

University of Reading

Code of Conduct for Supervisors of Research Students

1. Introduction

This code sits alongside, and supplements, the Code of Practice on Research Students¹ which sets out the minimum requirements for all parties involved in the awarding of research degrees at the University of Reading. Supervisors should consult the above Code for up-to-date information about all policies and procedures relating to research students. Other relevant documents for supervisors are the Good Practice Guide on Supervising PhDs and other Research Degree Programmes² Supporting PGR Wellbeing: A guide for supervisors and Directors of PGR Studies³, and the UKCGE Good Supervisory Practice Framework⁴

This Code of Conduct is intended to promote good practice in the supervision of research students and should provide the means for a harmonious working relationship between students and their supervisory team, which is vital to the success of the student's work.

It is important to note at the outset that the majority of supervisors do provide a very high standard of supervision. However, unfortunately, sufficient issues arise each year to justify the need for this separate Code of Conduct for Supervisors. It is hoped that making supervisors aware of the information in this Code might help to reduce or alleviate many of the concerns that are raised.

2. Appointing supervisors

All research students should have a minimum of two supervisors. It is expected that at least one (normally the principal) supervisor will have supervised at least one previous student to successful completion within four years, and at least one should be on a Teaching & Research or Research grade 8 or 9 contract.

In addition, it is important that the supervisory team has sufficient knowledge of the student's subject area to provide appropriate guidance throughout the project, and is sufficiently interested in the topic to motivate the student and provide encouragement when needed.

¹ http://www.reading.ac.uk/web/files/qualitysupport/cop_resstudents.pdf

² http://www.reading.ac.uk/web/files/graduateschool/PhD_supervision_Good_Practice_Guide.pdf

³ http://www.cms.rdg.ac.uk/nmsruntime/saveasdialog.aspx?IID=141122&fileName=pgr_mental_wellbeing_guide_oct2019.pdf

⁴ http://www.cms.rdg.ac.uk/nmsruntime/saveasdialog.aspx?IID=69047&fileName=UKCGE_Supervision_Framework_document_oct2019.pdf

Where academically appropriate, Emeritus Professors may be appointed as the supervisor of a research student. However, in such cases, a current research active member of staff of the University must act as a co-supervisor and moreover have ultimate responsibility for ensuring adherence to the current University regulations.

Where appropriate, supervisors based in an organisation external to the University may act as a primary supervisor. In such cases, this will be subject to the approval of the Dean of Postgraduate Research Studies. A current research-active member of staff of the University must also act as co-supervisor and have overall responsibility for ensuring adherence to University regulations.

At least one supervisor should be appointed at the offer of admission stage and a second (if not appointed at the same time) should be in place by the student's first term. Supervisors should not agree to take on new students if they have doubts about the student's ability to complete a PhD successfully. The availability of funding should never be an inducement to compromise on academic standards. Furthermore, ideally, staff should not agree to be second supervisors if they have little interest in the project and have little intention of contributing to the supervision.

The maximum number of students for whom a member of academic staff should act as primary supervisor should not normally exceed six. However, higher numbers can be permissible depending on (i) the field of research in question and (ii) the range and scale of responsibilities held by the proposed supervisor, including the number of students for whom they are second supervisor. It is important that the supervisory workload of staff is regularly reviewed by the Head of School / Department and the Director of PGR Studies.

3. Changes of supervisor

Students have a right to request a change of supervisor in cases where the supervisory relationship has broken down. In such cases, every effort should be made to put in place suitable alternative supervisory arrangements.

Changes of supervisor may also be necessary were members of staff leave the university. In such cases, proposed alternative arrangements should be discussed with the student and should be approved by the School / Department Director of PGR Studies. Where it is not possible for the School to provide suitable alternative supervision from within the University, a suitable external supervisor with appropriate academic knowledge and experience should be sought. It is important that this process occurs with as little delay as possible.

If a supervisor is temporarily ill or absent, the School should consider whether alternative supervisory arrangements need to be put in place. This should happen without any unnecessary delay and the student should be kept informed of what is happening.

4. Supervisor training and updating

Staff who are new to supervision must attend the relevant training programme run by the Centre for Quality & Staff Development through the Academic Practice Programme, or by People Development through the Open Programme.

It is expected that experienced supervisors will update their supervisory skills, at least every three years, to ensure that they are familiar with current policies and procedures. It is important that supervisors are able to provide their students with the right advice on procedural matters. If in any doubt, then supervisors should contact the School / Department PGR Director or the Doctoral Research Office (DRO) for the relevant information before advising students.

Supervisors should also be aware of the range of development opportunities for students that the Graduate School provides⁵ (including the Reading Researcher Development Programme, Preparing to Teach, PGR Leadership programme, and SPRINT PGR women's development programme). In collaboration with the International Study & Language Institute (ISLI), the Graduate School also runs a number of English language support courses for PGR students of different levels of ability, and supervisors are advised to direct their overseas students to these. Finally, the Graduate Schools now runs the Statistical Advisory Service for PGR students, formerly run by the Statistical Services Centre. Appointments can be booked through the Graduate School website.

