

Supervisor eligibility (doctoral students): guidance

The BGS has recently had cause to review the question of who is eligible to supervise graduate students. A survey of Degree Committees reveals a variety of practices across the University, reflecting in part disciplinary differences in research methodologies.

In discussion, the Board noted two overarching principles which should guide the appointment of supervisors:

1. **Accountability:** the University has an obligation with the student to provide supervision, to ensure it is of appropriate quality, and to have effective management and disciplinary mechanisms for when things go wrong.
2. **Student experience:** The supervisor should be an active researcher in the field, and able to advise the student in turn on all aspects of their development as an independent researcher.

These are expanded further below.

The Board is not currently minded to promote Regulations for the appointment of supervisors. However the Board does have an expectation that Degree Committees will critically examine their practice in the light of this guidance, and amend their practice where necessary.

General Principles:

Governance and accountability

- An employment relationship of the supervisor with the University provides a level of accountability that might not otherwise exist;
- A principal supervisor should normally be conducting research in a relevant field, and should be appraised and able to inform on recent developments in that field.
- A supervisor should be aware of the University rules and regulations pertaining to supervision of graduate students, including those concerning health and safety, research ethics and plagiarism
- A principal supervisor should have received training in supervision including attendance at the University's supervisor training course

Student experience

- Directors of Graduate Education (or equivalent) will provide oversight of supervisors in the exercise of their role
- Students should have appropriate and knowledgeable supervisor(s) taking account of any interdisciplinary activity
- Students should receive an appropriate level of supervision throughout their research project and not be disadvantaged by mid-project changes to the supervisory team
- Supervisors should provide advice on researcher development activity and appreciate the importance of this as a component of doctoral study.

- The principal supervisor should be in a position to advise on publications as well as thesis development.
- Supervisors should be aware of the sources of support available to students

Researcher development

- Institutional responsibility for career development of junior staff by giving them experience of supervision

Other considerations

Financial impact

- HEFCE provide funding to the University for students whose supervisor is employed by an English HEI. Therefore where possible it is expected that students are supervised by employees of the University.

Proposed guidance

		Guidance
1	Number of supervisors	<p>(i) All students must have at least one supervisor and one advisor appointed to them.</p> <p>(ii) If only one supervisor is appointed, that supervisor must be eligible to act as a principal supervisor.</p> <p>(iii) Where more than one supervisor is appointed, one supervisor must act as principal supervisor</p>
2	Role within the University (or elsewhere)	<p>(iv) All UTO¹s are eligible to act as a supervisor provided they are employed by the University at least 0.5FTE. They may be eligible to act as a principal supervisor provided they meet other eligibility criteria, detailed below.</p> <p>(v) College Teaching Officers are eligible to act as a principal supervisor if they are also a member of a University Faculty.</p> <p>(vi) Academic/research staff employed at least 0.5FTE by the University, but who are not UTOs may be eligible to act as a supervisor. This includes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Post-Docs Junior Research Fellows ○ Research Associates/ Senior Research Associates ○ Teaching Associates They may be eligible to act as a principal supervisor provided the their contract of employment is for a sufficient duration to include the students entire period of registration.</p> <p>(vii) Academic-related staff would not be eligible to act as a principal supervisor, but could act as a supervisor provided another member of the supervisory team is employed by the University.</p> <p>(viii) Academic staff from outside the University could act as principal supervisor for students registered in a University Partner Institution or where a principal supervisor is employed by another university or a research or industrial partner. In these circumstances, a supervisor from Cambridge must also be appointed (in order to receive the HEFCE funding).</p>

¹ University Teaching Officers – add more here – link to Ordinance

		<p>(ix) A principal supervisor would be expected to be “research active”, although not necessarily to have been returned in the REF.</p> <p>(x) Degree Committees have their own guidance on maximum numbers a supervisor can supervise. This should include consideration of supervisors from other Departments and Faculties</p>
4	Continued availability	<p>Principal supervisors are normally expected to be in a position to remain in Cambridge for the duration of the student’s studies (4 year)</p> <p>Supervisors who may not be in a position to confirm that they will remain in Cambridge for 4 years (e.g due to impending retirement, planned sabbatical or fixed term appointment) may act as principal supervisor provided another supervisor is appointed on the team from the outset to provide continuity</p> <p>Recently retired supervisors are eligible to act as principal supervisor provided there is another Cambridge supervisor on the team, appointed from the outset.</p>
5	Training	<p>All supervisors who are either supervising for their first time or who have previously supervised elsewhere but have recently arrived at Cambridge must complete supervisor training.</p>

