

Research Degree Precepts 2024-25

Introduction

- 1. These precepts have been agreed by Imperial College London to govern the delivery of research degrees offered by the university. They draw together regulatory and policy requirements as well as best practice from the sector. Departments should ensure they are following the precepts – compliance with the precepts forms the basis of the cyclical PGR Periodic Review process.
- 2. The document is intended to be used by university staff with responsibility for research degrees and guidance is included to point to further sources of information or give examples of how the standards may be met. Students may also refer to this document for information on how their degrees should be delivered and managed.
- 3. These precepts apply to the following research degrees:
 - a. Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)
 - b. Master of Philosophy (MPhil)
 - c. Doctor of Engineering (EngD)
 - d. Doctor of Medicine by Research (MDRes)

These precepts do not apply to students registered on Master of Research (MRes) programmes.

Precept 1: Recruitment and interviewing

- 4. All prospective students regardless of funding stream must be interviewed before an offer of a place is made. Interviews may be conducted remotely if it is not possible for the candidate to visit the department. The selection panel must comprise at least two members of staff one of whom should be independent from the project and the student. The department should identify in advance a position or positions (e.g. Director of Postgraduate Studies, PGR Admissions Tutor) who may form a pool of staff who can perform this independent role as required.
- 5. Departments are asked to consider the gender balance across interview panels. Where it is not possible to achieve a balance, to provide opportunity for applicants to meet with existing PhD students of the same gender as part of the interview process.
- 6. Staff not experienced in student selection or recruitment should attend a relevant recruitment and selection workshop before participating in an interview. All staff involved in interviewing students must keep up to date with current legislation, the university’s admission policies, and the policies to promote equal opportunities and widening participation.

Precept 1 guidance

7. The university provides a number of [training events focusing on recruitment, selection and equal opportunities](#).
8. Collaborative programmes: the interview procedures for entry into collaborative programmes should normally be the same as those which students directly applying to the university are subject to.

Precept 2: Offers and admissions

9. Only appropriately qualified and prepared applicants should be accepted. No offers should be made unless a student can be provided with an environment which is supportive of their research achievement; this includes only appointing supervisors who have sufficient time to carry out their supervisory responsibilities satisfactorily as well as access to necessary facilities and equipment.

Precept 2 guidance

10. An outline of the admissions process is available in the [Postgraduate Research Admissions Policy](#).
11. The university's admission criteria for doctoral awards and MPhil can also be found in the [Academic Regulations](#).
12. [Further guidance for handling special cases](#) is available on the Registry website.
13. Collaborative programmes: the admissions procedures for entry into collaborative programmes should normally be the same as those which students applying directly to the university are subject to.

Precept 3: Supervision

14. All new main and co-supervisors must successfully complete the online course "[Fundamentals of supervising PhD students](#)" part of the [Cornerstone Programme](#). Depending on the supervisor's prior experience, in particular those individuals who have not yet had primary responsibility for the supervision of a successful student, Departments may decide to request/suggest their attendance at the full day follow-up workshop, "[Introduction to Supervising PhD students at Imperial](#)".
15. In selecting supervisors and supervisory teams, departments are expected to comply with the requirements set out in the university's "[Policy on Research Degree Supervision](#)". Departments are also expected to have in place effective mechanisms to monitor the completion of mandatory supervisor training by new and/or inexperienced supervisors.

Precept 3 guidance

16. Students and supervisors should discuss the "[Mutual Expectations for the Research Degree Student Supervisor Partnership](#)" at their first meeting and re-visit the document periodically during the degree.

17. Students and supervisors should work together to ensure a healthy research culture and environment.
18. Collaborative programmes: Supervisors at the partner institution/organisation must normally have previous supervisory experience (primary responsibility for the supervision of a successful student) before taking on joint supervisory duties. However, if this is not possible, for example if the collaboration is with an industrial partner, then inexperienced supervisors must have undergone training and mentoring comparable to that expected at Imperial before taking on a joint supervisory role.