5. Supervisor responsibilities

The Code of Practice on Research Students¹ sets out the responsibilities of both supervisors and students. The supervisor responsibilities are listed here, and include:

- Giving guidance about
 - the nature of the research and the standard expected;
 - regulations relating to research integrity, academic misconduct⁶ and ethical standards⁷;
 - the planning of the research programme;
 - the nature and extent of the help the student may expect in preparing a thesis in its final form for submission;
 - relevant literature;
 - attendance at taught classes, where appropriate;
 - requisite techniques (including arranging for instruction where necessary);
 - necessary safety precautions.

- carrying out an analysis of training and learning needs ('Learning Needs Analysis');

- maintaining contact through regular supervision meetings, in accordance with University and School policy and in the light of discussion of arrangements with the student;

- being accessible to the student at other appropriate times when advice may be needed;

- giving advice on the necessary completion dates of successive stages of the work so that the whole may be submitted within the scheduled time;

⁵ <http://www.reading.ac.uk/graduateschool/training-and-development/gc-training-and-development.aspx>

⁶ Available at:

http://www.reading.ac.uk/web/files/graduateschool/pgr_academic_misconduct_statement_aug2018.pdf

⁷ Information on Research Ethics is available at: <http://www.reading.ac.uk/reas-REethicshomepage.aspx>

- requesting written work as appropriate, and returning such work with constructive criticism and in reasonable time;
- arranging as appropriate for the student to talk about the work to staff or graduate seminars;
- reporting in writing at least annually on the student's progress to the Head of School and School / Department Director of PGR Studies and the student;
- ensuring that the student is made aware of inadequacy of progress or of standards of work below that generally expected, and informing the Head of School without delay if at any stage it appears that the student is unlikely to achieve the degree for which he or she is registered;
- where research student projects involve external partners, the lead supervisor should be responsible for managing expectations and directing communications between the student and the external partners, and for ensuring that all parties are aware of their own and each other's roles and responsibilities;
- when the thesis is submitted, sending a written report to the Examiners via the Doctoral Examinations Officer in the Graduate School;
- helping students to prepare for their viva and, where applicable, to carry out requested amendments to their thesis;
- undertaking training as appropriate, and as identified in staff development reviews and by other means, in order to allow them to undertake the role of the supervisor effectively.

6. Joint supervision

As noted above, it is now normal practice for there to be more than one supervisor for each research student. For joint supervision to be most effective, it is essential for there to be clarity (both for the student and the members of staff) about the roles and responsibilities of the respective supervisors. These should be agreed at the outset of the project and reviewed as the project progresses. Students need to know who will be their main day-to-day point of contact, who will be attending particular meetings, and who will be responsible for reading and providing feedback on their work. A number of students get particularly confused about the role of the second supervisor. Where the second supervisor is expected to play a relatively minor role in the day-to-day supervision, it is better for the student to be aware of this from the outset.

It is important that joint supervisors do not give conflicting advice, and that any differences of opinion are debated between the supervisors in the absence of the student. Hence, good communication between supervisors is as important as between supervisors and students.

7. Supervisory meetings

At the outset, supervisors and students should agree on the appropriate frequency and nature of meetings and other communications. Students need to appreciate what is a reasonable expectation in terms of access to supervisors' time, and supervisors must ensure that they have sufficient contact with students to provide the guidance and support needed. The frequency and pattern of supervisory meetings may alter throughout the student's research programme, but it is recommended that meetings are held at least monthly, with email contact between where appropriate. The Code of Practice on Research Students¹ states that the minimum number of meetings should be ten per annum, and there should be more meetings initially. The majority of negative feedback that students provide about their supervision (through the annual Evaluation of Supervisory Arrangements survey and PRES) relates to supervisors having insufficient time available for their students due to other workload pressures. It is therefore important that supervisors do adhere to the requirement set out in the Code and do make sufficient time for their students.

Students should be encouraged to keep a record of supervisory meetings and share these with supervisors. Such records should include the date and approximate length of the meeting, the names of those present, the main points of discussion, and agreed actions. It is advisable for supervisors to keep their own independent records, which might be needed in cases of dispute.

8. Evaluation of supervisory arrangements

The Graduate School contacts all research students each year (usually in May) to ask them to complete a survey about their satisfaction with their supervisory arrangements. Completion rates are generally high and the vast majority of feedback is positive. In the most recent survey (May/June 2018), of the 500 who responded, 65% were very satisfied with their supervision and a further 26% were satisfied. However, around 30 students each year do provide (often very) negative feedback on their supervision, mostly relating to insufficient contact, poor quality feedback on written work, and / or lack of support. Where negative feedback is received, students are contacted in confidence by the Head of the DRO to discuss their concerns further and to request permission to discuss with the School / Department PGR Director. Many students, however, do not agree to this as they fear it will have a negative impact on their ongoing supervision and progress.

In addition to the negative feedback that comes in via the annual evaluation survey, a significant number of students raise informal or formal complaints about their supervision throughout the year. Although some of these result from unrealistic student expectations, several show clear evidence of academics not providing a sufficiently good standard of supervision.

