University of St Andrews

Supervision of postgraduate research students

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Version number	Purpose / changes	Document status	Author of changes, role and school / unit	Date
1.6	Clarification to the requirements for in-person supervision for students on a visa, requirements for supervisor training, and eligibility to supervise.	Approved	Emily Feamster, Deputy Head of Education Policy and Quality	01/04/2024

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Supervision of postgraduate research students

Supervision of postgraduate research students varies enormously, depending on the subject area, the background and needs of the student, and the work patterns and personalities of the student and supervisors. Nevertheless, both students and supervisors have certain responsibilities that must be fulfilled. The responsibilities described below should be seen not as comprehensive but indicative.

1. Definitions and requirements

Supervision of research degree students must involve at least two people: a principal supervisor and at least one of the following:

- Secondary supervisor
- A mentor

At least one member of the supervisory team will be currently 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. Breadth of experience and knowledge across the supervisory team will mean that the student always has access to someone with experience of supporting research student(s) through to successful completion of their programme.

All Schools must use the agreed terminology for supervisors, as set out below.

Principal supervisor

The main member of the academic staff of the University appointed to supervise a research degree student. They will act as the one clearly identified point of contact for the student. The principal supervisor will normally have relevant research expertise in the proposed study area. Principal supervisors are normally members of academic staff in the post of lecturer and above, or, for other research or academic-related posts, where an expectation to supervise PGR students is included in the job description. Exceptional arrangements for other academic staff may be allowed by agreement with the Associate Provost Students. Where more than one person has supervisory responsibilities for the student, there will still only be one principal supervisor.

Secondary supervisor

A secondary supervisor is an academic co- or joint supervisor appointed to support a research degree student. They may be appointed when the research expertise required to support the student spans two or more research areas, or where research expertise overlaps, and therefore the supervision of the student is shared between two members of academic staff. The proportions of supervision are normally agreed at the start of the arrangement, 50:50, 70:30 etc. A secondary

supervisor may also provide continuity of support when the principal supervisor is absent, or act as a mentor to the principal supervisor when the principal supervisor does not have the required experience of supporting a research degree student through to graduation.

Supervisors who are not contracted members of staff at the University, including supervisors from industry, may only usually be appointed as a secondary supervisor on completion of an agreement outlining relevant responsibilities and expectations. In such cases an additional secondary supervisor or mentor should be appointed from the University.

Post-doctoral Research Fellows may, at the discretion of the Director of Postgraduate Research Studies, be appointed as secondary supervisors in a limited capacity, provided that the guidelines laid out in Guidance on Post-Docs as Secondary Supervisors are adhered to. In all cases where a post-doc is appointed as a secondary supervisor, the principal supervisor should have experience of supervising a research student through to graduation.

Mentor

A member of the academic staff who primarily acts as a mentor to the student. They will provide advice and support independent from the principal and secondary supervisors as necessary and may also provide pastoral support. They will not normally be involved in the direct supervision of the research project and would therefore be eligible to examine the final thesis if there were no other perceived conflicts of interest identified by the Director of Postgraduate Research Studies. They may be involved in the annual progress review process for their mentees.

In cases where a student's supervisory team does not include a mentor, they should approach the Director of Postgraduate Research Studies in the first instance if they would like advice from someone outside of their supervisory team.

2. Appointment of research supervisors

Supervisors for postgraduate research students are appointed by the relevant School, usually at the time an application for admission to postgraduate study is formally accepted. Supervisors are normally members of academic staff on open-ended contracts, although alternative arrangements may be allowed by agreement with the Associate Provost Students.

Some students with external funding may have a supervisory team drawn from multiple institutions (cross-HEI supervision). Where St Andrews is the lead (nominating) institution our internal postgraduate research policies and procedures should be followed.

The University cannot guarantee continuity with a particular supervisor throughout the duration of any postgraduate degree. In exceptional circumstances, alternative supervisory arrangements may be necessary.

It is the responsibility of the Head of School to ensure that new supervisors are introduced to the content of this policy by university induction courses, school-arranged procedures and by directing them to relevant web resources. New supervisors should be knowledgeable about supervisory procedures required by the University and by the School and any other related matters deemed appropriate by the Head of School. Experienced supervisors should be briefed about new policies and procedures in a timely and effective way.

The number of research students assigned to any one principal supervisor must be closely monitored by the relevant Head of School, who must take into account the overall workload distribution of the supervisor. In cases where a supervisor has primary responsibility for more than six full-time equivalent research students, the Head of School must be able to provide satisfactory assurance to the Associate Provost Students that such supervision does not impose a level of responsibility upon the member of staff that may be detrimental to the progress of the research students concerned.