Precept 4: Non-Imperial staff who supervise

19. Departments must have mechanisms to ensure those supervisors working in industry or professional practice or a Partner Research Institution are aware of all university rules, regulations and procedures relating to research degree supervision. These supervisors should also be offered the opportunity to engage in developmental and other activities relating to the support of their research students.

Precept 4 guidance

20. Non-Imperial staff with supervisor roles should meet the criteria as laid out in [Policy on Research Degree Supervision](#).
21. Non-Imperial staff with supervisor roles should be directed to the [Mutual Expectations for the Research Degree Student Supervisor Partnership](#). Commitments beyond the supervisory role should be taken into account when appointing non-Imperial supervisors. Departments should be confident that potential supervisors will be able to meet the requirements of the role before making an appointment. (See Precept 6 below).
22. Non-Imperial supervisors should be directed to complete the core online Cornerstone course [Fundamentals of supervising PhD students](#).

Precept 5: Continuing professional development and support for supervisors

23. All supervisors are expected to engage and participate in [Continuing Professional Development \(CPD\)](#) activities. All supervisors are expected to undertake CPD specifically related to PhD supervision which, in addition to the courses/workshops for new and/or inexperienced supervisors, involves participating in departmental [Focus on Best Practice in Supervision](#) workshops. These are department-led workshops and departments are therefore responsible for determining the cycle of participants and frequency of these workshops. Within this cycle it is expected that every supervisor will attend at least one workshop over a six-year period.
24. Similar to the mandatory training for new and/or inexperienced supervisors, departments are expected to have in place effective mechanisms to monitor the engagement of supervisors in CPD activities.

25. Departments and supervisors themselves are responsible for ensuring that they are fully aware of their role and responsibilities as a supervisor, as described in the university document “[Mutual Expectations for the Research Degree Student Supervisor Partnership](#)”.

Precept 5 guidance

26. Responsibilities for supervisors are outlined in the “[Mutual Expectations for the Research Degree Student Supervisor Partnership](#)”.
27. The university provides [induction and continuing professional development](#) for supervisors through the [Cornerstone Programme](#).
28. The Early Career Researcher Institute (ECRI) will be able to provide a list of all who attended the Focus on Best Practice in Supervision workshop(s).

Precept 6: Supervisory arrangements

29. All students must have a supervisor who is identified as the main single point of contact and it must be made clear to the student who is their alternative contact if that individual is unavailable. The main supervisor must ensure that adequate contact with and support for their research student(s) is maintained throughout the research degree programme. Where a student has more than one supervisor, it is important that the student understands their respective roles.

Precept 6 guidance

30. As a minimum, all Imperial research students can expect to be allocated a main supervisor; they may also have co-supervisors and access to assistant supervisor(s). Where a student has more than one supervisor, one of the supervisors shall be designated the main (previously known as principal or lead) supervisor.
31. Departments are required to actively monitor the number of students per supervisor. It should be acknowledged that information on the number of students per supervisor is not always held centrally so there is an expectation that departments hold the most accurate data on this.
32. Students who are unhappy with their supervisor are advised to talk to their Director of Postgraduate Studies in the first instance. Students can also discuss this with their departmental Senior Tutor (PGR).
33. Heads of Department are responsible for approving supervisor appointments and must confirm that proper supervision can be given for the expected duration of the programme.
34. Collaborative programmes: All students must have appropriate supervisors at both Imperial and at the partner institution/organisation and there must always be a “main supervisor” identified for each student studying a collaborative research degree. In most cases the main supervisor will be an experienced member of Imperial academic staff or, in the case of joint degrees, an experienced academic located at the institution/ organisation where the student first commences study.
35. Collaborative programmes: Clear lines of communication must be established and agreed between the student and supervisors at both locations.

36. Collaborative programmes: Supervisors must maintain frequent (normally every 2 weeks) contact with students throughout the programme of study, whilst at Imperial and at the partner institution/organisation. The pattern and method of maintaining good communication must be agreed by students and their supervisors. Provision must be made for supervisors to visit the student while they are away from their respective institution.

