Research Degrees Supervision Policy

Contents

Version number: 1.0	Approved by: Research Degrees Committee
Effective from: 1st January 2023	Date for review: September 2024

Summary of policy

The Open University is committed to providing high quality supervision for Postgraduate Research students (PGRS) to enable our PGRS to succeed to the best of their abilities. Supervisors are integral to PGRS successes and as such they are responsible for ensuring that the PGRS for which they are responsible progress to completion of their studies on time and in accordance with the Research Degree Regulations.

This policy sets out the University's expectations and requirements for PGRS supervision which is considered to be an integral and valued aspect of the academic role. Supervisors are required to engage with ongoing development and reflection in line with departmental/school, Faculty and Open University policies, of which this is one.

Covered by this policy are:

- The appointment of supervisors

- Supporting PGRS

- Supporting supervisors

- Breakdown in PGRS-supervisor relations

- Student Route visa Reporting Obligations

Scope

Who and which circumstances this policy covers

This document applies to the supervisors of all PGRS registered with the Open University, including those based at partner institutions and Affiliated Research Centres (ARCs). Supervisors are required to read and understand this policy, and to comply with its provisions. PGRs are expected to be aware of this policy. Heads of School and line managers of supervisors are expected to encourage supervisors to act within the terms of the supervision policy and challenge this when this is not the case. PGRS are required to be aware of this policy and supervisors are required to understand and comply with it.

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Related Documentation

Refer to the following documentation in conjunction with this document:

- The Research Degree Regulations, and specifically Appendix 2 the Code of Practise for Supervisors and Research Students

- The University's Complaints and Appeals Process

- Academic Engagement and Attendance Policy

- Code of Practice for student discipline

- Bullying and harassment policy

- Dignity and Respect policy

- Fitness to Study policy

- Plagiarism and Research Misconduct Policy (for Postgraduate Research Students)

- Research Code of Practice

- Guidance for Supervisors involved in Complaints and Appeals.

The Open University Student Charter Values

This document specifically aligns with the following Open University Student Charter Values:

1. We treat each other with courtesy and respect, respecting the rights of individuals to hold different beliefs and views and to express them appropriately.
2. We communicate with each other in ways which are clear, relevant, accurate and timely.
3. We challenge bullying and harassment and are committed to supporting the mental health and wellbeing of all members of our University community.
4. As staff, we each play our role in enabling high-quality learning and advancing knowledge and understanding through research and scholarly activity, ensuring every student is supported.

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5.   We work to maintain and enhance the standards and reputation of our University recognising the contributions that all members make to its success.

Introduction

This policy can be used to help supervisors of PGRS to understand the requirements of their role and what they can expect of their PGRS. It is designed to work alongside the Code of Practice for Supervisors and Students within Appendix 2 of the [Research Degrees Regulations](#).

This policy will enable Faculties and ARCs to appoint supervisors in a clear and consistent way, and in the best way possible to support every PGRS. It describes the support that PGRS can expect from the supervisor/s in terms of the level and type of supervision and frequency. It describes what supervisors can expect of the University to enable them to maintain current practise in terms of the provision of mandatory training and its frequency.

It also describes the process by which the Faculties must adhere to if there is an absence of a supervisor for three months or more, with the focus on uninterrupted PGRS support. The policy also details what supervisors and PGRS can expect if the supervisor-PGRS relationship breaks down, or there are breaches in policy. It also sets out expectations surrounding the maximum number of PGRS that any one supervisor should supervise at any one time, which will form part of a workload planning conversation with Heads of School or line managers.

Commitment to Equality, Diversity and Inclusion at The Open University

• Policies are inclusive of all Open University staff and Open University postgraduate research students, regardless of age, civil status, dependency or caring status, care experience, disability, family status, gender, gender identity, gender reassignment, marital status, marriage and civil partnerships, membership of the Traveller community, political opinion, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, socio-economic background, sex, sexual orientation or trades union membership status.

Safe Space Reporting

- The Open University is committed to creating a diverse and inclusive environment in which everyone feels safe and is treated with dignity and respect. Unlawful discrimination of any kind across The Open University will not be tolerated. [Safe Space Reporting](#) is available through an online tool through which staff, students, learners and visitors are encouraged to report incidents of assault, bullying, harassment, hate crime, or sexual harassment. It also provides information about what you can do if these incidents happen to you, or to someone you know, and where you can find support.

