

Policy on Research Degree (PhD, MPhil, MD[Res] and EngD) Supervision

Introduction

1. This document sets out Imperial College London's policy on research degree supervision. The policy provides the university's expectations in the following areas:
 - Principles of supervision
 - Roles within supervisory teams
 - Number of students per supervisor
 - Eligibility to supervise
 - Collaborative provision
 - Continuing professional development of supervisors
 - Managing unexpected changes to supervisory arrangements
 - Conflicts of interest
2. All research degree supervisors are advised to access the [Cornerstone website](#) for further information and support pertaining to their role (including the [online Supervisors' Guide](#)) and their required training.

Principles of supervision

Principle 1

The role of supervisory teams and their partnership with students is of critical importance to the provision of a high-quality research experience at the university.

Principle 2

It is accepted that a wide range of models for successful student-supervisor partnerships exist.

Principle 3

As a minimum, all Imperial research degree students can expect to be allocated one main supervisor, they may also have co-supervisors and access to assistant supervisor(s).

Principle 4

All main and co-supervisors should normally have contracts which extend beyond their PhD student's registration (although note sections 48-52 on unexpected changes to supervisory arrangements).

Principle 5

All research degree students will have access to a departmental Senior Tutor (PGR) who is a member of academic staff responsible for the welfare and pastoral support of research students in the Department. There may also be one or more departmental student wellbeing advisors. By way of reminder, Imperial's [Student Support Services](#), including but not limited to the Disability Advisory Service (DAS) and Student Counselling and Mental Health, are available to support research degree students, as well as taught students.

Principle 6

A research degree student who is shared between two departments, more than one faculty or is registered to a Centre for Doctoral Training (CDT), Doctoral Training Programme (DTP) or who is part of a Doctoral Landscape Award (DLA) which crosses departments and/or faculties, can only be registered to one academic department in the university. This will normally be the department of the main supervisor.

Principle 7

All research degree students should have adequate and regular access to their supervisors who should have prior experience of working within the proposed field of research and prior experience/training in supervising students. Where a student's programme of research develops into an area where none of the supervisory team has expertise, supervisors should discuss this with their Head of Department and agree an appropriate course of action and support for the student so that the student can progress their research.

Principle 8

The university provides guidance in terms of the minimum expectations that research degree students and supervisors can expect from each other and how the student supervisor partnership should be managed. See: [the Mutual Expectations for the Research Degree Student Supervisor Partnership](#).

Principle 9

Supervisors should normally set aside a minimum of one hour per week (on average) with each research degree student. This may take the form of individual meetings, or could be scaled appropriately, depending on the number of students per supervisor, for example through group tutorials, group meetings, lab meetings or through email.

Principle 10

The university requires all supervisors to undertake continuing professional development training relevant to supervising research degree students.

Principle 11

Supervisors should make all reasonable efforts to ensure that their student's work is their own and that it is not plagiarised. As part of this responsibility, main supervisors should ensure that their student(s) submit their ESA to Turnitin. Supervisors should then interpret the Turnitin similarity report and provide

any follow-up guidance and support to the student. [Where AI has been used in the ESA, it should be appropriately referenced](#) by students.

Roles within supervisory teams

Main research degree supervisor (main supervisor)

3. The key roles of the main supervisor are to assist and support a student throughout their academic studies and, where there is more than one supervisor associated with a research project or a particular student, ensure regular communication within the supervisory team to provide clarity of direction for the student. See: the [Roles and Responsibilities for the Main Research Degree Supervisor](#).