Precept 7: Induction

37. Each department must have an induction day/programme for new students and must make provision for late arrivals, either in the form of a second induction day/programme or through arrangements whereby students meet individually with key staff to complete the induction programme. Students should be made aware of their responsibilities and entitlements (including financial) at early and/or appropriate stage in their research degree programme. The induction must include reference to the [Mutual Expectations for the Research Degree Student - Supervisor Partnership](#).

Precept 7 guidance

38. The Early Career Researcher Institute (ECRI) provides a central induction for all research students during Welcome Season.
39. In addition to the ECRI's Welcome event, departments are required to hold local inductions for their students.
40. Departments must ensure that a comparable induction programme is organised for students registering after October.
41. Supervisors are responsible for a significant part of the orientation process. More information is available in the guidance document [Mutual Expectations for the Research Degree Student Supervisor Partnership](#).
42. Collaborative programmes: the induction programme for new students on collaborative programmes should include the procedures and requirements for their particular programme, including the timelines for completion of the various stages of the research degree and the professional skills development and Doctoral Academic Communication requirement, and details of the relevant members of staff involved, both at Imperial and the partner institution.

Precept 8: Student handbooks

43. Each department must have a postgraduate student handbook, either in hard or electronic copy which contains, but is not limited to, information listed in the university's guidelines for handbooks document.

Precept 8 guidance

44. The Quality Assurance and Enhancement Team provide a checklist, templates and standard text for inclusion in departmental handbooks.

45. Collaborative programmes: students on joint and collaborative programmes must receive the postgraduate student handbook of the departments in which they are based at Imperial and at the partner institution/organisation. Students must also receive supplementary information, agreed by both partners, which describes the specific arrangements of the joint/collaborative programme.

Precept 9: Research student communities

46. Departments must make provision to allow research students to interact with their peers and should facilitate the existence of a collegial/scholarly community.

Precept 9 guidance

47. The Early Career Research Institute (ECRI) provides [guidance on cohort building](#)
48. The ECRI also provides information on how students can apply for funding to support student-led community activities via the [Postgraduate Community Fund](#).
49. The ECRI also hosts a number of [university-wide events](#) to support research students to share their research widely across Imperial and build connections.
50. Collaborative programmes: each collaborative programme must facilitate cohort building activities and events.

Precept 10: Pastoral Care Network

51. Departments must make provision for each research student to have access to a departmental Senior Tutor (PGR) (or Deputy Senior Tutor (PGR)) who is a member of academic staff with responsibility for the pastoral care and welfare of PGRs in the department.
52. The Senior Tutor (PGR) must not be involved with the assessment of an individual student. Where this is not possible, a Deputy Senior Tutor (PGR) or another named member of academic staff must be assigned to support that student. Students may also have access to departmental personal tutors and wellbeing advisors.
53. In addition to this, departments may wish to consider implementing a pastoral care network in which to extend opportunities for students to talk about their welfare with a range of individuals who they feel most comfortable with. Such examples may include cohort building, mentoring, a network of Deputy Senior Tutors or personal tutors, or a buddy scheme.
54. Departments must be able to demonstrate how they ensure research degree students are aware of staff who can provide them with pastoral care and the department's pastoral network, where this is in place.

Precept 10 guidance

55. Departments who implement a pastoral care network are subject to the following:

- a. The network should involve individuals who will support the Senior Tutor (PGR) in their role. The individuals should be the “eyes and ears” of the Senior Tutor (PGR) and should raise concerns with the Senior Tutor (PGR), when these arise. The purpose of this system is to ensure that the role of Senior Tutor (PGR) is pro-active rather than reactive and that a network of support and community is developed within departments.
- b. Members of the network should meet regularly but informally with students. Existing departmental events, seminars and group meetings could be utilised for this purpose.
- c. Models may include the following but departments are free to propose their own:
 - A network of Deputy Senior Tutors (PGR) or personal tutors, each assigned to a group of students
 - A mentoring scheme
 - Cohort building
 - Buddy scheme for PhD students – buddies could be postdocs or PhD students in their later years
 - PG student reps who regularly meet with the Senior Tutor PGR

Precept 11: Research & Professional Skills Development

56. During induction, all students must be made aware of the Early Career Researcher Institute’s [Professional Skills Statement of Policy and the university’s](#) requirement for students to complete professional skills training as part of their milestone progression. Supervisors should support their students to engage with professional skills training. Furthermore, all students should have the opportunity to engage in further activities and training to enhance their research and professional skills and receive careers advice.

