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**Code of Practice on the Supervision of Graduate Research Students**

**Revised Sept 2019**

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*The supervisory structure and sources of support*

Patterns of supervision differ in the MPLS Division according to the nature of the subject. In some subjects there is typically a sole supervisor; others may typically have two or more supervisors, with one designated as the responsible supervisor; and others may have supervisory teams.

Where more than one supervisor is appointed, one of the supervisors shall clearly be designated the responsible supervisor.

In all cases, the department shall ensure that each graduate student has access to one or more named persons in addition to the supervisorto whom they can turn for support, such as the head of the research group, the Director of Graduate Studies, or where appropriate the Head of Department. Where there is a sole supervisor, these other sources of support, and the arrangements for providing cover during the absence of the supervisor (under 3 below), are especially crucial.

In all cases students should also expect to be able to approach a college advisor. The student’s college will appoint a college advisor; receive termly supervision reports, and Transfer and Confirmation of Status reports. The Division asks colleges not to appoint a student’s departmental supervisor as a college advisor. The college may also have procedures in place to monitor the overall well-being of the graduate research student, including a discussion of academic reports. If the college identifies any concerns which might impact on the academic progress of the student concerned, and which may not already have been recognised in departmental reports, it may refer these in confidence to the Director of Graduate Studies in the department concerned, who will initiate such action in the department as seems to them to be necessary in the individual circumstances.

*Who can supervise?*

1. Someone of sufficient standing to be able to operate with credibility on behalf of the responsible body.
2. Someone who has sufficient experience to be able to provide appropriate guidance to the student about the necessary procedures and, in particular, the academic expectations associated with an Oxford doctorate in their subject area.
3. Someone who is able to undertake the tasks assigned to the supervisor in the Policy on Research Degrees[[1]](#footnote-1) including integrating them into the national and international network in their subject.
4. Someone who has sufficient security of tenure to make it likely that they will see the student's research through to successful conclusion.

*The responsible supervisor*

A student may have one, two or more supervisors, but there must be one who is responsible overall for academic progress and pastoral needs, and who is responsible for signing progression forms.

The responsible supervisor shall normally be:

* A member of staff of the department on a permanent contract and who is an associate professor, reader, professor or senior researcher (grade 8 or above, or RSIV), OR
* A member of staff who is also a researcher with an independent fellowship that lasts for the duration of the student’s degree.

The responsible supervisor will currently be engaged in research in the relevant discipline(s) so as to ensure that the direction and monitoring of the student’s progress is informed by up to date subject knowledge and research developments.

Nobody should be appointed as responsible supervisor if it is known at the time of the appointment that they will not be in post at the time the student is due to complete the programme in question.

A person appointed to supervise alongside the responsible supervisor shall normally be:

* An associate professor, reader or professor;
* A member of research staff who is grade 8 or above;
* An independent research fellow affiliated with the University, which is taken to be those with fellowships secured from an external learned society, research council or equivalent. The fellow should have at least three years’ experience as a post-doctoral researcher before becoming a supervisor, and should be based at Oxford;
* A postdoctoral researcher with at least three years of experience of research at postdoctoral level or equivalent;
* A Department Lecturer at grade 8 or above who is research-active and has at least three years of experience of research’;
* An employee of an external organisation such as a commercial company or national laboratory who has both a relevant doctorate and expertise in the subject of the student’s DPhil, and who has at least three years of experience of working in research and development.

A postdoctoral researcher who has done less than three years’ postdoctoral research should not normally be appointed as a supervisor; however they may be appointed as an associate supervisor.

It is important that independent research fellows or members of research staff who do supervise are formally recorded as a supervisor on the student record and the Graduate Supervision System to ensure that their contribution is recognised (as supervision experience is important on fellowship applications) and to record lines of accountability for the progression of the student in question.

Where specialist supervision is needed that is not available from a member of academic staff or college fellow, a senior member of research staff (Grade 8 or above) may be appointed as a subject specialist supervisor, OR, in appropriate cases, a supervisor may be appointed who is external to the University of Oxford. A person in the department holding a substantial external fellowship, e.g. a Royal Society Fellowship or equivalent on a fixed-term contract also may be appointed to act as a student’s responsible supervisor. In these circumstances, an experienced member of academic staff shall always be appointed as joint supervisor. This must be a member of staff responsible to the Head of Department or Head of the Division.

In the case of a student following an interdisciplinary DPhil who has two equally senior supervisors in two different departments, there should still be a single ‘responsible’ supervisor, who would normally be in the department where the student is registered for administrative purposes. For the purposes for signing off Transfer, Confirmation and submission forms, the responsible supervisor should liaise with their counterpart in the other department, and where there is any disagreement between the two, the DGS in the department where the student is registered would make the final decision.

*New supervisors*

Appropriate support and training will be given to new supervisors[[2]](#footnote-2).

For supervisors undertaking their first graduate student supervision, an experienced co-supervisor will be appointed to support the student and the supervisor.

For members of academic staff in their first period of office, the Divisional Board will appoint a mentor who will, amongst their other duties, provide confidential advice, support, and guidance on teaching, and supervision of research students. The supervision record of a new member of academic staff is included in the review prior to appointment to retiring age.

The Centre for Teaching and Learning offer a range of resources to support teaching at Oxford, available here: <https://www.ctl.ox.ac.uk/teaching-resources>.

When a supervisor is not a member of academic staff at the University, or a fellow of an Oxford college, or a person with previous supervisory experience,

* An experienced member of academic staff will be appointed by the department either as joint supervisor or as an advisor to the supervisor, and will be expected to act as mentor to the new supervisor;
* When the supervisor is a member of contract research staff, s/he will be expected to complete the online [DPhil Supervision at Oxford](https://www.ctl.ox.ac.uk/online-courses) course.

For the avoidance of doubt, a candidate should not be admitted if there is no suitable specialist supervision available in the University or its colleges.

*Ensuring the quality of supervision*

Departments should put in place mechanisms to ensure that the quality of supervision is not put at risk as a result of the excessive volume and range of burdens assigned to individual supervisors. Although for an individual supervisor with a normal academic load, a supervisory load equivalent to six full-time students would be regarded as the normal maximum, it is recognised that there is a range of supervisory practice, in terms of supervisory teams, and the Division emphasizes the importance of adhering to the Quality Assurance Agency’s indicators of sound practice in the provision of supervision, which state that higher education providers will:

* appoint supervisors with the appropriate skills and subject knowledge to support and encourage research students, and to monitor their progress effectively;
* ensure each research student has a supervisory team containing a main supervisor who is the clearly identified point of contact;
* ensure that the responsibilities of research student supervisors are readily available and clearly communicated to supervisors and students;
* ensure that individual supervisors have sufficient time to carry out their responsibilities effectively.[[3]](#footnote-3)

*Frequency of meetings*

**Typically, a student should expect to have meetings with their supervisor or a member of the supervisory team with a frequency of at least once every two weeks averaged across the year. The regularity of these meetings may be subject to variations according to the time of the year, and the stage the student is at in their research programme.**  It follows that, alongside their other duties, a supervisor should be able to provide this typical level of support for each of their research students.

Departments should ensure that students are not disadvantaged by the appointment as a supervisor of someone who is about to go on leave, and shall make appropriate arrangements to cover for a supervisor’s absence on leave or for other reasons.

1. <https://academic.admin.ox.ac.uk/research-degrees> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://www.mpls.ox.ac.uk/graduate-school/information-and-resources-for-supervisors> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. UK Quality Code for Higher Education, <https://www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/quality-code/chapter-b11_-research-degrees> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)