On occasion the mentoring role of the secondary supervisor may raise the prospect of dealing with difficulties in the student's relationship with the principal supervisor. If there are any circumstances that might make it awkward for the student to discuss such difficulties with the second supervisor, the school Director of Postgraduate Research Studies should ensure that the student is put in touch with another member of staff, or the Associate Provost Students, who can fulfil this pastoral role.

For the EngD, the Head of School shall appoint an academic principal supervisor and an industrial supervisor. The latter shall be a member of staff of the industrial organisation that is sponsoring the student. The organisation will be a participant in the Engineering Doctorate Scheme. External supervision may also be needed for CASE PhD students, periods of fieldwork or placement, and external PhD students. In all such cases, however, an academic member of staff at St Andrews should be designated as principal supervisor.

3. Frequency of supervision

Supervisors should have contact with research students at least 10 times per academic year for substantive discussions of the student's work. Contact can be in person and/or electronically, but international students studying on a Student Visa must adhere to the in-person attendance and engagement requirements stipulated by UK Visas and Immigration (UKVI) under the terms of their visa (for further guidance, please see Postgraduate research engagement monitoring and record

keeping). Supervisors and students should keep a written record of such contacts. In circumstances where it has not proved possible to have contact 10 times per session (or where this is anticipated), the principal supervisor is responsible for notifying the relevant Head of School as soon as possible and informing them of the circumstances. Contact may be more frequent than 10 times per session in the early stages of work, depending on the discipline and stage of the project.

Supervisors should give particular attention to overseas students in the early stages. Students whose first language is not English may be required to attend, prior to matriculation, a specified English language course in the University. It is the responsibility of the Head of School, in consultation with the supervisor, to monitor that the student attends this course and that the student's knowledge of English and use of academic English is sufficient to enable the research to proceed satisfactorily. If a student requires further language support, the student should be referred to English Language Teaching, ideally as early as possible in their studies.

Part-time students may also require special attention from supervisors. They may find it difficult to meet regularly with supervisors and devote enough time to research. The supervisor should be aware of these problems and deal with them sympathetically, while still ensuring that the student gets launched on the project without undue delay and maintains good progress.

4. Responsibilities of supervisor

All supervisors are expected to attend some form of supervisory training at least once every five years, or more frequently if required by funding bodies. Particular funders may require additional training sessions, and these requirements must also be met.

Principal supervisors should support a culture of research integrity through the following actions:

- establish mutually agreed means of communication and contact with the student. Supervisors are expected to be accessible to research students at appropriate times when advice may be needed.
- give written as well as oral feedback on any submitted work within a reasonable period of time after submission. This written feedback should contain constructive criticism so that students are aware of potential problems.
- ensure that the student has obtained Protection of Vulnerable Groups (PVG) clearance and ethical approval from UTREC, as appropriate, prior to research commencing (see also student responsibilities).
- ensure that the student has received the appropriate ethical clearance, training and/or licencing prior to research commencing with animals.

- ensure that a risk assessment is undertaken, as appropriate, and that the student is fully aware of the risks and precautions that apply to the conduct of such research. Risk assessments also need to account for disabilities, where relevant.
- work with the student to ensure that they are taking an appropriate course of research skills training, to be reported at the annual progress review.
- ensure that students have adequate space (bench, desk) in the school, or elsewhere in the university, where they can work.
- inform Heads of School if they intend to be absent for any length of time so that alternative supervision may be arranged.

Principal supervisors are responsible for providing guidance about:

- defining a suitable research topic that can be completed in a timely fashion.
- the nature and techniques of research.
- the standard expected for the degree.
- the requirement that students must ensure their own research activity embodies a culture of research integrity, according to the principles of good research practice, and with knowledge of the definition of research misconduct. To this end, supervisors should direct their students to, and discuss with them, relevant professional and institutional guidelines, policies, processes and training opportunities.
- the planning of the research programme.
- literature and sources.
- required attendance at taught classes.
- copyright implications of working on certain subject areas, in particular given the requirement for the electronic publication of theses, and about the embargoes of work where publication would have commercial, professional, legal or ethical consequences again in particular given the requirement for the electronic publication of theses.
- presenting work at appropriate conferences, and publishing papers and patents.
- career intentions, and assist them (as appropriate) to acquire skills relevant to their intended career development, and make referrals to the Careers Centre, CEED, or programmes offered by professional societies as appropriate.

The Director of Postgraduate Research Studies is responsible for ensuring annual progress reviews take place, and approving reports in MMS.

5. Responsibilities of research students

The primary responsibility of research students is to pursue their research with integrity, diligence and according to the highest standards of their discipline, taking due account of the advice and criticism offered by their supervisors and other scholars in their field(s). Students should:

- live in accordance with the University's Location of Study Policy.

