

**Research Degree Guidelines**

**for Supervisors**

Copies of all guidelines and forms referred to in this document are available on the [Graduate School Network](http://www.open.ac.uk/students/research/forms-and-guidance)

The **Research Degree Regulations** can be found at: <https://help.open.ac.uk/documents/policies/research-degree-regulations>

The **Research Degrees *Handbooks*** can be found at: <https://help.open.ac.uk/documents/policies/research-degrees-handbook>

Please select the Research Degrees Handbook relevant to the research degree you are registered for.

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# 1 INTRODUCTION

This document provides information about the role and responsibilities of supervisors of students registered for a research degree. It should be read in conjunction with the ***Research Degree Regulations,*** the principal means through which The Open University ensures consistency in academic standards across the research degree programmes that it offers, *and the* ***Research Degrees Handbook,*** *which contains* the academic and administrative arrangements for research degree study and provides information about the services available to research degree students, the policies that apply to registration, and advice about key points in the student journey.

If you have any queries or require advice, please contact the Research Degrees Team in the Graduate School who will be happy to help you:

**Contact details**

+44 (0)1908 653 806

[Research-degrees-office@open.ac.uk](mailto:Research-degrees-office@open.ac.uk) (directly registered students)

[Research-Degrees-ARC@open.ac.uk](mailto:Research-Degrees-ARC@open.ac.uk)  (ARC students

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# THE CODE OF PRACTICE FOR SUPERVISORS AND RESEARCH STUDENTS

Good supervision is an important contributing factor to a student’s successful and timely completion of their research degree. Supervisors are responsible for the academic progress and pastoral or personal support of their students, and for dealing with administrative matters. They should provide the guidance and support necessary for successful completion of the research project.

Supervisors are expected to have undertaken supervisory training and be committed to ongoing development of supervision skills.

For students based in an Affiliated Research Centre, the Research Degree Coordinators are expected to ensure that supervisors have access to all the necessary information and training to enable them to carry out the supervision role effectively.

# Duties of all supervisors

Supervisors are responsible for the academic progress and pastoral or personal support of their students, and for dealing with administrative matters. They should provide the guidance and support necessary for successful completion of the research project. Supervisors are expected to have undertaken supervisory training and be committed to ongoing development of supervision skills.

**Supervisors are responsible for:**

1. Establishing a framework for supervision, at the beginning of the student’s research, including arrangements for regular supervisory meetings and key milestones during registration.
2. Defining the role of each supervisor.
3. Meeting the student regularly and frequently, at the intervals agreed at the beginning of the research project and in line with the supervision policy.
4. Being accessible to give advice by whatever means is most suitable, taking into account the location of both the supervisor and student, and the mode of study.
5. Making sure the student has up-to-date supervisor contact details, including when away from the normal place of work.
6. Giving assistance in defining the topic and objectives of research to be undertaken. It is important that this is agreed between the student and supervisors at an early stage.
7. Making sure that the project:
   1. falls within the supervisors’ area of expertise;
   2. can be completed with the resources available;
   3. can be completed within the prescribed period of study;
   4. is suitable for the degree that the student intends to take;
   5. for funded students can complete within the period of the studentship.
8. Support the student in their professional development and specifically undertake a training needs analysis referenced to the Vitae Researcher Development Framework. In particular, making sure that students know about research training provided by the University and by the discipline, ensuring they are aware of attendance requirements and the means of planning and recording their development. The skills analysis should be reviewed on an annual basis.
9. Seeing that the health and safety policies of the University and of the discipline or Affiliated Research Centre are brought to students’ attention and explained.
10. Discussing ethics review, standards of academic conduct, plagiarism and any hazards or risks associated with the research work and how they can be dealt with and ensuring that safety and other relevant procedures are followed.
11. Ensuring ethics review has been undertaken and approval in place, where applicable.
12. In agreement with Faculty or Affiliated Research Centre colleagues ensuring that suitable alternative support is arranged if the supervisors are going to absent for a period of three months, or longer.
13. Responding promptly and constructively to written work, within the schedule agreed at the beginning of the project.
14. Keeping to the monitoring and reporting timetable agreed at the beginning of the project. This will include the regular progress monitoring reports.
15. Ensuring that examiners are nominated in good time, so that the examination can go ahead as soon as possible after submission of the thesis.
16. Ensuring that the student has an opportunity to participate in a *mock viva voce.*
17. Ensuring that at the beginning of their studies students understand the requirements for submitting non-book content as part of their thesis and guiding them through the process in line with relevant guidelines.
18. Maintaining records of formal supervision meetings as agreed with students and in such a way they can be accessed and understood by anyone with a legitimate need to see them.
19. For those students who enter the UK on a Tier 4 visa, ensuring any breaches to Tier 4 compliance are reported.