Policy

1.   Purpose

This policy provides a framework for PGRS supervision noting that high quality and consistent supervision is key to the success of PGRS.

1.1. The objectives of this policy are:

1.1.1. To ensure that supervisors understand what is required of their role

1.1.2. To ensure that supervisors understand the requirement for training and its frequency

1.1.3 To ensure that Faculties, Heads of School, Directors of Research and line managers understand the requirements for the appointment of supervisory teams

1.1.4 To ensure that PGRS understand what they can expect from their supervisors

1.1.5 To ensure that supervisors and PGRS understand the procedure to follow when relations break down

2.   Policy principles

2.1 Appointment of supervisors

Faculties and ARCs are required to have clear and consistent processes for the eligibility and appointment of supervisory teams. Directors of research degrees (or equivalent, including Research Degree Co-coordinators in Affiliated Research Centres) are responsible, in consultation with their colleagues, for recommending supervision teams to the Graduate School Director for approval.

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Team supervision enables a breadth of experience and knowledge across the supervisory team. They must comprise two internal supervisors, one of whom is named as the lead supervisor (or Director of Studies within an ARC), who takes day-to-day responsibility for administrative issues and processes required for student registration, progression and completion. Supervisors may not be nominated as a lead supervisor until they have successfully co-supervised to completion, and any appointed lead supervisors may not lead on a consecutive studentship until their first as lead is successfully completed. It is the responsibility of both internal supervisors to provide supervision and to ensure that all administrative elements of the student's registration are completed in a timely manner until completion. Supervisory teams may be enhanced by external supervisors who typically provide additional expertise and/or access to facilities not found within the University, this is normal for Professional Doctorates and ARC PGRS supervisory teams.

Students are allocated to supervisors who have academic competence in their chosen area and should typically be active researchers involved in research in their chosen discipline. The expectation is that supervisors will have a research degree (usually a PhD or professional doctorate) or, for some disciplines, supervisors may not have a research degree but will have demonstrated significant engagement within their research or practice field and of PGRS supervision. It is expected that, within the supervisory team, at least one supervisor will have a doctorate. Engagement in research is defined at the level of Institute/Faculty/Discipline/Unit, but needs to be clearly demonstrated, for example through outputs such as peer review articles, books, reports, etc., appropriate to the discipline.

The number of PGRS that any one supervisor is supervising at any one time would normally be limited to ensure that the quality of the PGRS journey is not compromised. In practice, and for ease of implementation, each appointment as a supervisor will be considered as a supervision unit, where a full-time supervision would count as 1 and a part time supervision would count as 0.5. It is not expected that the total number of supervision units would normally exceed 5.

Within the supervision team there needs to be experience of supervising at least one UK PhD to successful completion. In addition to this requirement, teams may also demonstrate experience of research degree supervision in a variety of ways including experience of broader research degree processes such as examination (either as an examiner or as an exam panel chair); engagement with the university's training programme for supervisors, or engagement with the university's research development programme for students.

The appointment of external supervisors is determined by the need of the student project and any negotiated arrangements for their studies (i.e., co-funded by an external organisation/industrial partner or supervised through a Doctoral Training Partnership (DTP)) and in the case of ARCs, may be determined by institutional policy. Any external appointment would typically be in addition to the two internal supervisors. A contract is needed either directly with the external supervisor or via their organisation in order for the appointment to be approved.

In addition, if an external organisation is providing resources necessary for the successful completion of the PGRS Doctoral Award there needs to be a contract in place with the external organisation to protect the viability of the studentship for the duration of registration. This needs to be in place prior to any offer of registration being made.

2.2 Supporting PGRS

Supervisors are responsible for the academic progress and pastoral or personal support of their students, and for dealing with administrative matters, as set out in Appendix 2 of the [Research Degree Regulations (Code of Practice for Supervisors and Research Students), and for ensuring that their students understand good research practice, and the principles of research integrity as set out in the Research Code of Practice](). They are expected to be committed to their ongoing development of supervisor skills and for keeping abreast of changes to the [Research Degree Regulations]() and, where relevant, any changes to UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) / UK Visas and Immigration (UKVI) policy and procedures, for which there is regular training arranged by the Graduate School.