9. Student progress

At the outset of their programme, students need to complete a Learning Needs Assessment, using the template on the Graduate School website. Completed templates should be discussed with supervisors to ensure that the amount and nature of training the student is planning to undertake is appropriate.

By the end of the first term, students should have a clear understanding of what research questions they are addressing and how they are going to address these. It can be helpful to set them one or

more pieces of written work during this period to gain a clearer view of their level of understanding, and to assess their academic writing ability.

Each student's progress (including those studying part-time or by distance) must be formally assessed at least once per year, and Schools will have a process in place for doing this. As part of this process, supervisors are required to provide written reports on the student's progress since the last assessment. It is important that supervisors report any concerns that they have about the student in question, even when these are not major. It is essential to have a thorough paper trail of a student's progress in place from the outset, in case matters do deteriorate and students do not pass Confirmation of Registration or are being considered under the University's Academic Engagement and Fitness to Study procedures.

In addition, to annual formal assessments, it is strongly recommended that Schools assess students' progress more frequently on an informal basis, and many Schools now do this. Whether this is the case or not, supervisors should inform the School / Department Director of PGR Studies about any concerns they have about their student as soon as these arise, rather than waiting for the next assessment, or simply hoping the student will start to improve. Giving the student the 'benefit of doubt' rarely turns out to be the most helpful thing for the student in the long term. Experience has shown that unnecessary delays (which typically results in increased student stress and financial outlay) are often caused by supervisors not acting on concerns about the students' ability and / or lack of engagement at the time they arise.

Similarly, when students' work is affected by health, financial or other difficulties, supervisors should encourage them to suspend their studies until they are in a position to study effectively. The Graduate School receives too many requests for extensions, or retrospective suspensions, due to problems that occurred earlier in the student's programme.

Supervisors of part-time students should appreciate that part-time study can feel very open-ended, with a good number of students reporting loss of motivation, which impacts on their progress. It is important to keep in regular contact with students and to set regular milestones for them to work towards. It is also helpful to be aware of relevant work and family constraints they might have when setting meeting times.

All students should be encouraged to write up their work as they progress, as this often has a positive impact on time needed for submission. It is also important that supervisors provide feedback on students' work in a timely manner. Lengthy delays lead to students feeling demoralised and have a negative impact on their submission times. A normal expectation is that written feedback should be provided within three weeks of the work being submitted. Where this is not possible due to excessive work load, students should be informed of the date by which they will receive feedback and should be encouraged to work on other aspects of their thesis, where appropriate, in the meantime. Supervisors should also consider the manner in which they provide feedback; critical comments should be framed in as constructive way as possible and balanced, where appropriate, with positive comments. Students become easily demoralised if they feel that their supervisor is overly critical of their work.

It is also expected that supervisors will help students to prepare for their vivas, and will continue to support them when making minor or major amendments to the thesis.

10. Working relationships

Different supervisors will adopt different supervisory styles but it is important that all supervisors take an interest in their student's work and well-being. This is particularly the case when supervising overseas students, who may be feeling isolated due to having left their family and friends in their home countries, and / or may be experiencing some level of financial hardship. Experience has shown that many students who are considered under the University's Academic Engagement and Fitness to Study procedures have experienced personal as well as study problems, and some have felt unable to discuss these with their supervisors.

Clearly, there needs to be a relationship of mutual respect between supervisors and students, particularly as the project progresses and students become more independent. Supervisors should be open to students wanting to change to the project design or methodology provided the student's view is a legitimate one (albeit different from that of the supervisor).

Although supervisors need to ensure that students are spending sufficient time on their studies and are making good progress, they should be wary of trying to 'over-control' the way their students work. Some students have complained about supervisors expecting them to keep strict office hours and not appreciating that they may have other commitments which may require a more flexible approach to time management.

It is also good practice for supervisors to take an interest in their students' career plans, identifying appropriate conferences and other meetings for them to attend and helping them to network, as well as thinking about what additional training and development they would benefit from. Supervisors should also encourage students to write up their work for publication as they progress in their studies. Having one or more publications often improves students' chances of gaining an academic position on graduation, and contributes to the School's and wider University's research output.

Although it is recommended that supervisors take a wider interest in their students, it is important that they do not become 'overly close'; proper boundaries need to be respected. This is important for the sake of both the student and the supervisor. Supervisors should never exploit, either intentionally or unintentionally, the duty of care they have for their students. Furthermore, they should not ask students to take on additional work (on behalf of the supervisor) that is not related to the student's thesis, unless this is being done as official paid employment. Students might feel pressure to agree to this, even though it might have a negative impact on the progress of their studies.

11. Concluding note

As noted at the outset, the vast majority of supervisors at Reading provide a high standard of supervision for their students. However, this is not universal and a good number of problems arise each year. Ensuring frequent contact and good communication with students, in a relationship of mutual respect, should help to reduce the number of concerns and complaints that do arise. It should also help to reduce student stress, improve their overall well-being, and result in more effective outcomes for the student and School.

October 2019.