

Policy on Research Degree Supervision

This document sets out the College's Policy on Research Degree Supervision. It covers the College's Principles of Supervision, roles within supervisory teams, eligibility to supervise, the continuing professional development of supervisors, managing unexpected changes to supervisory arrangements and how potential conflicts of interest can be managed.

Supervisors are advised to access the [online Supervisors' Guidebook](#) for further information and support pertaining to their role.

1. Imperial College London: Principles of Supervision

Principle 1:

The role of supervisors and their relationships with students are of critical importance to the provision of a high quality educational experience at the College.

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 students can expect to be allocated a main supervisor, they may also have co-supervisors and access to assistant supervisor(s).

Principle 4:

Where a research student has more than one supervisor, one of the supervisors will always be designated the main supervisor.

Principle 5:

All research students will have access to a departmental Postgraduate Tutor. A member of academic staff who is responsible for the welfare and pastoral support of research students in the Department.

Principle 6:

A student who is shared between two departments, more than one Faculty or is registered to a CDT or DTP which crosses departments and/or Faculties, can only be

registered to one main academic department in College. This will normally be the department of the main supervisor.

Principle 7:

All students should have adequate and regular access to their supervisors who should be appropriately qualified (in terms of prior experience and/or training in supervising postgraduate research students) to undertake research degree supervision.

Principle 8:

The College provides guidance in terms of the minimum expectations that students and supervisors can expect from each other and how the student supervisor partnership should be managed. Download the *Mutual Expectations for the Research Degree Student Supervisor Partnership*.

Principle 9:

Supervisors should set aside normally a minimum of one hour per week (on average) for consultation with students. This may take the form of individual meetings, tutorials, group meetings or lab meetings, email or Skype.

Principle 10:

All supervisors are required to undertake continuing professional development relevant to supervising research degree students.

Principle 11:

All Supervisors have a responsibility for ensuring that their student's work is their own and that it is not plagiarised. As part of this responsibility, for all research degree students starting on or after 24 September 2019, supervisors should make sure that their student(s) submits a copy of the ESA and full PhD thesis to Turnitin. Each supervisor, along with the examiners (for both the ESA and Thesis), should also interpret the Turnitin report when it becomes available.

2. Roles within Supervisory Teams

Main Research Degree Supervisor

- 2.1 The key roles of the main research degree 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 and a particular student, to ensure regular communication between the supervisory team occurs in order to provide clarity of direction for the student. *Download the Roles and Responsibilities Document for the Main Research Degree Supervisor.*

Co-Supervisor

- 2.2 The key roles of the **co-supervisor(s)** 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 the supervisors). 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 the supervision process. It is important that all supervisors are aware that they have a responsibility for the student, and there is no scope for nominal supervision.
- 2.3 The main differences between a co-supervisor and a main 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, in industry or in the case of collaborative research programmes, at a partner institute.
- 2.4 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 College, the main supervisor should lead discussions to agree supervisory arrangements and that the main supervisor communicates this to the student. It is suggested that *Defining the Roles and Responsibilities of Supervisory Teams* is used to facilitate this discussion.

Good Practice Guidance

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 College. 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

- 2.5 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 4 of this document). *Download the Roles and Responsibilities Document for Assistant Supervisor.* Prior to a student enrolling at College, it is suggested that the main supervisor

leads discussions with Assistant Supervisors to agree supervisory arrangements. It is suggested that *Defining the Roles and Responsibilities within Supervisory Teams* is used to facilitate this discussion.

3. Number of Students Per Supervisor

- 3.1 The College recommends that departments consider placing limits on the number of students that can be supervised by an individual at any one time. 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 College has determined not to set a precise figure for the number of students an individual may supervise at any one time, preferring instead to offer broad guidance as set out below. Ultimately this will be a matter for individual departments to decide upon, based on their context, research structures and existing departmental supervision arrangements for postgraduate research students.
- 3.2 The College 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 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.
- 3.3 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.

4. Eligibility to Supervise

- 4.1 Supervisors will generally hold the position of Lecturer, Senior Lecturer, Reader, Assistant Professor, Associate Professor, Associate Professor of/Reader in Education, Professor, Professor of Education or Senior Research Fellow.
- 4.2 Possession of a doctorate is not normally a prerequisite for the role of supervisor and it is not general College policy, although individual departments may have such a policy in place: the possession of a doctorate is not a guarantee of good supervision, just as the absence of a doctorate does not mean that the individual is not or will not be a successful supervisor. What is

important is for a supervisor to have acquired sufficient and appropriate research experience.

Probationary Academic Staff

- 4.3 It is the College's view that most probationary academics could and should supervise research students as a main supervisor, once they have undergone appropriate training, but always in collaboration with a permanent member of academic staff who is an experienced supervisor.

Staff within the Learning and Teaching Job Family

- 4.4 Given the College is now moving towards strengthening its profile in terms of pedagogic scholarship and research, demonstrated by the newly created The Centre for Higher Education Research and Scholarship, it may be possible for staff within the Learning and Teaching Job Family to supervise PhD students.
- 4.5 Teaching Fellows, Senior Teaching Fellows, Principal Teaching Fellows and other staff within this job family can be appointed as main or co-supervisors to PhD students, provided the College's 10 Principles of Supervision and the criteria for the appointment of academic main and co-supervisors can be applied to the individual.

Staff (including NHS staff) holding honorary appointments and titles at Imperial such as Visiting Professor or Visiting Reader.

