

A Compact Guide for Postgraduate Research Supervisors

Twenty Frequently Asked Questions

Introduction

This short Guide answers questions regarding the responsibilities and matters of particular importance and interest to supervisors. It should be used in conjunction with the *Regulations for Higher Degree by Thesis*. The regulations set out the rules which PGR students must follow and they include detailed explanations and guidance.

1. How many supervisors should each PGR student have?

Each student has a minimum of two supervisors; the Director of Studies (DoS) and the Second Supervisor. The supervisors are expected to work as a team co-ordinated by the Director of Studies.

2. What are the responsibilities of the Director of Studies?

The Director of Studies is the principal supervisor. It is an exciting and challenging role. The DoS has overall responsibility for providing full and appropriate support and guidance for PGR students taking a higher degree by research. S/he is expected to co-ordinate the supervision and take a *proactive* role providing encouragement and academic advice at all stages from the outset in designing and planning the research to preparing for the *viva-voce* examination. This is a critically important role because the University expects all registered PGR students to achieve their potential and gain a higher degree by research.

3. What part does the Director of Studies play in the admissions of a student?

The Chair of the Faculty Research and Research Degrees Committee (FRRDC) should consult the prospective supervisors about a PGR application. The DoS should indicate whether the proposed area of research relates well to his/her own research interests. S/he should also communicate with the prospective student, preferably in an interview, in order to assess whether there are prospects of a good working relationship. See the regulations for detailed considerations in relation to off-campus students.

4. How often should the supervisors meet with a PGR student?

It is strongly recommended that formal contact should be planned [and recorded] on a regular basis. The frequency normally varies from weekly to monthly but in questionnaires PGR students have commented that formal contact at three weekly intervals or more are insufficient for their needs. Some students may lose momentum or, a bigger danger, they go off at a tangent to the planned work if they are left alone for too long. It is advisable to aim for frequent formal contact at least initially until there is mutual confidence that the research is progressing well. For many, especially FT students this frequency may be maintained with advantage. If a student does not have sufficient formal contact and, additionally, has any difficulties contacting the DoS and second supervisor then the situation can quickly deteriorate into lack of trust and confidence.

5. Should the DoS maintain a record of supervision (RD22)?

Records of supervision were piloted in EHS in about 2000. This trial was successful and so in 2004 this was extended as a requirement across all the faculties. DoS are asked to keep a record of the outcomes of supervisory meetings. This should be completed by the DoS and signed by the PGR student. This can serve as a reminder to agreed actions. Students are also encouraged to maintain a Personal Development File recording the reflections on their growing research skills. However, while the DoS advises on which skills it may be appropriate to develop s/he is not expected to review the File. This is entirely a matter for the student.

6. What role should the DoS play in the completion of the RD5 form?

This is the classic perennial question! The PGR student normally enrolls for the PhD/MPhil awards rather than for a specific award. Exceptionally the PGR student may elect for registration for an MPhil or be able to make the case for registration direct for a PhD. The PGR student should meet with the DoS to discuss the plan of work, the research training support, the risk assessment and any ethical considerations. The student should then prepare the draft responses for the RD5 and invite the DoS to comment. The DoS may wish to suggest amendments but it is not the job of the DoS to complete the RD5 on behalf of the student. The RD5 form incorporates substantial guidance.

In commenting on the draft RD5, the DoS should consider each aspect very carefully indeed. Is the overall aim appropriate? Are the objectives suitably challenging for the intended award? Is the plan of work realistic? Is there sufficient information for the FRRDC to understand the scope and depth of the investigation? Is the risk assessment realistic? Has the student acknowledged and addressed ethical considerations? Has the student built in appropriate research training support? Is there a need for external training or the purchase of equipment with cost implications? If so the DoS should check the position with the Head of School or the Dean of Faculty.

7. How long should the preparation of the RD5 take?

The regulations allow 12 weeks for the enrolled PGR student to accomplish registration. In fact the PGR student should embark on registration immediately after enrolment. It is recognised that some PT students will have limited time to spend on this. All RD5 forms are subject to the approval of FRRDC. The RD5 must be considered by a formal meeting of FRRDC. It is advisable to aim for a particular meeting of the FRRDC. This acts as a spur to completion of the RD5. The Committee commonly asks for some revision but this may be handled by Chair's Action. After approval the date of registration is backdated to the date of enrolment.