Precept 11 guidance

57. [Further details of the ECRI’s Professional Skills Courses](#) are available on the ECRI website.
58. It is expected that supervisors should help their students to attend at least one conference to present a paper during their programme.
59. Collaborative programmes: students on collaborative programmes must complete the ECRI’s Professional Skills Development requirement, unless an alternative approach is agreed by Imperial and the partner institution/organisation.

Precept 12: Management/organisation

60. Each department must have a Postgraduate Committee (with a minimum composition of 3 members including the Director of Postgraduate Studies and Senior Tutor (PGR)) chaired usually by

the Director of Postgraduate Studies, to oversee the format and quality of the higher degree programme including:

- recruitment and admissions
- induction and registration
- supervisory partnerships
- progression and assessment
- student feedback (including the results of PRES)
- complaints
- training
- proposal of external examiners
- submission and completion rates.

61. The Committee must report to the Head of Department and meet regularly. There should be a written record kept of all meetings which is accessible to the staff and student body. In some circumstances, it may not be appropriate to hold a discrete Postgraduate Committee – in such cases it would be expected that quality issues would be considered at a department management committee or similar with appropriate membership and inclusion of the areas above in the Terms of Reference. Written records of discussions of postgraduate issues should be made available.

Precept 12 guidance

62. Imperial College London and Imperial College Union (ICU) have produced [Good Practice Guidelines for Staff-Student Committees](#).
63. Collaborative programmes: Each collaborative programme must have a Joint Management Committee (e.g. EngD Boards etc.) which meets at least annually to review procedures, student progress, good practice etc.

Precept 13: Assessments/appeals and complaints

64. Assessment procedures and the mechanisms for complaints and appeals should be clearly communicated to research students, supervisors and examiners. Students and supervisors should have a clear and mutually understood mechanism to raise concerns at a departmental level.

Precept 13 guidance

65. [Assessment procedures](#) are available on the Registry website.
66. [Appeals information for students](#) is available on the Registry website.
67. [Procedures for handling student complaints and appeals](#) are available on the Registry website.

68. Collaborative programmes: All students on collaborative programmes are subject to the same assessment procedures as programmes based solely at the university unless an alternative approach is agreed by the Postgraduate Research Quality Committee (PRQC) and the Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee/Senate, as appropriate.
69. Collaborative programmes: departments at the partner institution/organisation must have a suitable protocol which should include directions to staff and students about the appropriate channels for raising particular concerns, complaints and appeals. There must also be appropriate disciplinary procedures in place. Students on collaborative programmes, including those programmes with industrial partners, must be made aware of the protocol at both institutions. It must also be made clear to the students which procedures they should follow and when.

Precept 14: Early Stage Assessment (ESA)

70. Assessment of students' research ability to determine whether registration for the PhD degree can continue will involve a confirmation examination (ESA). The ESA must be completed by 12 months (full-time students) and 24 months (part-time students), which may include one opportunity for re-assessment. The assessment panel will include at least one independent academic assessor (a member of academic staff independent from the research 'group', i.e. from the project and the supervisor) in addition to the supervisor(s). Assessors can only be selected by the Director of Postgraduate Studies, Senior Tutor (PGR) or Postgraduate Committee, who can choose to ask for suggestions from the supervisor.
71. Where a student fails the confirmation examination or is recommended to transfer to the MPhil degree, written feedback should be provided to the student (with a copy to Registry to initiate the withdrawal / transfer) within one month of the examination date.