Appendix: QAA Quality Code B11

Extract from the QAA Quality Code for Higher Education, Chapter B11: Research Degrees. The extract relates to supervision; the full chapter can be found at <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/assuring-standards-and-quality/the-quality-code/quality-code-part-b>

Supervision

The research student-supervisor relationship is of paramount importance in all research degrees. Higher education providers therefore establish systematic and clear supervision arrangements. These include providing research students with:

- opportunities for access to regular and appropriate supervisory support
- encouragement to interact with other researchers
- advice from one or more independent sources, internal or external
- arrangements that protect the research student in the event of the loss of a supervisor.

These points are covered in more detail by the following Indicators. They provide a framework for the minimum requirement for research student supervision.

Indicator 9

Higher education providers appoint supervisors with the appropriate skills and subject knowledge to support and encourage research students, and to monitor their progress effectively

To ensure that all supervisors possess the expertise required for their role, higher education providers use criteria for eligibility in appointing supervisors, whose performance in the role is kept under review. Supervisors are expected to engage in development opportunities, to equip them to supervise research students, and to meet requirements for continuing professional development. Supervisor training and development opportunities are relevant to research education, providing advice on how to supervise research students effectively in different circumstances, and are given similar status to programmes on teaching and learning in higher education for new academic staff. In supporting supervisors to enhance their knowledge and skills, higher education providers define and enable sharing of good practice and encourage strategies such as mentoring relationships, for example for new supervisors.

To ensure consistency of supervision, supervisors working in industry or professional practice are made aware of and enabled to fulfil the higher education provider's expectations of the supervisor role and are offered opportunities to engage in developmental activities.

Indicator 10

Each research student has a supervisory team containing a main supervisor who is the clearly identified point of contact.

Supervision arrangements vary depending on the structure for research student support that the higher education provider adopts, and on any guidance provided by the funding body where relevant. New research students are made aware when they can expect their supervisors to be appointed.

Involvement with a supervisory team provides valuable development opportunities for staff, giving them a grounding in the skills required to become an effective research supervisor. In addition to the main supervisor, the supervisory team may include:

- other supervisors and research staff in the subject
- a departmental adviser to postgraduate students
- a faculty postgraduate tutor
- other individuals in similar roles.

Breadth of experience and knowledge across the supervisory team ensures that the student always has access to someone with experience of supporting research students through to successful completion of their programme.

In all cases, each research student has an identified single point of contact who is the main supervisor. It is made clear to the research student who the alternative contact is if the main supervisor is not available. This may either be the second supervisor or an additional designated member of academic staff able to provide advice and support. To avoid misunderstandings, the names, contact details and responsibilities of the main and other supervisors are provided to research students at registration and readily available throughout their programme.

Higher education providers ensure that students are easily able to contact their supervisors for advice and guidance throughout their programme, irrespective of their geographical location. Reasonable accessibility of supervisors is given priority and providers assure themselves that research students and supervisors are aware of the importance of this, and have a shared understanding of what is reasonable.

Between them, the supervisors and, where relevant, other members of the supervisory team, ensure that research students receive sufficient support and guidance to facilitate their success.

At least one member of a student's supervisory team is currently engaged in excellent research in the relevant discipline(s), ensuring that the direction and monitoring of the student's progress is informed by up to date subject knowledge and research developments.

If and when a main supervisor is not able to continue supervising the research student, another appropriate supervisor is appointed to assume the role.

Higher education providers take a view on how long a main supervisor may be absent before a permanent replacement is appointed, bearing in mind the importance of providing breadth and continuity of supervision for the research student in determining this period. In some circumstances, another supervisor is asked to assume the role of main supervisor while a replacement main supervisor is found.