The level and type of support and supervision required by students varies during their studies and across Institutes/Faculties/Disciplines. Arrangements between the research student and supervisors may be kept flexible, as long as the team and the institute or Faculty Director of Research Degrees are satisfied that adequate support is being provided for the research student and that progress is formally monitored.

The style and approach to supervision will vary by discipline and by the individual needs of the student and supervisors. In addition to these considerations all full-time students should have a minimum of **ten** face-to-face formal supervision meetings in an academic year, and for part-time students this should be a minimum of **five** face-to-face formal supervision meetings in an academic year. Formal means that the meeting is scheduled and that there are jointly agreed notes of the meeting and with an agenda, and the notes are stored on

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[PGR Manager](#) and accessible to any stakeholder that has the right to access to them in order to progress university business.

Supervisory meetings for full time students should normally be in person; however, other arrangements may also be used such as telephone, video conference and Skype, on an occasion where in-person supervision is not practical. For part-time students working at a distance from the campus, in person face to face and online meetings are acceptable. Please refer to the [Academic Engagement and Attendance](#) policy.

Subject to this agreed minimum, the frequency of supervision meetings will vary during the course of a PGRS journey especially at key times such as: during the first months of the PhD, prior to the Upgrade assessment; and approaching thesis submission. Supervisors should also keep in touch with students (e.g. via email or phone) and/or schedule additional meetings with them to help meet their individual learning/training needs.

Supervision in teams enables short absences to be managed by the supervisory team in consultation with the Head of School or line manager as necessary. Where there is a significant absence of a supervisor alternative support needs to be provided. An absence of over three months requires provision of alternative arrangements agreed within faculty or ARC.

Where supervisors have been on extended leave, discussions about the viability of returning to the supervisory team need to take place with the Head of School or line manager. The decision is based on student need, the stage of the student's studies and the supervisory team.

2.3 Supporting supervisors

This policy recognises that research degree supervision is a process that requires a thorough induction and continued ongoing professional development to remain up to date with the current [Research Degree Regulations](#), funder requirements and UKVI visa requirements, for example.

Faculties, Institutes and ARCs are responsible for allocating sufficient time for supervisors to carry out the duties required for quality supervision and PGRS support.

Supervisors are required to undertake supervisor training within the first 6-12 months of beginning the role within the university, or within the ARC, and then renew this training every 4 years as a minimum. Experienced supervisors who are new to the university, as well as

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newly qualified supervisors are expected to undertake initial supervisor training. Communications from Heads of School and line managers to supervisors should strongly encourage them to engage in training enabling them to familiarise themselves and remain up-to-date with the OU Research Degree Regulations, relevant policy changes and sector expectations. The benefits of undergoing such supervision should be emphasised. Supervisors of international students on a visa must attend mandatory 'Student Route' visa training and renew that training every two years. This ensures that supervisors are aware of any changes in UKVI policy. Training is provided within the university to support supervisors in the development of their role.

Within the Institute/Faculty/Unit, the career development and staff appraisal (CDSA) process provides individual supervisors with the opportunity to discuss their training needs and workload concerning supervision with their line manager. Supervision should form part of the annual Workload Planning exercise noting that any diminishing of the quality of supervision will be a line management matter.

Throughout the year there are arranged centrally student-supervisor fora covering different aspects of the student journey and supervisors and PGRS are encouraged to make time for such training and discussion opportunities. It is expected that the lead supervisor acts in this capacity and does not delegate, formally or otherwise, responsibility to less experienced members of the supervisory team or wiser research group.

The development needs and any performance issues of supervisors are managed through the usual line management processes and are not the responsibility of the ADR Research or delegate. Where there are concerns about the quality of supervision, Directors of Research Degrees (or equivalent, including Research Degrees Co-coordinator in ARCs) should, where required, provide feedback to line managers and this may lead to compulsory training in the areas identified, or mentoring by experienced supervisors for example.

Where supervisors have concerns about the quality or progress of a PGRS work, or the persistence of actions deemed inappropriate or contrary to the Research Degrees Regulations or Codes of Practice, the relevant Director of Research Degrees (or Research Degrees Co-coordinator in an ARC) supports the team through a number of actions including the procedure for managing unsatisfactory progress (Appendix 3, Research Degrees Regulations) and, where necessary, invoking the procedures set out in the Plagiarism and Research Misconduct Policy (for Postgraduate Research Students), Code of Practice for Student Discipline, the Bullying and Harassment policy, the Dignity and Respect policy or the Fitness to Study policy.