**Students can also reasonably expect their supervisors to:**

* 1. Treat them professionally and see that they get proper credit for their work.
  2. Give advice about the proposed research project and the standard expected for the degree the student intends to take.
  3. Arrange a supervision meeting as soon as possible after registration. This would usually be within the first week for full-time students but may take longer to arrange for part-time students.
  4. Make sure that the first meeting covers the areas set out in Good supervisory arrangements and practice below or, if that is not possible, that those areas are covered in another way.
  5. Suggest some directed reading before registration. This might be general background reading so that the student can discuss the topic with the supervisors soon after registration, or it might be the beginning of a literature review.
  6. Offer advice about literature sources and other research resources.
  7. Deal promptly with any research problems.
  8. Take an active role in introducing the student to meetings of learned societies, seminars and so on, and to other researchers in the field.
  9. Offer advice about the presentation and publication of research work, and make sure that attribution is discussed before presentation/publication.
  10. Put the student in touch with specialists inside or outside the University or Affiliated Research Centre if part of the research falls outside the supervisors’ expertise. If appropriate, the supervisors should recommend the appointment of specialists as internal or external supervisors.
  11. Provide support by encouragement and constructive criticism and advice.

# Additional duties of an ARC Director of Studies

In addition to the duties outlined in 2.1, the ARC director of studies is also expected to:

* + 1. Take responsibility for supervising the student regularly and frequently
    2. Ensure that the supervisor(s) is carrying out her/his responsibilities to the student
    3. Meet the student and supervisor(s) together to discuss the research project at least once a year (or three times a year in the case of students registered to study full-time).
  1. **Responsibilities of the student**

**Research students are expected to**:

1. Work conscientiously and independently within the guidance offered. While it is important to keep supervisors informed and to show work to them, students should be self-directed.
2. Participate fully in research training provided by the University and the discipline or the Affiliated Research Centre as required, aligned with their professional development needs.
3. Come to supervisory meetings well prepared and with a clear agenda.
4. Before the end of the first year (the first 24 months for part-time students), have the area of research defined, be acquainted with the necessary background knowledge, complete the literature review and have a provisional framework for the progress of the research, with a timetable for the rest of the research period and ensure that ethical approval has been sought.
5. Maintain progress according to the timetable agreed with the supervisors at the outset.
6. Present written material in time for comment and discussion before going on to the next stage. As groundwork for the thesis, students should write rough drafts of potential chapters as soon as possible. Those in the sciences should keep a systematic record of all experimental work attempted and accomplished. It is good practice for students in other disciplines to keep log-books of their research.
7. Ensure that their English is good enough for the presentation of a thesis. Those whose first language is not English should seek advice. (This does not apply to students who have permission to submit their theses in Welsh or Gaelic.)
8. Write regular reports, as agreed at the outset, on the progress of the research.
9. Adhere to the terms and conditions of registration, including the payment of any fees due.
10. Tell the University, and the Affiliated Research Centre where applicable, of any disruptions, special needs or changes which might affect their study.
11. Be familiar with the regulations and policies relevant to their registration and award.
12. Maintain research records in such a way they can be accessed and understood by anyone with a legitimate need to see them.
13. Maintain records of formal supervision meetings as agreed with supervisors and in such a way they can be accessed and understood by anyone with a legitimate need to see them.

