institution.

The appointment of examiners should be made against the following criteria (RD 18.10):

- a) Be qualified and have current experience and expertise in the field of the thesis to be examined.
- b) Have experience of UK research degree supervision to successful completion and/or examination.
- c) Each examiner should have at least one experience in UK Doctoral VIVA examination.
- d) Collectively have experience of examining a minimum of five UK Doctoral degrees.

An independent Chair, to be chosen among the faculty, attends the exam, and guarantees that it takes place according to the rules. The external examiner is expected to be familiar with examining UK research degree students.

None of the student's Supervisors should be appointed as an examiner but they could be an observer at the examination only if the student requests it and nominates one of them.

None of the examiners should have had a substantial direct involvement in the student's work. Together with the Examination Panel Nomination form, an up-to-date CV of each member of the nominated panel must be submitted to the OU for approval.

The CV or an accompanying document must include the following information:

- All publications (pertaining to the last five years)
- Supervision experience in the UK (numbers currently supervising and number of completions)
- Examination experience (numbers of UK MPhils, PhDs, EdDs examined plus any examined outside the UK)
- Experience in Chairing an examination (number of UK research degrees chaired) (only for Examination Panel Chair)

If there are any potential conflicts of interest (please refer to The Open University *Research Degrees Regulations*, Appendix 4: Conflicts of Interest ([download](#))) between examiners or Examination panel chair and supervisors or the student, the IFOM PhD Coordinator should provide as much information as possible to the OU.

Once the examination panel has been approved the OU writes to the examiners formally confirming the appointment. Copy of these letters of appointment is sent to the student. The IFOM PhD Office also sends the examiners electronic copies of all the documents needed for the exam. From this moment, neither the student nor their supervision team is allowed to be in direct contact with the examination panel for any reason but only through the chair or PhD Coordinator or the IFOM PhD Office until the completion of the examination.

Upon receipt of the approval by the OU research degrees committee, the student is asked to submit the Candidate Declaration Form via PGR Manager and submit three bound copies of the thesis to the IFOM PhD Office, which are then delivered to the internal and external examiners.

IFOM PhD Office and the examination panel seek for an appropriate date for the final examination (VIVA) that should take place within 6 weeks after the submission of the thesis.

5.8 The examination (VIVA)

Before the oral examination (VIVA), the examiners complete independently their own *Pre-Viva Report Form* on PGR Manager. Upon their completion, the examination panel chair (EPC) shares the reports with the examiners so that they can exchange opinions about the thesis. Examiners then meet for the oral examination which takes place in IFOM at the presence of the examiners previously approved by the OU. The Chair and the IFOM PhD Office are responsible for arranging the VIVA examination and for ensuring that all parties are aware of the arrangements. In the case of very particular situations the VIVA can be arranged by video conference upon the written consent of the student and the approval of the OU.

A Pre-VIVA meeting should be held by the examination panel before the VIVA to identify a 'nominated examiner'.

The VIVA usually takes 2-4 hours. Most frequently, the student is asked to present a short (30-40 min.) overview of their work with the main results and to highlight the impact of these results in the research field. Thereafter, the examiners ask the student to clarify specific parts of the thesis that they found incorrect or insufficient or inaccurate. The student should answer and defend their thesis but also consider to modify the work appropriately.

At the end of the VIVA examination, the nominated examiner is responsible for completing the *Examination Report* with the evaluation of the VIVA and the recommendations then the PhD Coordinator approves and submits it to the OU for the evaluation of the Research Degrees Examination Results Approval Committee of The Open University. The latter makes the final

decision on the final outcome of the exam. All the examination process will be done via PGR Manager.

In accordance with the examination guidelines of The Open University, five different types of recommendations are possible:

- Award the degree. No corrections or modifications are required;
- Minor corrections and modifications. This recommendation should be made if the requirements of the relevant degree have been met in full subject to typographical corrections and/or minor editorial modifications to be in any case listed in the Examination Report Form. Students are allowed two months to complete minor corrections and modifications. A second oral examination is not required. The internal examiner is responsible for checking the corrected thesis and completing a Corrected Thesis Form.
- Substantial amendment. This recommendation should be made if the requirements of the relevant degree have been met in full subject to limited deficiencies which the panel is confident can be corrected satisfactorily by the student. Such deficiencies must be reported in the Examination Report Form. Students are allowed six months to complete substantial amendment. Supervision should be provided during this period. A second oral examination is not required. All examiners are responsible for checking the corrected thesis. Each examiner must complete a Corrected Thesis Form.
- Major revision and resubmission for re-examination. This recommendation should be made if the requirements of the relevant degree have not been met but the panel is confident that the degree can be awarded subject to major revision and re-examination. The required revisions, which may include additional research work, should be listed in the Examination report form. Students are allowed twelve months to complete the major revision and resubmit their thesis for re-examination. Supervision should be provided during this period. A second oral examination must be held.
- Alternative recommendation for PhD examinations. In exceptional cases examiners of a PhD may recommend the award of an MPhil degree. Details about this recommendation are available on the Examination Guidelines.
- Fail. This recommendation should be made if the requirements of the relevant degree have not been met.