Precept 14 guidance

72. Further information about the Early Stage Assessment is available in the [Early Stage Assessment guidance notes](#).
73. [Early Stage Assessment Form](#).
74. Through the Early Stage Assessment, Departments will check that the [Mutual Expectations for the Research Degree Student Supervisor Partnership](#) has been discussed.
75. Collaborative programmes: All students on collaborative programmes are subject to the same assessment procedures as programmes based solely at the university unless an alternative approach is agreed by the Postgraduate Research Quality Committee (PRQC) and QAEC/Senate, as appropriate.

Precept 15: Late Stage Review (LSR)

76. A further review of a student's research ability will be undertaken by 24 months (48 months for part-time students) after the date of initial registration which may include one opportunity for re-

assessment. The form of review will be determined by the student's department and must be clearly communicated to students. The assessment panel will include at least one independent academic assessor (a member of academic staff independent from the research 'group', i.e. from the project and the supervisor) in addition to the supervisor(s).

77. Where a student fails to satisfy the assessors at this stage and it is recommended that they are transferred to the MPhil degree or withdrawn, written feedback (with a copy to Registry to initiate the withdrawal / transfer) should be provided within one month of the review date.

Precept 15 guidance

78. Further information about the Late Stage Review is available in the [Late Stage Review guidance notes](#).
79. Through the Late Stage Review, Departments will check that the [Mutual Expectations for the Research Degree Student Supervisor Partnership](#) document has been re-visited.
80. [Late Stage Review Form](#).
81. Collaborative programmes: All students on joint and collaborative programmes are subject to the same assessment procedures as programmes based solely at the university unless an alternative approach is agreed by the Postgraduate Research Quality Committee and QAEC/Senate, as appropriate.

Precept 16: 36 month monitoring point and Writing Up

82. A formal monitoring point must be completed by 36 months to ensure that the student's research is progressing and can be completed within the expected timescales (i.e. submission within 48 months for full-time students and 96 months for part-time). By 36 months, students should submit a timetable of remaining work to be done in order to complete the thesis within the required time. A key outcome of the monitoring point at 36 months is to confirm whether the student will enter Writing Up status. A student who still has experimental work to perform at this stage cannot move into Writing Up status and will continue to pay full fees.
83. During the Writing Up period the student will remain registered and no fees will be charged. Students may request to enter the Writing Up period before 36 months. Any such request must be recommended by the main supervisor and approved by the Director of Postgraduate Studies (or nominee) and will bring forward the expected thesis submission deadline accordingly.

Precept 16 guidance

84. Collaborative programmes: All students on collaborative programmes are subject to the same assessment procedures as programmes based solely at the university unless an alternative approach is agreed by the Postgraduate Research Quality Committee and QAEC/Senate, as appropriate.

Precept 17: Student Representation

85. Each department should have a staff/student committee in which postgraduate research students are represented to discuss postgraduate issues. This can be the Postgraduate Committee [Precept 12] or a separate forum. A meeting including student representatives should normally take place at least three times per year. There should be a written record kept of all meetings and this should be made accessible to students and staff.

Precept 17 guidance

86. Further information can be found in the [Staff-Student Committees Good Practice Guidelines](#).

87. Collaborative programmes: Suitable mechanisms must exist at both partner institutions/organisations for obtaining feedback on the programme from supervisors and from students at appropriate intervals during the programme. Academic partner institutions/organisations must offer students on collaborative programmes the opportunity for representation on postgraduate academic forums whenever possible.

Precept 18: Evaluation

88. Regular evaluation of the department's research programme(s) should be carried out internally. All stakeholders should have the opportunity to provide their feedback (and in confidence if appropriate). Evaluations should be considered openly and the results communicated appropriately with any decisions made by the department to implement (or not) any changes resulting from this feedback clearly communicated to all stakeholders.

Precept 18 guidance

89. Every six months, departments must give their students the opportunity to submit a confidential report on their experience on the programme(s).

90. For quality assurance purposes the responses from the student surveys are considered as part of the regular and periodic review of departmental research degree training.

91. The university takes part in the Advance HE's national Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES) on a biennial basis. Departments and faculties are expected to complete an action plan and comment on their PRES results annually.

92. Collaborative programmes: collaborative programmes are subject to the same review and evaluation mechanisms as programmes based solely at the university.

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