Co-supervisor

4. The key roles of a co-supervisor will vary according to the research project. In many cases the co-supervisor will play a major role in directing the research (for example when the project is the result of collaboration between supervisors) but in other cases, the role will be more supportive. However, the co-supervisor does have a responsibility for the student's progress and will be expected to take an active role in supervision. It is important that all supervisors are aware that they have a responsibility for the student, and there is no scope for nominal supervision.
5. The differences between a main supervisor and a co-supervisor are that the main supervisor will take responsibility for ensuring that there is regular communication between the supervisory team associated with a particular student, providing clarity of direction for the student, and for ensuring that the student understands the role of each supervisor within the supervisory team. This is particularly important where co-supervisors are from different departments, faculties, industry or in the case of collaborative research programmes, at a partner institute.
6. There are key roles and responsibilities which all co-supervisors must undertake, regardless of supervisory split, but there are also some roles which can be negotiated between the main supervisor and co-supervisor(s) depending on the nature of the project. Prior to a student enrolling at Imperial, the main supervisor should lead discussions with the supervisory team to agree supervision arrangements and communicate what has been agreed to the student. It is suggested that [Defining the Roles and Responsibilities of Supervisory Teams](#) is used to facilitate this discussion.
7. It is good practice for there to be two supervisors for every student, as it provides back up for situations where one supervisor is ill for a period of time, or a supervisor leaves the university. It can also be helpful in situations where there might be a disagreement between a student and supervisor or on rare occasions where the student/supervisor partnership irretrievably breaks down. In addition, it can provide breadth of expertise and support to the project. Some departments insist on there being a minimum of two supervisors.

Assistant supervisor

8. Assistant supervisors play a major role in supporting the day-to-day activities of research students. This role is usually carried out by postdocs but there are other members of staff who can fulfil this

role (see section on eligibility to supervise) and also the [Roles and Responsibilities Document for Assistant Supervisor](#).

9. Prior to a student enrolling at Imperial, it is suggested that the main supervisor leads discussions with assistant supervisors who will be part of the student's supervisory team to agree supervisory arrangements and support for the student. It is suggested that [Defining the Roles and Responsibilities within Supervisory Teams](#) is used to facilitate this discussion.

Number of students per supervisor

10. The university recommends that departments place limitations on the number of research degree students that can be supervised by an individual at any one time.
11. The number of students that an individual can supervise satisfactorily will vary with the nature and size of the research group, and with the scope of their other duties. For these and other reasons the university has determined not to set a precise figure for the number of students an individual may supervise at any one time. Ultimately this will be a matter for individual departments to decide upon, based on their context, research structures and existing departmental supervision arrangements for research degree students.
12. The university has never prescribed what the limit should be, but it is suggested that few academic staff would be likely to act as the main supervisor for more than six research degree students at any one time (e.g. two in each year of the doctoral programme), and that the research group would be of sufficient size to support the students.
13. In determining what might constitute an appropriate number of students for an individual to supervise, departments should take account of the supervisory model(s) in place across research groups. There may be examples where students are routinely allocated co-supervisors and are part of a large research group with further support/supervision provided by assistant supervisors where it may be entirely appropriate for a member of academic staff to act as the main supervisor to a large number of students at any one time. Conversely there may be smaller research groups where students are allocated a sole main supervisor and where there is less additional support/supervision available from assistant supervisors where it may not be feasible for a member of staff to act as the main supervisor for more than a handful of students at any one time.

Eligibility to supervise

14. Possession of a doctorate is normally a prerequisite for the role of main or co-supervisor, and all supervisors should have prior experience of/track record of working in their research degree student's proposed field of research.

Staff within the Academic Job Family (clinical and non-clinical)

15. Once probationary academic staff have completed the university's mandatory training for new supervisors (available through Cornerstone), most probationary academic staff can be appointed as main or co-supervisors, but always in collaboration with a permanent member of academic staff who is an experienced supervisor

16. All staff within the academic job family (Lecturer (level 4), Senior Lecturer (level 5), Reader (level 6), Professor (level 7)) can be main and co-supervisors of research degree students.

Staff within the Teaching job family

17. Given the university has strengthened its profile in terms of pedagogic scholarship and research, demonstrated by the establishment of the Centre for Higher Education Research and Scholarship (CHERS), it may be possible for staff within the Teaching Job Family to be appointed as main or co-supervisors to research degree students, including for projects beyond pedagogical scholarship and research, provided the university's Principles of Supervision (as above), the criteria for the appointment of academic main and co-supervisors can be applied to the individual and noting point 29 below.
18. Teaching staff are eligible to carry out the following supervisory roles, however, it should be noted that Heads of Department may set local parameters around entitlement to supervise:
- a) Associate Teaching Fellow (level 3.a) - assistant supervisor only
 - b) Teaching Fellow (level 3.b) - assistant supervisor and exceptionally with permission of the Head of Department, Co-supervisor
 - c) Senior Teaching Fellow (level 4) - Co-supervisor and exceptionally with permission of the Head of Department, main supervisor
 - d) Principal Teaching Fellow (level 5) – Co-supervisor and exceptionally with permission of the Head of Department, main supervisor
 - e) Principal Lecturer (level 6)- main and co-supervisor
 - f) Professor of Teaching (level 7) - main and co-supervisor

19. Teaching staff who supervise research degree students must complete the mandatory training for assistant supervisors and main/co-supervisors, as appropriate.