- 4.6 There is no objection to such persons acting as main supervisors, subject to the agreement of the Head of Department, providing (i) that they will be available for the duration of the research programme, (ii) that students have regular and adequate contact with them and (iii) that a co-supervisor is appointed from the permanent College academic staff. Honorary staff who are appointed as main supervisors will be expected to comply with the College's Framework for the support and development of Imperial College London Supervisors including attending the workshop on Introduction to Supervising PhD Students at Imperial College (either the face-to-face or online version, depending on experience) and the Departmental Focus on Best Practice in Supervision. Staff with Honorary appointments must fulfil all other requirements for PhD supervision.

Emeritus and Retired Members of Staff

- 4.7 Such persons, who may also be appointed as Senior Research Fellows, 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 supervisors of newly admitted students. In the latter case, co-supervision with a member of permanent academic staff would normally be required.

Post-doctoral Research Assistants; Academic Visitors; Clinical Lecturers; Junior Research Fellows

- 4.8 While such persons may well be involved in a student's research programme, it is not appropriate that they are appointed as main supervisor and not usually co-supervisor. However, such individuals can play a major role in supporting a research student and when this is the case, individuals should be appointed Assistant Supervisor. Exceptionally, subject to the agreement of the Head of Department, and provided the individual has completed the College's mandatory continuing professional development training requirements for Co-supervisors, a person in this category, with appropriate seniority may be appointed a co-supervisor. Further, a person in this category can only be appointed a co-supervisor if they will be present for the duration of the student's research programme.

Industrial Supervisors

- 4.9 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.

5. Collaborative Provision

- 5.1 Co-supervision with staff of other Universities is permitted where there is a formal link with the university in question, either through a joint PhD programme or other collaborative research programme that has received College approval. In such cases and in line with the College's Principles of Supervision, one of the supervisors, either from Imperial or from the partner university, must be designated the main supervisor in accordance with the requirements of the particular collaborative programme.
- 5.2 In other cases where it is wished and considered appropriate that an academic from another institution contributes to an individual research student's project this should be done on an informal basis. If a formal arrangement is sought then approval must be sought for a formal collaborative research programme.
- 5.3 In addition to formal collaborative research programmes, the College also operates a Partner Research Institution (PRI) scheme and Split PhD scheme. In both schemes students will have a College supervisor as their main supervisor but will also be allocated a local co-supervisor who will be formally appointed as part of the student's application under either the PRI or Split PhD scheme. [Download the Procedures for the Approval, Review and Renewal of](#)

[Partner Research Institutions. Download the Procedures for the Approval and Review of Split PhDs.](#)

6. Continuing Professional Development

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

- 6.1 It is a requirement for all new supervisors to complete a compulsory course entitled *Introduction to PhD Supervision at Imperial College*. The course is available as a full day, face-to-face workshop, delivered by the Educational Development Unit (EDU) or as an online course, depending on the level of experience of the new supervisor when commencing appointment with the College. Heads of Department will be expected to ensure that all new supervisors undertake this training. The term 'new supervisors' is taken to include staff who will be supervising postgraduate research students for the first time and staff who are new to the College but may have supervised postgraduate research students previously (i.e. they are 'new' to supervising students at the College).
- 6.2 New supervisors with no, or limited, prior experience of supervising PhD students will be required to complete the full day, face-to-face *Introduction to PhD Supervision at Imperial College* workshop. Departments are expected to have mechanisms in place to monitor completion of this mandatory training by new supervisors [see *Research Degree Precepts – Precept 3, Supervision*].
- 6.3 Where Departments appoint new members of academic staff who have experience of supervising PhD students at other institution(s), the Head of Department and Director of Postgraduate Studies will discuss with the new supervisor their prior experience and the role of PhD supervisor at Imperial and determine a strategy for training/support; either through attendance at the full day *Introduction to PhD supervision* workshop, or by completing the online version of the training. This initial discussion and agreement on the training required should take place during the induction process. Departments are expected to have mechanisms in place to monitor completion of this mandatory training by new experienced supervisors [see *Research Degree Precepts – Precept 3, Supervision*].

Continuing Professional Development (all new Imperial main and co-supervisors)

- 6.4 It is also a College requirement that all supervisors undertake Continuing Professional Development (CPD). CPD is an important part of employment at the College and supervisors are encouraged to take a range of development courses. All supervisors should contribute to a departmental "*Focus on Best Practice in Supervision*" workshop at least once every six years. These workshops are Department-led with support from the EDU and the Graduate School. The cycle of participants and frequency of the workshops will be

decided upon by the Head of Department and Director of Postgraduate Studies and the Department will monitor attendance at these.

- 6.5 More information about supervisor CPD and guidance on how to sign up for courses is available here at the [online Supervisors' Guidebook](#)

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

- 6.6 The College recommends that all supervisors who supervise Imperial College PhD students to 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 "Introduction to Supervision at Imperial College London." The course is available via Blackboard and supervisors should contact the Graduate School (graduate.school@imperial.ac.uk) to request guest access.

7. Unexpected Changes to Supervisory Arrangements

Section 7 describes the measures that the College will put in place should there be changes to a student's supervisory arrangements. Please also refer to the [College's Student Protection Plan](#).

Supervisors departing to other institutions

- 7.1 When supervisors leave the College 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).
- 7.2 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

- 7.3 Where a supervisor is granted an extended absence from College (e.g. sabbatical leave) or has an extended absence through ill health, arrangements must be made by the Postgraduate Tutor and/or Director of Postgraduate Studies for continuing supervision to be provided for that person's research students.

Supervisors departing in unfortunate circumstances

- 7.4 There may be rare occasions where a supervisor is dismissed or resigns from the College 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.

8. Conflicts of Interest

Supervision by immediate relatives

- 8.1 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 PG Tutor should monitor this partnership carefully.

Romantic or sexual involvements

- 8.2 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: the supervision arrangements must be immediately reviewed.

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

- 8.3 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.