**Supervisors can also reasonably expect students to**:

* 1. Produce a substantial amount of written work, even if only in draft form, before the end of the first year (24 months for part-time students). The interpretation of ‘substantial’ should be agreed between supervisors and students at the outset.
  2. Tell their supervisors about other people with whom they discuss their work.
  3. Discuss with their supervisors the form of guidance and kind of comment they find most helpful.
  4. Fully engage in the induction process.
  5. Take the initiative in raising problems or difficulties in a timely manner, however elementary or trivial they seem. Students as well as supervisors have a responsibility to initiate contact and raise questions.
  6. Recognise that supervisors may have many other demands on their time. Students should hand in work in good time and give adequate notice if they ask supervisors for unscheduled meetings or to provide references.

# Good supervisory arrangements and practice

The following points are recommended to students, supervisors, disciplines and Affiliated Research Centres as good supervisory arrangements and practice.

**Supervision**

At their initial meeting the supervisors and the student should draw up a written agreement on the role of each supervisor and arrangements for supervisory support.

**Supervision meetings**

Students and supervisors should have regular meetings at which academic advice is given and through which progress is monitored. Notes should be retained of formal meetings, in accordance with the supervision policy. This is particularly important at the beginning of the research, so that the project makes a good start. It cannot be too strongly stressed that the success of research projects depends largely on the help and guidance offered by supervisors, especially in the early stages of the work. Close contact at that time is essential if later difficulties are to be avoided.

**Frequency of meetings**

This will depend on the student’s circumstances (full-time or part-time) and the nature and stage of the research project. Meetings with full-time students will usually be face to face; however, other arrangements may also be used such as telephone, video conference and Skype. Supervisory meetings with part-time students should be arranged according to whatever means of communication is most appropriate, ideally with at least one supervision meeting face-to-face.

Subject to the minimum requirements as outlined in regulations, the frequency of supervision meetings will vary during the course of a student’s research programme especially at key times such as: during the first months of study, prior to the upgrade assessment period; and approaching thesis submission. Supervisors may also choose to schedule additional meetings with students to help meet their individual learning needs.

Arrangements for supervisory support, including the frequency of meetings, must be agreed at the first meeting, and the schedule must be adhered to by students and supervisors.

**The first meeting**

The first meeting between student and supervisors is particularly important in establishing a provisional framework for future support and getting the student’s academic work off to a good start. The following areas should be covered in the first meeting:

* role of each supervisor;
* frequency of future meetings;
* timetable for early meetings;
* arrangements for seeing and commenting on written work;
* monitoring arrangements and timetable;
* safety;
* ethics and integrity;
* research facilities available;
* University and discipline, or Affiliated Research Centre training programmes and attendance requirements;
* relevant protocols and codes of practice including ethics review, standards of academic conduct, plagiarism and this code;
* general framework for the whole research project;
* detailed plan for the early stages of the research project.

**Subsequent meetings**

Regular meetings, in accordance with the supervision policy and agreed schedule, are essential to monitor progress and agree timetables for the future. The research timetable should be committed to paper so that supervisors can see whether deadlines have been met.

The length of meetings will vary. For full-time students’ meetings of an hour or so are usual. For part-time students, whose meetings are less frequent, they will be longer.

At the beginning of registration, it is important that student and supervisor together undertake an assessment of the student’s professional development needs and that skills development is regularly monitored throughout registration.

# Monitoring Student Progress

Supervisors use different methods to monitor their students’ progress, and they should agree with the student at the initial meeting how it is to be done. Monitoring may take the form of a formal review of progress and forward planning or a discussion of general matters relating the student’s research. Students and supervisors are required by the University’s Research Degrees Committee to submit a regular report to the Associate Dean Research or Affiliated Research Centre Research Degrees Coordinator on the progress of their students, and this should be taken into account when working out a monitoring schedule.

The University’s Research Degrees Committee requires a substantial review of progress for full-time students shortly before the end of the first year, for part-time students before the end of the two-year upgrade period. A meeting between the Head of School and the student is required during the first year of registration for full-time students, during the upgrade period for part-time students. The timetables agreed at supervision meetings should be used to see whether deadlines are being met and progress is being made.

Students should prepare progress reports for their supervisors at regular agreed intervals.