8. When should the PGR student prepare for confirmation of registration (RD7)?

The PGR student should prepare for confirmation when it is evident that there has been a solid start to the investigation and there are significant initial results to report. This should be at 15 months (FT) and 24 months (PT).

9. What does the confirmation process entail?

The PGR student is asked to prepare an Application for Confirmation of Registration (RD7) which is reviewed by an assessor and to take part in a *viva voce* event to discuss the research. The Report should be relatively compact but should contain sufficient to convey the extent of the progress achieved. The viva is intended to test the student's growing knowledge and command of the subject including research methodology. The DoS should advise the Chair of the FRRDC on the choice of assessor. This person may be internal or external but must not be a member of the supervisory team. An external assessor cannot subsequently serve as the external examiner. This process is designed to enhance the quality of the research being undertaken.

10. What are the Annual Progress reports?

Every PGR student is expected to complete an Annual Progress Report. The report is quite short but is of sufficient length for the student to convey the extent of progress and list the key outcomes so far. S/he may also indicate any delays, difficulties encountered regarding facilities, equipment or illness. The DoS is asked to complete a separate Annual Progress Form for the student so that the FRRDC has both perspectives. The University encourages the PGR student to share their progress report with the DoS. This is in the best interests of the student – supervisor relationship. The Research Office requires the Progress Forms to be completed before re-enrolment is permitted in August for the next academic year.

The Progress Forms are considered by FRRDC. The Committee is asked to provide feedback for the student. Normally this will be positive and encouraging, but if the DoS has signalled concerns the FRRDC may take the opportunity to urge the student to take corrective action.

11. Does the PGR student have to accept the advice of the Director of Studies?

Although the DoS has the responsibility for providing sound advice on all aspects of the research and the preparation of the thesis, the PGR student has the ultimate responsibility for the research undertaken. Normally, PGR students follow the advice given by DoS, but there may be occasions when the student decides at variance to the advice. This is his/her right: the DoS advises and the PGR student decides. However, the PGR student is subject to University committee decision making regarding the outcomes of submissions in regard of registration, confirmation, annual progress and the examination for a higher degree.

12. What happens if the PGR student goes against my advice?

The key aspects of the on-going professional relationship between supervisor and student are respect and trust. Occasional differences on minor matters should be absorbed within a good student – supervisor relationship. But regular discord in thinking and disagreement on important matters such as research methods and the timing of confirmation is worrying for both the DoS and the PGR student. It is advisable for the DoS to record the advice given in the Supervisory Record and to work with the Second Supervisor to persuade the PGR student that s/he is making unwise decisions. This is not a situation that can be allowed to continue.

13. Can a Director of Studies ask to be replaced as supervisor?

A DoS can ask to be replaced and a PGR student can request a change but clearly this is an undesirable situation. There will seldom be an equally well qualified and suitable alternative. So it is best to try to resolve differences in a direct meeting called for that purpose. The Chair of FRRDC has responsibility for the assigning of supervisors and may participate in the meeting. A fresh start to the supervisory relationship has sometimes brought real benefits. However, if the PGR student is simply not responding to advice and is not performing adequately it may be necessary to issue a formal warning.

14. What happens if a PGR student is performing badly?

DoS are advised to propose courses of action for their students from the outset so that the student becomes aware of the need to maintain good progress. This enables the DoS to advise from an early stage on the quality of the work. Positive feedback at this stage will enhance the relationship and give rise to mutual confidence. But if the quality of work is poor then the student should be steadily advised on how to improve. It may be helpful to recommend attendance of PGT or UGT modules by arrangement with programme and module leaders. If the problem of poor performance persists then the PGR student must be advised of this by the DoS. If this is still a concern when the Annual Progress Report is prepared then the FRRDC should be notified (see above). In extreme instances the DoS may recommend a formal warning with a course of remedial action. If this is not acted upon then this may be followed by a recommendation that the registration be terminated. There must be no element of surprise for the PGR student. Preparatory meetings for termination are advisable. The University is not assisting a weak student by allowing a registration to continue long after it is evident that the student will not gain a higher degree. However, the FRRDC should learn in what way it can avoid a repeat of the situation.