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2.4 Breakdown in PGRS-supervisor relations

Occasionally there may be a disagreement between PGRs and supervisors that may require intervention and mediation by a third party. Each PGRS is assigned a Third Party Monitor and their role is to provide independent and confidential advice and support to PGRS. It may be necessary to enlist the help of a Faculty ADR or delegated equivalent (Senior Postgraduate Research Tutor/Postgraduate Convenor/Director of Research Degrees) depending on the individual Faculty structure). Normally mediation is successful and the PGRS-supervisor relations continue as normal.

Where such instances occur that mediation is not successful then the Faculty will establish whether a change in supervisor/s is practical and beneficial, noting that there must be an equivalence in subject expertise and supervision experience of any replacement supervisor/s. Changes in supervision are considered by the Faculty not only based on subject expertise and experience but based on workload, and so change is not an automatic process that can be instigated by the student, nor does a student have the right to choose their supervisors. Any changes endorsed by the Faculty will then be considered by the Graduate School Director.

If a PGRs is not satisfied that their needs are being met either then they should be referred to the University's Complaints and Appeals process.

Where a supervisor finds themselves to be a named respondent in a complaint and/or appeal they should refer to the *Summary for Supervisors Involved in Student Complaints and Appeals* which can be downloaded from the Graduate School Network

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2.5 Student Route visa Reporting Obligations

The University is legally obliged to comply with the requirements of UKVI. Supervisors are required to ensure that they and their PGRs comply with the UKVI reporting requirements. The Academic Engagement & Attendance policy outlines what is required and the frequency of in person attendance and academic engagement. Any breaches potentially place the University's sponsoring establishment licence in jeopardy and will potentially lead to a PGRS de-registration and a report to UKVI.

Procedure

3.1   Implementation

It is the responsibility of the Graduate School to ensure that this policy is circulated amongst all supervisors including those at ARCs and those that are contributing to Directly Supported PGRS as external supervisors.

It is the responsibility of the Faculties/ARCs in concert with Schools/Departments to nominate supervisory teams based on subject expertise, supervision experience and workload, and it the Graduate School Director's role to approve the supervisory team or request further information from the Faculty.

It is the responsibility of the Head of School to ensure that supervision is effective and of the highest quality, and to deal with any line management issues. It is the responsibility of Heads of School and line managers to support supervisors to fulfil the terms of this policy and to challenge when this is not the case.

It is the responsibility of the supervisor to ensure compliance with this policy and in concert with their line management during the annual workload planning process establish when supervisory training is required.

It is the responsibility of PGRS to ensure that they have read and understood this policy so that they are clear of their expectations of the supervisor/s and how the University is supporting them through the provision of high quality and appropriate supervision.

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3.2. Non-compliance

The Graduate School Director may decide not to approve Faculty-nominated supervision teams if there is any deviation from what is set out in this policy surrounding supervisor appointments. The Graduate School Director may seek further clarification from the Faculty to inform the decision whether to approve or not.

Supervisors that fail to adequately engage with this policy are at risk of being sanctioned in terms of future supervision of any PGRS. Equally, supervisors of any Student Route viva holders who breach reporting requirements are likely to be sanctioned in terms of supervising Student Route visa holders. In both circumstances discussions will be held with the ADR and Head of School and result in action by the Head of School likely include mandatory training.

PGRS who remain unsatisfied with their supervisors/replacement supervisors may raise a complaint via the University's Complaints and Appeals processes.

Where Supervisors have concerns that a PGRS has breached the Research Degree Regulations, Codes of Practice or policies, the matter must be reported immediately to the Graduate School Director (Research-Degrees-Office@Open.ac.uk) for investigation through the relevant process.

Further clarification

If you have any queries around the content provided within this document and how to interpret it, please contact your supervisors and/or the Graduate School. Email: research-degrees-management@open.ac.uk.

If you have any comments about this policy document and how it might be improved, please submit these to research-degrees-management@open.ac.uk.

Alternative format (for Research Degrees Supervision Policy)

If you require this document in an alternative format, please contact the Graduate School.

Email: research-degrees-management@open.ac.uk

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