

**Mathematical  
Physical and  
Life Sciences  
Division**

**A Brief Guide to the roles of research  
students and supervisors**

**and the**

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

## **A Brief Guide to the roles of research students and supervisors**

The primary purpose of a research degree programme in the Mathematical, Physical and Life Sciences Division is to enhance and develop your knowledge in a specific area of research, and to equip you with the research and transferable skills needed to become an independent researcher, or to prepare you to be able to adapt the skills you have learnt to pursue a career in other fields. Our aim is to provide you with an excellent educational experience, which should also be enjoyable, as well as hard work. To achieve this result, both supervisors and students need to be clear about their respective roles and responsibilities. This note provides a brief guide to these roles. If you have any questions about the roles described below, do discuss these with your supervisor or the Director of Graduate Studies in your department.

*The role of the Supervisor (and in some cases the supervisory team) is to:*

1. Establish a timetable of regular meetings for detailed discussion of your progress (these meetings should take place at least once every two weeks averaged across the year)
2. Agree a research plan and programme of work, and to establish clear academic expectations and milestones
3. Agree with you a timetable for the submission of any written work and to return your work within a reasonable time
4. Advise you of your department's health and safety regulations. Supervisors are responsible for all aspects of safety under their control, and in particular for the safe conduct of all experiments carried out in the course of their student's research
5. Assess formally your subject-specific and personal and professional skills training needs on a regular basis and ensure you are aware of the opportunities available to meet these needs. A full review of your skills training needs should be carried out each year with your supervisor
6. Write a report on your progress at the end of each term on the graduate supervision system (GSS)
7. Ensure you are aware of the formal requirements in relation to transfer and confirmation of status and final submission, and help you to incorporate these into your plan of work
8. Inform the departmental Director of Graduate Studies through termly reporting mechanisms of any concerns about your progress, attendance or other needs

*The role of the Student is to:*

1. Meet with your supervisor regularly and give due weight to any guidance or corrective action proposed, keeping a written record of your discussions where appropriate
2. Draw up a research plan and timetable of work in consultation with your supervisor, and to keep relevant records of all aspects of your work
3. Reflect and report on your progress at the end of each term on the graduate supervision system (GSS)
4. Take ultimate responsibility for your research programme, including the development of subject-specific, research, personal and professional skills
5. Carry out research with proper regard to good health and safety practices

6. Be aware of the University's guidance on plagiarism and of any ethical or legal issues, health and safety requirements, or intellectual property issues arising from your research
7. Pursue opportunities to engage with the wider academic community at University, national and international level
8. Inform your supervisor immediately if you need to be away from the department, for example if you are ill.

# Code of Practice on the Supervision of Graduate Research Students

## Mathematical, Physical & Life Sciences Division

### A. Appointment of supervisors for Graduate Research Students

#### *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 primary supervisor; and others may have supervisory teams.

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

In all cases, the department shall ensure that each graduate student has access to one or more named persons in addition to the supervisor to whom he/she 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 referred to at 4 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 him/her to be necessary in the individual circumstances.

#### *The person(s) appointed to supervise*

The supervisor shall normally be:

1. *Someone of sufficient standing to be able to operate with credibility on behalf of the responsible body*

The main supervisor shall normally be a member of academic staff of the University, or a college fellow.

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 main 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.

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.*

At least one 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.

Appropriate support and training will be given to new supervisors.

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 his/her 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.

Departments shall encourage all new supervisors to attend the Learning Institute's Seminar on Graduate Supervision

[http://www.learning.ox.ac.uk/seminar\\_desc.php?cat=cc&ls=all&cc=AP/PGS&page=19](http://www.learning.ox.ac.uk/seminar_desc.php?cat=cc&ls=all&cc=AP/PGS&page=19).

*(These seminars can be arranged on a departmental or divisional basis when there are sufficient numbers of participants. Sessions can also be arranged if cognate departments wish to work together).*

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 attend the Learning Institute seminar.

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.

3. *Someone who is able to undertake the tasks assigned to the supervisor in the memorandum and notes of guidance including integrating them into the national and international network in their subject.*

In terms of academic standing and experience, this is dealt with above.

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 precepts on supervisory practice. These are that:

- “Institutions will appoint supervisors who have the appropriate skills and subject knowledge to support, encourage and monitor research students effectively.
- Each research student will have a minimum of one main supervisor. He or she will normally be part of a supervisory team. There must always be one clearly identified point of contact for the student.
- Institutions will ensure that the responsibilities of all research student supervisors are clearly communicated to supervisors and students through written guidance.
- Institutions will ensure that the quality of supervision is not put at risk as a result of an excessive volume and range of responsibilities assigned to individual supervisors.”

**Typically, a student should expect to have meetings with his/her 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 his or her research programme.** It follows that, alongside his/her other duties, a supervisor should be able to provide this typical level of support for each of his/her 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.

4. *Someone who has sufficient security of tenure to make it likely that they will see the student's research through to successful conclusion.*

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

## **B. How skills training needs are to be assessed.**

The Graduate Academic Programme is available to all graduate research students from all departments in the Division and includes courses in academic subjects, research skills, tools and techniques, teaching, transferable skills and career development. With access to all these courses, you and your supervisor are able to adapt a broad individually tailored training programme to suit your specific needs and background. For details of these courses and booking instructions, please see: <http://www.mpls.ox.ac.uk/training>

Skills training needs are an important part of a postgraduate research student’s programme. These include skills that are specific to the research being undertaken, and personal and professional skills training, as outlined in the Researcher Development Statement which is derived from the Researcher Development Framework (RDF). This is the key reference statement for the development of postgraduate researchers’ skills and attributes and researchers employed in higher education. Further details are available at:

<http://www.vitae.ac.uk/CMS/files/upload/Researcher%20development%20statement.pdf>

The student’s skills training needs are assessed at three specific points in his/her programme: in the initial general review of the student’s needs with their supervisor, at Transfer of Status, and at Confirmation of Status. It is, however, an integral part of the supervisor’s role, at the regular supervisory meetings, to continue to monitor and advise the student on his/her skills training needs,

and to draw to the attention of the research student, and encourage the student to take up, such opportunities that are available for the further development of these skills. A full review of your skills training needs should be carried out each year with your supervisor.

A review of research and transferable skills training needs should form part of at least one meeting per term between the supervisor and the student. In a student's third and subsequent years the supervisor should also discuss career paths with the student. The student should keep a written record of the discussions.

Extensive information about transferable skills training can be found in the Division's skills training web pages at:

<http://www.mpls.ox.ac.uk/training>

<http://www.mpls.ox.ac.uk/training/interdisciplinary-courses-for-research-students-and-research-staff>

<https://weblearn.ox.ac.uk/portal/hierarchy/grad/>