Academic Staff with honorary appointments and titles (including NHS staff)

20. There is no objection to staff with titles such as Honorary Reader, Honorary Lecturer, Honorary Professor of Practice acting as main or co-supervisors, subject to the agreement of the Head of Department, providing (i) that they will be available for the duration of the student's research programme, (ii) that students have regular and adequate contact with them and (iii) that if they are appointed as a main supervisors, that a permanent member of Imperial academic staff is appointed as co-supervisor.
21. Honorary members of staff who supervise research degree students will be expected to comply with the university's mandatory training requirements for research degree supervisors (available through Cornerstone)
22. Visting academic staff such as Visiting Professor and Visting Reader would not normally be appointed as a main supervisor, but may be appointed as a co-supervisor, provided they are present for the duration of the student's research degree programme.

23. It should be noted that Honorary associations are stipulated as being non-renumerated in Imperial's written guidance and in the offer letters the associates receive, as such, there is no expectation for them to be paid for supervisory activities.

Emeritus and retired members of staff

24. Such individuals can continue to act as main supervisors, subject to the agreement of the Head of Department, providing that they are still active in the field and that students have regular and adequate access to them. We would expect that in most cases such persons would be supervising those students whom they had accepted before their retirement, and they would be unlikely to be appointed as main supervisors of newly admitted students. However, should this be the case, co-supervision with a member of permanent academic staff would normally be required.
25. It should be noted that Emeritus associations are stipulated as being non-renumerated in Imperial's written guidance and in the offer letters the associates receive, as such, there is no expectation for them to be paid for supervisory activities.

Research Staff

26. Research staff are eligible to carry out the following supervisory roles, however, it should be noted that Heads of Department may set local parameters around entitlement to supervise, including for senior and principal research fellows who must have appropriate experience:
- a) Research Assistant (level 3.a and typically pre-PhD) - assistant supervisor to taught students only
 - b) Research Associate (level 3.b) – Assistant supervisor and exceptionally with permission of the Head of Department, co-supervisor
 - c) Research Fellow (level 3.b) – Assistant supervisor and exceptionally with permission of the Head of Department, co-supervisor
 - d) Advanced Research Fellow (level 4 and 5) - Co-supervisor and exceptionally with permission of the Head of Department, main supervisor
 - e) Senior Research Fellow (level 6) - main and co-supervisor
 - f) Principal Research Fellow (level 7) - main and co-supervisor
27. Principle 4 states, “all main and co-supervisors should normally have contracts which extend beyond their PhD student’s registration.” This principle also applies to research staff. Research staff who are eligible to be a main or co-supervisor must be part of a supervisory team comprising at least one member of academic staff.
28. Research staff who supervise research degree students must complete the mandatory training for assistant supervisors and main/co-supervisors, as appropriate.

Research Technical and Software Professionals

29. TBC pending the outcome of the review of this job family.

Industrial Supervisors

30. Such persons can act as co-supervisors subject to the appointment of a main supervisor who is a member of academic staff at Imperial College London.

Staff within the Professional Services Job Family

31. Staff within the Professional Services Job Family cannot be appointed as main, co-supervisor or assistant supervisor.

Continuing professional development (CPD)

Initial training (all new Imperial main and co-supervisors)

32. It is a requirement for all new supervisors to complete a compulsory online course entitled *Fundamentals of Supervising PhD Students*. Heads of Department will be expected to ensure that all new supervisors undertake this training and have mechanisms in place to monitor completion of this mandatory training by new supervisors [see Research Degree Precepts – Precept 3, Supervision].

Continuing professional development (all Imperial main and co-supervisors)

33. It is also a university requirement that all supervisors undertake Continuing Professional Development (CPD). All main and co-supervisors are required participate in regular CPD as articulated in the [Supervisor CDP Framework](#) and available through [Cornerstone](#). The cycle of participants, frequency and nature of the CPD will be decided upon by Departmental Senior Leadership and the department will monitor attendance at these.