- agree a schedule for obtaining research skills training in the areas identified by the supervisor. It is the responsibility of research students to adhere to this schedule for training, and they should inform the principal supervisor without delay regarding any difficulties in doing so.
- establish mutually agreed means of communication and contact with the supervisor. Students who intend to be absent, on fieldwork, or who are not resident have a particular obligation to inform and maintain contact with their supervisor.
- be responsible for keeping appointments punctually and are expected to be diligent in meeting deadlines for submitted work or the advancement of their projects.
- be responsible for adhering to health, safety and security guidelines operative within their place of study or research. If working away from St Andrews, students must take due precautions appropriate to their place of study or research.
- ensure that their research activity embodies a culture of integrity, according to the principles of good research practice, and with knowledge of the definition of research misconduct. To fulfil this responsibility, students must appraise themselves of, and discuss with their supervisors, relevant professional and institutional guidelines, policies, processes and training opportunities.
- obtain any necessary ethics approval for their research, when this involves animals, human participants or human tissue.
- take note of and respond to criticism of submitted work and all advice concerning the progress of their work made by supervisors.
- discuss with their supervisors opportunities for presenting their work within and outwith the university in order to obtain feedback from a wide range of scholars and in order to gain experience of making research presentations.
- submit annually (on the form provided) the student self-assessment in accordance with the Progress Review Policy.
- have ultimate responsibility for the form and content of the thesis that they submit.
- have ultimate responsibility for deciding the appropriate time for thesis submission, having taken due account of the principal supervisor's opinion and regulations governing duration of study.

Students are entitled to reasonable periods of absence and holiday, as laid out in the Length of Studies policy, provided that these are properly agreed in advance with the principal supervisor and conform to the stipulations of the funding body (if applicable).

6. Change of supervisor

Occasionally, a student or a supervisor may request from the Head of School a change of supervisor. If a Head of School agrees to or proposes a change of supervisor, whether permanently or temporarily, a Change of Supervisor form must be completed and sent to Registry.

7. Problems with supervision

One of the most important functions of the supervisor is to provide constructive criticism of the student's work. Students also should not hesitate to make known their concerns to supervisors. Open and frank discussion between supervisor and research student from the outset is encouraged in order to avert potential future difficulties or growing misunderstandings.

Occasionally the relationship between a student and the principal supervisor will break down. If the secondary supervisor is unable to resolve problems, then the student and/or supervisor should report difficulties in writing to the Head of School in the first instance, who may refer the matter, if necessary, to the Associate Provost Students. Prompt action must be taken to resolve the conflict. Where necessary, a student or a supervisor may request from the Head of School a change of supervisor. All such changes must be notified to Registry to be agreed by the Associate Provost Students (see Change of Supervisor form).

If a student falls ill for an extended period of time, they (or the supervisor where the student is incapable of acting on their own behalf) should submit relevant documentation to Registry requesting a leave of absence.

On occasion, it may be necessary to engage an external supervisor for an extended time. This is for cases where no other alternative is possible (e.g. departure of a supervisor prior to completion of a student's PhD). In line with the Guidance on the use of external supervisors for PGR students, the Head of School should propose the name of an external supervisor to the Associate Provost Education after consultation with the student. The Head of School must authorise payment by the school of any necessary travelling expenses, etc. for supervisors or students. The level of fee for an external supervisor should be calculated on a range related to external examiner fees. External supervisors are expected to meet the student at least three times per semester.

If serious problems regarding a student's progress are identified, it may prove necessary to discontinue the student's studies or register them for a lower degree (see Registration and status).

Version number	Purpose / changes	Document status	Author of changes, role and school / unit	Date
1.0	Converting policy previously held on a webpage to a stand-alone document.		Emily Feamster, Academic Policy Officer, Principal's Office	6/6/2019

	Amended to allow post-doctoral researchers to act as secondary supervisors for PGR students.			
1.1	Change to the frequency of required supervisor training		Emily Feamster, Academic Policy Officer, Principal's Office	21/1/2020
1.2	Updated wording on annual leave.		Emily Feamster, Academic Policy Officer, Principal's Office	17/12/2020
1.3	Updated titles for Associate Provost.	Approved	Emily Feamster, Academic Policy Officer, Principal's Office	02/08/2021
1.4	Periodic policy review – no changes made	Approved	Emily Feamster, Academic Policy Officer, Principal's Office	21/06/2022
1.5	Typographical corrections and link to guidance added	Approved	Emily Feamster, Deputy Head of Education Policy and Quality	14/06/2023
1.6	Clarification to the requirements for in-person supervision for students on a visa, requirements for supervisor training, and eligibility to supervise.	Approved	Emily Feamster, Deputy Head of Education Policy and Quality	01/04/2024