When all requirements are met, the PhD Coordinator contacts the Research Degrees Committee which decides whether to award the degree or not. If the degree is awarded, an electronic copy of the final version of the thesis should be submitted to the Library via Open Research Online (ORO). Please see the [Annex 1](#) for the ORO process. Additional advice is available Online ([link](#)). One bound copy is deposited at the IFOM PhD Office.

6. Educational activities

As outlined in Section 5 (Milestones of the PhD Programme), the PhD students attend both Seminars and proper courses during their training, with the goal of improving their skills.

Seminars

IFOM researchers attend a regular schedule of scientific seminars and lectures open to all members of the Institute. These seminars, given by members of IFOM or by invited Italian and foreign scientists, are in English and constitute an important moment of the PhD training.

The Students attend also informal laboratory meetings consisting of individual presentations of research results by PhD students or Post Docs.

Scientific Courses

Scientific courses on specific topics are organized with the contribution of IFOM PIs in the framework of the 'Scuola Europea di Medicina Molecolare' (SEMM). Students participate to these events that constitute an integral part of their research training. The courses are offered by scientists of IFOM as well as by Italian and international scholars. Students start immediately attending the available courses after the registration.

Since December 2020, a new possibility to replace SEMM courses with on-line courses has been introduced if the students find topics that are more strictly related with their PhD project. Student are required to discuss about this possibility at the beginning of their academic year with their supervisor and communicate their choices, upon the approval of the supervisor, for the consideration of the EdCo. Approval of the EdCo is mandatory.

English for Academic Purposes

A course of 'Scientific writing' is available among the courses organized by SEMM. Upon request, IFOM can also organize or support the attendance of courses of English for academic purposes for students who need to improve their oral and written skills.

Research Career and Development Programme

Students are invited to attend regular meetings organized in IFOM by the post-doc association, where topics relevant for their research career are covered (scientific careers outside of academia, grant writing, networking, etc.). Moreover, depending on the results obtained from the annual skill audit, students may be able to attend courses specifically aimed at improving their skills outside of IFOM.

7. Research activities

Training of students attending the PhD Programme is exclusively performed in research laboratories lead by IFOM PIs. To carry out their experimental research, every PhD student has a lab position and every PhD student has full access to the IFOM and Cogentech facilities. As already partially described, students have several opportunities to organize and present their work.

Research presentations

Students are encouraged and trained by the Supervisor to present their data in public meetings, and precisely in the following occasions:

- Weekly group meetings can either deal with presentation of own results or presentation of articles from the literature, presented by PhD students or post-docs from the Student's Supervisor group.
- Each student presents their data during the PhD programme in a Public Seminar, obviously in English, to all Institute.
- Each PhD student may attend at least one International/national scientific congress to present their own results. In this case, registration fee and travel expenses are fully covered by IFOM.

Scientific writing

Under the supervision of their Supervisor, students are requested to contribute in writing scientific articles based on their research activity. Moreover, they have to write annual progress reports on their work.

Literature up-date

Access to PubMed and constant updating of the literature relating to the specific topics of interest are essential components of the training programme. IFOM guarantees online access

to the major scientific journals. Similarly, students are allowed to access journals via The Open University Library.

8. Students Attendance to Conferences

Students are highly encouraged to attend conferences at least during the last years of their PhD studies. Unless students can have access to travel fellowships, this is supported by their PI.

9. Students' feedback

The PhD Coordinator meets the representative of PhD students whenever requested, and anyway at least once a year. The PhD Coordinator seeks ideas and suggestions from the students in order to improve the organization of specific internal courses and of the PhD organization in general. In addition, the PhD Coordinator answers the questions and replies to doubts relating to the ARC's internal and the OU's procedures.

9.1 Annual feedback

Once a year PhD Students are asked to answer an anonymous Questionnaire regarding their satisfaction about the PhD Course. The results of the questionnaires are discussed by the EdCo, and action can be taken to address the points raised by the students.

9.2 Research students' representative in IFOM

With less than 5 registered students, only one representative is elected, otherwise there are two representatives. Students' representatives are elected among the pool of students registered in the PhD Programme and represent the students when contacting the PhD Coordinator for any relevant matter concerning the PhD Programme. Candidates propose themselves as potential representative and are voted exclusively by the PhD students. In case of an equal number of votes an agreement is reached by the parties. Each representative must be elected every year. Students' representatives will meet the EC in a dedicated meeting at least once per year.

10. Complaints and Appeals

Students have the right to discuss and criticize the PhD Programme and the supervision they are receiving.

10.1 Complaints procedures

Initially, any concern should be raised by the student with the own Supervisor. If the problem cannot be solved, the student should discuss the difficulties with the Third-Party monitor. If the latter cannot bring the complaints to a solution, the PhD Coordinator must be informed and individually meets with the student and try to settle the matter before a formal complaint is filed, and communicated to the OU, according to the guidelines and specifications contained in the relevant section of the *Research Degrees in Affiliated Research Centres Student Handbook* ([download](#)). The PhD Coordinator can consult with the EdCo regarding the complaint.