34. More information about supervisor CPD and guidance on how to sign up for courses is available at the [Cornerstone website](#).

Training for assistant supervisors

35. Before being assigned to the role of assistant supervisor, it is a requirement for staff to complete the mandatory training course, “[introduction to being an assistant supervisor](#)”, available through the Cornerstone website.

Training for supervisors who supervise Imperial research students but are not university employees

36. The university recommends that all supervisors who supervise Imperial PhD students undertake training. It is good practice that supervisors based elsewhere such as those at approved partner research institutions or organisations or supervisors based in industry complete the online course *Fundamentals of Supervising PhD students*. The course is available via Blackboard and supervisors should contact the Early Career Researcher Institute (ecri@imperial.ac.uk) to request guest access.

Unexpected changes to supervisory arrangements

37. This section describes the measures that the university will put in place should there be changes to a student’s supervisory arrangements. Please also refer to the university’s [Student Protection Plan](#).

Main and Co-Supervisors departing to other institutions

38. When supervisors leave Imperial for other positions, arrangements will need to be made for their research students prior to their departure. These arrangements will vary according to the stage an individual has reached. No action may be needed where a student has completed the normal three-year programme for a PhD or two years for an MD [Res]; the supervisor can still sign the various forms and offer guidance from their new position. A PhD student who has completed two years (the minimum period of registration for a full-time PhD) could opt to follow the supervisor to another academic institution, retaining the degree registration with Imperial. However, if the student chose to stay at Imperial for the third year, the departing supervisor could still retain an interest in the research and would be a named co-supervisor, but another main or co-supervisor would need to be appointed (depending on whether there is already a co-supervisor in place).
39. Where a student has not completed the minimum registration period of two years, they will not have the option of transferring to another institution and retaining the degree registration at Imperial; if the student decides to transfer to another institution to follow the supervisor, the degree registration would also need to be transferred (subject to the agreement of the receiving institution). Alternatively, the student can continue their research at Imperial with a new main or co-supervisor (depending on whether there is already a co-supervisor in place).

Supervisors and extended absence

40. Where a supervisor is granted an extended leave of absence from the university (e.g. sabbatical leave) or has an extended absence through ill health, arrangements must be made by the Director of Postgraduate Studies for continuing supervision to be provided for that person's research students. It would not be usual practice for a new student to be assigned to a supervisor who is taking an extended leave of absence from the university.

Supervisors departing in unforeseen circumstances

41. There may be rare occasions where a supervisor is dismissed or resigns from the university under circumstances where it would not be appropriate for supervision of research students to continue by that supervisor. In such cases the department is obliged to make alternative supervisory arrangements for the students affected. Similar alternative arrangements would also need to be made in the unfortunate event that a supervisor were to pass away suddenly and unexpectedly.

Conflicts of interest

Supervision by immediate relatives

42. Any cases of kinship, whether by blood, marriage, civil partnership or law, between a student and a proposed or current supervisor must be declared prior to registration. A research student should not be supervised solely by an immediate relative or someone with a kinship connection. If departments consider it appropriate for a relative or someone with a kinship connection to be involved with the supervision as a main supervisor there must be an appointed co-supervisor with no kinship connection with the student. If departments consider it appropriate for a relative or someone with a kinship connection to be involved with the supervision as a co-supervisor there

must be an appointed main supervisor with no kinship connection with the student. The Director of Postgraduate Studies and Senior Tutor (PGR) should monitor this partnership carefully.

Romantic or sexual involvements

43. It is considered inappropriate for romantic or sexual involvements to develop between supervisors and their students. However, if a relationship does develop, the supervisor and student must report this to the Head of Department in accordance with HR procedures and the supervision arrangements must be immediately reviewed.

Supervision by persons who are married, in civil partnership, partners or are immediate relatives

44. In cases where it is considered appropriate for a student to be co-supervised by academic staff who are married to each other or who are partners or who are closely related, it is important that the student is appointed a third co-supervisor or academic mentor who is able to play an active and independent role during the period of research study. However, a research student must not have a supervisor and a mentor who are related by marriage, civil partnership, blood/law or who are partners. All such relationships should be declared prior to the student's registration.

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