Where supervisors have concerns about the quality of progress of a student’s work they should implement the procedures for managing unsatisfactory progress, with support from the Head of School and Associate Dean Research, or Affiliated Research Centre Research Degrees Coordinator as appropriate.

Associate Deans Research or Affiliated Research Centre Research Degrees Coordinator are accountable for research student progress. They are required to ensure that students in their academic unit or Affiliated Research Centre make adequate academic progress, and to take any action required to enable students to meet their submission dates. They are also responsible for making sure that students receive copies of their progress monitoring reports when they have been endorsed.

# Managing Unsatisfactory Academic Progress

1. The registration of all research degree students is subject to satisfactory academic progress.
2. Supervisors and Associate Deans Research (or delegate), and the Affiliated Research Centre Research Degrees Coordinator where applicable, are responsible for monitoring and reporting on research student progress and, are accountable to the University’s Research Degrees Committee for these activities.
3. These procedures seek to reconcile the interests of the student and the staff responsible for her/his studies as well as those of the University whilst ensuring that the wider expectations of fairness are met. They are concerned with both responsibilities and entitlements and are intended to reflect the principles of natural justice, as well as being transparent and timely.
4. Where the academic progress of a student is unsatisfactory, the supervisors are required to arrange a meeting with the student to:
   1. Inform the student that their progress is unsatisfactory.
   2. Explain clearly why their progress is unsatisfactory and what they must do to address the situation.
   3. Explore with the student the reason(s) why the student has not made satisfactory progress and suggest strategies for overcoming any problems or difficulties identified by the student.
   4. Remind the student that research degree registration is subject to satisfactory academic progress.
   5. Set clear tasks for the student to complete by specified deadlines to allow them to demonstrate whether satisfactory progress can be made.
   6. After the meeting, write to the student to:
      1. Confirm the discussion of points a) to e) as outlined above.
      2. Encourage the student to seek help and advice from someone else (e.g. the

Head of School, third party monitor; Associate Dean Research (or delegate) or the Affiliated Research Centre Research Degrees Coordinator where applicable) if the student has concerns or difficulties that they do not wish to discuss with the supervisors.

* + 1. Warn the student that if they are unable to make satisfactory academic progress the Head of School or the Affiliated Research Centre Research Degrees Coordinator will be asked to recommend to the Graduate School Director that the student’s registration is terminated.
  1. Inform the Head of School or the Affiliated Research Centre Research Degrees Coordinator that the student’s progress is unsatisfactory and the action being taken to address the situation.

1. Where the academic progress of a student is unsatisfactory, the Head of School, or delegate acting on behalf of the Head of School, or the Affiliated Research Centre Research Degrees Coordinator, where applicable, is required to arrange a meeting with the student to:
   1. Explore the reason(s) why the student has not made satisfactory progress.
   2. Suggest strategies and/or take appropriate action to overcome any problems or difficulties identified by the student.
   3. Check that the student understands:
      1. Why their progress is unsatisfactory.
      2. What they have to do to demonstrate whether satisfactory progress can be made by the specified deadlines.
      3. Research degree registration is subject to satisfactory progress.
      4. If they are unable to make satisfactory progress the termination of their registration will be recommended to the University’s Graduate School Director.
   4. Discuss the situation with the supervisors suggesting strategies and/or taking appropriate action to overcome any problems or difficulties.

In the case of an Affiliated Research Centre student, the Affiliated Research Centre Research Degrees Coordinator, should, after this meeting inform the University’s Research Degrees Office that the student’s progress is unsatisfactory and outline the action being taken to address the situation.