All information about the complaint procedure is available in the IFOM PhD Office, and the appropriate documents can be downloaded from [here](#).

10.2 Appeal procedures

Students have the right to appeal against decisions of The Open University Research Degrees Committee, such as examination result, termination of registration, refusal of permission to submit a thesis, registration for a research degree. Appeals have to be lodged within one month of the decision, or two months for appeals against an examination result. The information on the appeal procedure is available in the PhD Office.

11. Extension, withdrawal and change of supervision

11.1 Changes in supervision

Students may request a change of supervision and with the support of IFOM, a change request is submitted to the OU for approval via PGR Manager. IFOM may also recommend a change and, preferably with the agreement of the student, submit a change request to the OU via PGR Manager. The Student should be aware that there may be difficulties in finding a replacement Supervisor who has experience of the thesis subject area.

11.2 Request of extension/suspension

Exceptionally, extensions of one year of the PhD course is considered beyond 4 years from registration (5 years for impairing illnesses and women in maternity leave). Students requiring an extension period, with the approval of their Supervisor, have to notify it the latest 3 months before the end of the third year, to the IFOM PhD Office. The request is then sent to the OU which decides whether granting the extension or not. The student is notified by the OU decision as soon as the outcome is available. Payment of tuition fees by IFOM Supervisors continue throughout the end of the PhD.

A student may ask, subject to approval, to temporarily suspend their studies for a total maximum period of 12 months over the 4 years of registration. Ground for suspension is limited to illness and significant personal circumstances, officially documented. Students in receipt of a stipend, taking a study break on the grounds of certified serious ill health of the student or a family member or dependent for whom the student is acting as a carer, can request to continue to receive their grant payments for a maximum of two months. Any grant paid during study break is not in addition to their normal grant and will not extend their funding deadline. The final choice is up to the OU. More information is available in the *ARC Students Handbook*, to which the IFOM/OU programme adheres.

All change request must be submitted via the PGR Manager.

11.3 Withdrawal from the research degree programme

If a student decides to withdraw from the research degree should let the OU Research School know as soon as possible via the PGR Manager. the OU Research School acknowledges receipt and confirms the withdrawal of the student's registration. The date given on the PGR Manager is recorded as the formal withdrawal date.

11.4 Termination of registration

Registration on the research degrees programme is subject to the student continuing to make satisfactory progress. If a Supervisor is not satisfied with the progress made by a student, attempts should be made to ascertain if there are any specific reasons for the lack of progress. The Supervisor informs the PhD Coordinator and they both seek for strategies to overcome the problems. The student should be made aware of the concerns about their progress and be given opportunities to rectify the problem with specific targets for achievement set by the Supervisors.

11.5 Procedures for replacing supervisors on prolonged leave of absence

When supervisors cannot supervise students for periods longer than three months, in agreement with the PhD Coordinator, the Supervisor will identify a temporary provisory supervisor who will follow the student's progress. Upon the return of the supervisor, the

supervision of the student will be reassigned in agreement with the provisory and the lead official supervisor.

12. PGR Manager system

The OU has introduced PGR Manager system in 2021. Haplo PGR Manager is a comprehensive and time saving administrative solution for Post Graduate Researchers, supervisors and Graduate students. Keeping information in one place, it streamlines the process of supervision meetings, progression monitoring, examinations management and reporting and more. PGR Manager replaces the previous paper forms.

For the following processes all the parties must use the PGR Manager:

- Upgrade (probation)
- Annual Progress Review
- Skill Audit, Training plan and register
- Periodical supervision meeting
- Thesis and VIVA examination

While the following processes are still on paper forms:

- Application
- Pre-Upgrade Report (1st year Half-year Progress Report)
- Half-year Progress Report
- Thesis and VIVA process of those who will submit the thesis before 30/06/2021

Students and supervisors receive the instructions and training immediately after the official registration. Already registered students and their supervisors receive a training organized by PhD Coordinator and PhD Office.

Log-in page link: <https://doctoral-research-system.open.ac.uk/do/ou-auth/login>

For any technical problem, IFOM PhD Office is the first reference office. If the problem cannot be solved by us, PhD Office contacts OU Research Degrees Office and PGR Manager Team.

13. Administrative aspects

Salary

Tuition fees for each PhD student are covered by IFOM for the entire duration of the PhD Programme and IFOM provides the student with a monthly salary in the form of a fellowship (gross stipend is typically € 25.000/year, but can be increased in exceptional cases).

Intellectual Property

The students registered in the PhD Programme establish with IFOM a regular signed contract. In the contract it is specified that the Intellectual Property that may arise from the scientific activities of the students is owned by IFOM.

Ethics

All students registered in the IFOM/OU PhD Programme are expected to adhere to the IFOM rules and regulations, and to adhere to IFOM's Code of conduct for research and researchers.

Code of Conduct ([download](#))

Conflict of interest policy ([download](#))

Good Research Practices ([download](#))

14. Regulations, forms, guidelines and links

All the regulations, forms and guidelines are downloadable at IFOM intranet “Dentroweb” – PhD Program ([link](#)).

Documents and links are kept updated regularly by the IFOM PhD Office.