15. Who decides when the thesis is ready for submission?

It is the responsibility of the DoS to advise when the thesis is ready for submission. If there is a good relationship between the student and supervisor, it will be clear to both as this time approaches. The student should submit the Notification of the Intention to Submit (RD13) with the agreement of the DoS. If the final stages progress to plan then submission can proceed a few months later. The PGR student is expected to accept the advice of the DoS. The FRRDC is very concerned if the submission takes place against the advice of the DoS and there is

equal concern if the submission takes place without consultation of the DoS. Although the student is *entitled* to decide when to submit, it is very rare [= not yet!] for there to be a satisfactory outcome of the examination if the DoS has not agreed to the submission. The DoS is recommended to discuss the arrangements for the examination stage well before this situation could conceivably arise in order to prevent the situations described above. It may be useful to explain that the DoS is responsible for recommending the examiners and this would be difficult to do professionally if the thesis is submitted prematurely. Supervisors are strongly advised not to get involved in copying, binding, transporting or submitting the completed thesis. All kind of problems ensue! This must all be done by the candidate.

16. What is the role of the supervisor in the appointment of the examiners?

The DoS in conjunction with the second supervisor is responsible for identifying and approaching suitable external and internal examiners. Points to consider include: Is the external examiner an accomplished researcher in the specific field of research pursued in the investigation? Does the internal examiner have a good general knowledge of the field? Have they between them experience of at least three previous examinerships at this level? Can you confirm that the external examiner has not been a member of staff at the University in the last five years? Can you confirm that the external examiner has not been appointed an examiner more than three times in the last three years? Is the external examiner working in the UK with modest travel costs? It is important to note that both examiners will need to be *external* if the candidate is a FT/PT member of staff. The DoS should obtain CVs of the examiners and complete the RD14 for submission to the Chair of FRRDC.

17. Should the supervisors arrange a mock *viva-voce* examination?

Yes, definitely! PGR students have confirmed that this is really useful. It is now a University requirement. PGR students have confirmed that this experience was strongly beneficial.

18. Should the supervisors attend the *viva-voce* examination?

At least one of the supervisors is encouraged to attend the *viva-voce* examination for the purpose of getting any feedback. But if the candidate would feel more comfortable if the supervisors are not present, then this wish is observed. Similarly the examiners may prefer the supervisors not to be present. If the supervisor(s) are permitted to attend they should not make any contribution whatsoever unless explicitly invited by the examiners.

However, the DoS is strongly recommended to be present at the conclusion of the examination when the examiners provide feedback to the candidate including details of any revision required. Some candidates do not recall the comments at this stage very clearly and so the presence of a supervisor is helpful.

19. What happens if the DoS takes a sabbatical or leaves the University?

In the event of a temporary absence it is advisable for a DoS to inform the PGR student at an early stage to reduce any sense of surprise or insecurity. It may be satisfactory to hand over the DoS responsibilities to the second supervisor for periods up to two months. If there is another member of staff who can assist on a temporary basis this is desirable and should be arranged with the help of the Chair of FRDDC.

In the more serious situation of the DoS or second supervisor leaving the University or suffering from long term illness there are several possibilities. Again the DoS should inform the student at an early stage and set out the steps that will be taken to assure continuity of supervision. The responsibility for arriving at a solution which satisfies the student rests with the faculty. The DoS may prepare the ground by identifying and discussing a replacement supervisor. Alternatively, s/he may explore, if appropriate the possibility of the PGR student transferring with the supervisor. This may apply if a department is closing down. The key point is to be pro-active and not allow the student to become anxious or insecure regarding the future of their research.

20. Who should I see in the event of difficulties?

In the event of any difficulties there are two principal sources of assistance. The first is the Chair of FRRDC who has overall responsibility for the management of the research training within the faculty. You can also go to the Research Office where the staff will be very willing to assist by providing advice or indicating who could be approached for advice. In the event of any procedural matter, please ask rather than risk making a significant error.

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