If a research student-supervisor relationship is not working well, alternative independent sources of advice are made available to the research student. By mutual agreement between the research student and the higher education provider, and where permitted by the terms of any sponsorship agreement, supervisory responsibilities can be changed, at the request of either the research student or a supervisor.

Indicator 11

Higher education providers ensure that the responsibilities of research student supervisors are readily available and clearly communicated to supervisors and students.

Supervisors and research students are made fully aware of the extent of one another's responsibilities, to enable both to understand the supervisors' contribution to supporting the research student and where the supervisors' responsibilities end.

Supervisors are sensitive to the diverse needs of individual research students and the associated support that may be required in different circumstances. Higher education providers ensure that supervisors are aware of the range of support available, and communicate to their research students how they can access it. Higher education providers ensure that relevant documents concerning these responsibilities are readily available to research students and supervisors in a format that is easily accessible to the research student.

Higher education providers develop their own staff guidance on the minimum frequency of contact advisable between research students and supervisors, as well as details of procedures for dealing with extensions and suspensions of study. Including this information in the academic framework and regulations and guidance (see Indicator 2) may be helpful to research students and supervisors.

Arrangements between the research student and supervisor may be kept flexible, as long as both are satisfied that adequate support is being provided for the research student and that there are sufficient opportunities for formally monitoring progress. As well as providing opportunities for formal interaction, higher education providers expect research students and supervisors to meet informally, and frequently enough to address the research student's need for general guidance.

Research students and supervisors are jointly responsible for ensuring that regular and frequent contact is maintained. Provision is made for the research student, as well as the supervisor, to take the initiative when necessary. The nature and frequency of contact between research student and supervisor varies depending on the duration of the programme, the way the research is being conducted, and the amount of support needed by the research student.

Taking account of these considerations, the following are agreed by and clear to both research student and supervisor from the start of the programme:

- the minimum frequency of scheduled meetings between research student and supervisor, or supervisory team, and the purpose of such meetings
- guidance on the nature and style of the research student-supervisor interaction, including discussions about academic and personal progress.

The responsibilities of supervisors may be set out in guidance issued by the higher education provider or by any sponsor(s). They may include:

- introducing the research student to the department (or equivalent), its facilities and procedures, and to other research students and relevant staff
- providing satisfactory and accurate guidance and advice
- monitoring the progress of the research student's research programme
- establishing and maintaining regular contact with the research student (guided by the higher education provider's stated academic framework and regulations and guidance)
- being accessible to the research student to give advice (by whatever means is most suitable, given the research student's location and mode of study)
- contributing to the assessment of the research student's development needs
- providing timely, constructive and effective feedback on the research student's work and overall progress within the programme
- ensuring that the research student is aware of the need to exercise probity and conduct his or her research according to ethical principles, including intellectual property rights, and of the implications of research misconduct
- ensuring that the research student is aware of sources of advice, including careers guidance
- helping research students understand health and safety responsibilities
- providing effective pastoral support and/or referring the research student to other sources of such support, including student advisers, graduate school staff and others within the research student's academic community
- helping the research student to interact with others working in the field of research, for example encouraging the research student to attend relevant conferences and supporting him/her in seeking funding for such events
- where appropriate, giving encouragement and guidance to the research student on the submission of conference papers and articles to refereed journals
- maintaining the necessary supervisory expertise, including the appropriate skills, to perform all of the role satisfactorily, supported by relevant continuing professional development opportunities.

Indicator 12

Higher education providers ensure that individual supervisors have sufficient time to carry out their responsibilities effectively.

In appointing supervisors, managers need to be aware of and guided by the overall workload of the individual, including teaching, research, administration and other responsibilities; for example, external examining duties and other professional commitments, such as consultancy or clinical responsibilities. The role of supervisors is critical in maintaining quality and academic standards when supporting research students' research, and higher education providers therefore find ways of showing their support for and rewarding this valuable contribution to the research environment.

Higher education providers ensure that supervisors have sufficient time for adequate contact with each research student to fulfil the responsibilities listed under Indicator 11. Supervisors and research students agree between themselves the level of interaction required and what constitutes sufficient contact (which may vary year by year to reflect the research student's changing needs), in terms of both the quality and the quantity of the time allocated. When a research student needs advice or guidance, supervisors respond within a reasonable timescale.