Early Stage Assessment (ESA) - Guidance Notes

This is a formal review of progress in the first year, which must take place at month 9 from the registration date. This consists of a written report, called ESA report), and an oral examination. Students whose work fails to meet the required standards will be asked to resubmit at month 11. Students failing at that point will be required to withdraw or to transfer to the MPhil degree. The aims of the review are to:

- ensure the student is capable of and suited to PhD research;
- ensure the student is progressing with the research topic at a rate which will allow completion in the allotted three years;
- ensure the research topic is well structured and has the elements needed to provide a successful doctoral topic;
- check that supervision arrangements are working satisfactorily;
- check that there are no problems with the supply of equipment, or other materials;
- provide feedback, comments and technical suggestions;
- provide experience of writing technical reports at the level expected of a PhD dissertation; provide some experience of an oral (‘viva voce’) examination.

Report and Presentation

The 9-month ESA Report should not normally exceed about 30–40 pages. You may use any papers and technical reports you have produced over the year to develop the report. Your supervisor can offer advice on content and structure. The report will normally include [most of] the following:

- **Introduction and statement of problem.** A clear statement of the research problem and aims and objectives. This should be described in a way that is accessible to any member of the Department’s academic staff.

- **Literature survey.** An outline of the precedents for the proposed work, points of departure, and indication of potential significance; a comprehensive and critical literature review demonstrating a good knowledge of the background to the research problem. Where a detailed literature review chapter for the dissertation has already been drafted, this may be attached as an appendix and a summary of the main points included in the report.
• **Methods and techniques.** An account of the methods and techniques adopted in the study. This will normally include a presentation of the relevant theoretical computational or experimental methods to be employed.

• **Summary of research.** An account of research carried out so far.

• **Results.** A discussion of results obtained.

• **Research Plan.** A clear account of the future plans for the research with a schedule for completion of the work. This must include a realistic timetable of activities leading to a successful completion of studies. An outline of the dissertation [chapter and expected section headings] should be included. You should identify any risks and describe briefly the backup plans.

• **Bibliography.**

Detailed papers and reports, if any, can be cited but need not be included. Examiners are well aware that results at this stage will be limited and ideas still at a preliminary stage. Students should not defer submission of the report because of a lack of results or because they have a paper deadline etc. They must submit their ESA report through CATE by uploading the .pdf file of the report in CATE as part of the module 612 (Early Stage Review (ESR)).

The presentation in the oral examination should cover the following points.

• Introduction and statement of problem, structure of the talk

• Objectives and Aims: what you want to achieve, and how you will measure your success

• Techniques to be used, research carried out so far, (any) results obtained

• Comparable research work in the area

• Proposals for further work

Your target audience should be the Department’s staff and fellow PhD students. Part of the presentation should therefore be at a level accessible to a computing graduate. On the other hand, you should not hesitate to include a technical part requiring specialist knowledge. You should expect to be
asked lots of questions: about your understanding of the area, the choices you have made, related work, alternatives, etc.

Assessment
Each student will be allocated an assessment team consisting of at least three members of academic staff, including the supervisor, the 2nd supervisor (or co-supervisor), AND one or more independent assessors. The independent assessor must be an academic within the department, not a research assistant or senior researcher. Mentors cannot be part of the Assessment Team. Assessment forms are available in CATE. The independent assessor will fill in form F1, whereas supervisor(s) will jointly fill in form F2. Director of Postgraduate Research (DPS), or year mentor, or PhD administrator will confirm the final outcome using form F4.

The outcome of the ESA assessment can be one of four basic recommendations:

- The student can progress to the 2nd year.
- The decision is deferred. The student needs to submit a revised report by month 11 and, at the discretion of the Assessment Team, possibly give a second presentation. A final decision will follow the re-submission.
- The student is required to downgrade to the MPhil degree.
- The student is required to withdraw.

Hilfred Chau Memorial Prize
The Hilfred Chau Memorial Prize is awardable annually for the best 9-month ESA report. Supervisors should nominate suitable candidates to the Postgraduate Tutor as soon as possible.