1. If in spite of action being taken as outlined above, a student is unable to demonstrate satisfactory progress, the supervisors and Head of School, or Affiliated Research Centre Research Degrees Coordinator where applicable, should:
   1. Inform the student that their progress remains unsatisfactory.
   2. Confirm to the student that a formal recommendation for the termination of their registration will be made to the Graduate School Director.
   3. Check whether the student would prefer to withdraw from study.
2. The supervisors are responsible for preparing a written report, working with the Head of School or discipline, or the Affiliated Research Centre Research Degrees Coordinator where applicable, recommending the termination of a student’s registration for failure to make satisfactory progress, to the University’s Graduate School Director. The report should:
   1. Outline why the student’s progress is unsatisfactory
   2. Provide details of the action taken to address the situation
   3. Confirm that the student has:
      1. Received written warnings about their unsatisfactory progress and the implications of not being able to demonstrate satisfactory progress
      2. Had an opportunity to discuss the situation with the Head of School, or delegate, or the Affiliated Research Centre Research Degrees Coordinator, where applicable
      3. Have been encouraged to seek help and advice from other appropriate members of staff
   4. Include appropriate documentary evidence. This must include all of the agreed notes from the formal supervision meetings and a complete record of progress reports.

The report must be ratified by the Head of School, or the Affiliated Research Centre Research Degrees Coordinator where applicable, and copied to the student before being sent to the Head of Research Degrees.

1. The report will be referred to the Graduate School Director, who may:
   1. Ratify the recommendation that the student’s registration should be terminated for failure to make academic progress
   2. Arrange for the student’s work to be assessed by a suitably qualified external assessor
   3. Allow the student to remain registered for a specified period subject to appropriate conditions and requirements.

In the case of (b) a decision about the termination of the student’s registration will be made on receipt of the external assessor’s report.

1. Should the Graduate School Director ratify the recommendation to terminate the student’s registration (8a above) they will send a formal letter to the student informing them of the decision. The letter will include information on the University appeals/complaints process.

# Changes in supervision

Students have the right to discuss and criticise the supervision they are receiving. Initially, any concerns should be raised with supervisors at the regular supervision meetings. If they cannot be resolved, the student should discuss the difficulties with their third party monitor and the Head of School, the Affiliated Research Centre Research Degrees Coordinator where applicable, or the Research Degrees Team.

If the problem cannot be resolved new supervisors will be appointed, but there may be difficulties in finding a replacement supervisor who has experience of the thesis subject area.

# CONDITIONS OF APPOINTMENT

Upon admission students will be allocated a supervisory team. The team will be nominated by the Associate Dean Research (or delegate) in consultation with relevant stakeholders or in the case of students registered through the Affiliated Research Centres, the Research Degrees Coordinator (or delegate). The Graduate School Director confirms the appointment of supervisors upon admission and when any further changes are required.

# Supervisor Appointments

Supervisory teams comprise a minimum of two internal supervisors who are members of the University’s academic staff, or a member of academic staff from a Doctoral Training Partner. Additional external supervisors may be appointed where appropriate. The constitution of supervisory teams for students registered through an Affiliated Research Centre must comprise a minimum of two supervisors, at least one internal to the Affiliated Research Centre.

Supervisors must meet all of the following criteria:

1. Hold an appointment as a member of academic staff at The Open University, or other university, or member of a research group of appropriate academic standing.
2. Possess academic expertise in the chosen discipline.
3. Hold a doctoral award.
4. Have sufficient time to carry out their responsibilities in the provision of quality supervision and support for students.

The supervisory team collectively must have experience of supervising at least one UK PhD to successful completion and at least one member of the team must be an active researcher involved in research within their chosen discipline as evidenced through peer reviewed outputs.

Supervisors should not be registered for a research degree themselves other than a Higher Doctorate, nor should they be in a close personal relationship with the student they are supervising, nor should there be any other significant conflict of interest. If a relationship develops after the appointment has been made, the Faculty or the Affiliated Research Centre should make alternative arrangements for the student’s supervision.

Research fellows (including post-doctoral researchers), emeritus professors and honorary associates of the University may be appointed as internal supervisors, provided that they and the other members of the supervisory team collectively meet the requirements of supervising a UK PhD student to successful completion, they have the capacity to supervise for the duration of the student’s registration and it can be demonstrated they are likely to retain interest and knowledge in the research area for the length of the student’s degree studies. Those appointed as supervisors for Affiliated Research Centre students must have a contract for supervision with the Affiliated Research Centre.

Faculties, Institutes and Affiliated Research Centres are responsible for allocating sufficient time for supervisors to carry out the duties required for quality supervision and support of students.

# Lead Supervisor

One of the supervisors internal to the University or the Affiliated Research Centre will be the lead supervisor; this is termed the Director of Studies at an ARC; and will take day to day responsibility for the administrative issues and processes required for student registration, progression and completion. Where the lead supervisor does not have experience of supervising a UK PhD student to successful completion the supervisor on the team with the requisite UK PhD experience must act as a mentor to the lead supervisor. Regardless of experience or role it is the responsibility of all supervisors to ensure that all elements of a student’s registration are completed in a timely manner.

# External Supervisors

Where the supervisory team includes an external supervisor it is the responsibility of the internal supervisor(s) to:

1. Ensure that the external supervisor is carrying out their responsibilities to the student and to the University, this includes contributing to progress monitoring reports and ensuring that they are submitted at the required time
2. Meet the student with the external supervisor face to face to discuss the research project for part-time students at least once a year or at least three times in the case of full-time students.

All external supervisors will need to be able to demonstrate their right to work in the UK. No supervisory duties should be undertaken until an official letter of appointment has been issued subsequent to the appropriate checks.

# Supervisor Absence

Where a supervisor is absent for a period greater than three months alternative supervisory arrangements must be put in place. Upon the return of a supervisor following such a period of extended leave, discussions must take place with the Associate Dean Research (or delegate) or Affiliated Research Centre Research Degrees Coordinator, as appropriate, regarding the viability of them resuming the role. All changes to the supervisory team must be approved by the Graduate School Director.

# Supervisor Training

Supervisors are required to undertake initial training within the first 12 months of beginning the role within the University or within the Affiliated Research Centre. This includes experienced supervisors who are new to the University or Affiliated Research Centre as well as supervisors who are new to the role.

Research and professional skills development is an important component of the research degree. The Research Career Development Team organises the main induction events and will show the students and supervisors how to access training and development resources and book themselves onto further events throughout the year.

<http://www.open.ac.uk/students/research/activities/lists/doctoral-training-workshops>

Supervisors are expected to engage with the Researcher Development Framework (RDF) spear headed by Vitae. This framework provides information and guidance for research career development. It is intended to support the professional development of students throughout their PhD and beyond. It is therefore important the supervisors use the RDF with the student as a tool to

develop their development as a researcher. The University has a licence for the Personal Development planner tool and this is available for both students and staff. Further information on professional development and use of the RDF can be found on the Graduate School Network.

<http://www.open.ac.uk/students/research/supervisors/vitae>

In addition, there are resources on the Graduate School Network specifically to support the development of supervisors.

<http://www.open.ac.uk/students/research/supervisors>

# TIER 4 STUDENT RESPONSIBILITIES

The OU is licensed as a Tier 4 sponsor under the points-based immigration system. This allows the University to register non-European Economic Area (EEA) students. In order to retain the University’s license, students registered with a Tier 4 visa in conjunction with their supervisors are required to undertake the additional monitoring activities detailed in this section. Failure to do so will be reported to the Border Agency and could result in the student’s visa being withdrawn. All forms referred to in this section can be downloaded from the forms and guidance section of the Graduate School Network.

<http://www.open.ac.uk/students/research/>

# Monthly Attendance Monitoring

Tier 4 students must complete a monthly attendance monitoring form confirming the expected contacts they have had during that month. This could include but is not limited to formal supervisor meetings, training workshops and seminar attendance. It is the responsibility of the student’s supervisory team to submit an endorsed copy of the report each month to the Research Degrees Office.

# Authorised Absence

A Tier 4 student may during the course of their studies be required to be absent from their main place of study. As a Tier 4 sponsor, the University is required to be aware of a student’s current location and maintain contact. An authorised absence form must be completed and submitted by the student’s supervisory team before any period away from the students main study location. If the student is required to leave the UK as part of their absence, they must show their original passport to the Research Degrees Office on their return.

# Annual Leave

Any period of annual leave must be discussed and endorsed by the student’s supervisors using a Request for Annual Leave form prior to annual leave being taken. As with an authorised absence, if the student leaves the UK as part of their annual leave, they must show their original passport to the Research Degrees Office on their return.