# UCL Academic Manual 2021-22
## Chapter 5: Research Degrees Framework

# Guidance on Addressing Poor Performance in Research Students

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*Guidance*

## 1. General Principles

The following guidelines seek both to assist in preventing research student poor performance and to set down the procedures that must be followed in dealing with cases of poor performance up to and including the termination of studies due to Academic Insufficiency.

The introduction of different guidelines for research students is necessitated by the unique status of the research degree as a self-directed programme under the supervision of an academic expert, a method of study that in all likelihood a student will not have encountered before. The student/Supervisor relationship is an intimate and unusual relationship and clarity of expectation and prompt action where expectations are not met is key to overcoming problems successfully.

These guidelines apply to all research degree students at UCL and establish guidance for Supervisors, Departmental Graduate Tutors and Faculty Graduate Tutors in relation to the management of poor performance. These guidelines are designed to ensure that cases of poor performance are dealt with consistently and fairly, with the prime objective of improving an individual student's performance to the required level for the successful and timely completion of their programme.

The guidelines also seek to ensure that UCL has a robust and open process for dealing with cases of Academic Insufficiency in research student programmes. UCL and the supervisory team has a responsibility for setting realistic and measurable standards of performance, for explaining these standards carefully to students, and for supporting students to achieve the required standards.

## 2. Measures of Performance and Early Warning Signs

*Early identification of problems is key, but this is not always straightforward. The following aims to provide a list of some of the capabilities, milestones, and issues that can help the Supervisor gauge when a student is not performing at the required level.*

### 2.1 General Measures of Performance

The following are some of the skills and capabilities about which the Supervisor should maintain awareness and provide constructive feedback. They can also give an indication of the student's progress:

- Creativity and the generation of ideas
- Independence of thought and action
- Enthusiasm/motivation
- Familiarity with literature
- Record keeping
- Time management
- Planning/strategic thinking
- Problem solving
- Communication skills
- Networking
- Standard of English
- Technical writing

Supervisors should also be aware of the following general issues that also provide early warning signs of problems:

- Problems with attendance
- Procrastination
- Poor delivery against agreed objectives
- Problems with completing research tasks
- Overreliance on skills training
- Isolation - lack of interaction with departmental/UCL peers and the research community

### 2.2 Milestones and Indicators

The setting and monitoring of student progression against regular concrete milestones in the research degree also helps to ensure that the student remains on track, and can send early-warning signals if the student fails to achieve satisfactory outcomes. The following are useful milestones:

- Seminar attendance and presentation
- Conference attendance and presentation
- Publishing
- Teaching
- Public engagement activities
- Generic and transferable skills training

### 2.3 The MPhil/PhD Upgrade and the Importance of Recording Progress

The only formal regulatory hurdle in the research degree is the upgrade from MPhil to PhD which is a significant moment in the student's research programme. As such it needs to be

taken seriously by all concerned – an upgrade without sufficient rigour is not in the long term interests of students or Supervisors.

The purpose of the upgrade, as set out in the Code of Practice for Graduate Research Degrees, is to assess the student's progress and ability to complete their PhD programme in a reasonable time frame. The assessment is not confined simply to the research material presented by the student but should also consider the student's demonstrable academic and generic skills.

The Research Student Log is key to monitoring research student progress by the supervisory team, the Departmental Graduate Tutor and the Faculty Graduate Tutor. Use of the Log is mandatory for all research degrees and failure to engage with the Log in a meaningful way can itself be an indication that there is a problem. The formal review stages of the Log, including the upgrade, provide an opportunity for reflection on behalf of both student and Supervisor that all is proceeding as could be expected and allows student and staff to flag problems and ensure that issues, planned action and outcomes are properly documented – evidence that will be important should Academic Insufficiency/Complaint processes be invoked (again as below).

## 3. Reasons for Poor Performance and Preventative Actions

*Maintaining an open dialogue between student and Supervisor from the outset of the project can help reduce conflict or prevent it arising. Providing prompt and constructive criticism is central to the role played by the Supervisor, but the Supervisor must be alert to differing learning styles, academic background and personalities of their research students. Unnecessarily negative criticism can be very demotivating; an overly uncritical approach will not address the problems of a student who is failing to achieve the required standards.*

The Supervisor should be alert to reasons for short term poor performance when the student under normal circumstance would meet the standards required and these may include the following:

- Personal problems
- Interpersonal problems – conflicts with colleagues and peers
- Physical/mental health issues
- Lack of clarity of academic and/or cultural expectations

In these circumstances, students may need support to address these issues in the short and medium term, sometimes from outside the supervisory team, and may require a period of interruption if this is considered advisable.

Of a more serious nature is the realization that the student is unlikely to achieve the standards required of a research degree. Although it is recognised that there will be mixed abilities within the research student community, expectations of an individual student will be informed by the Supervisors' knowledge of the general standard expected of a research degree candidate at UCL, within the sector and within the discipline.

It is in the interests of both Supervisor and student that prompt action is taken. The procedure for dealing with poor performance from informal intervention through to formal Termination of Studies due to Academic Insufficiency is set out below:

## 4. Managing Poor Performance – from Informal Interventions to Formal Academic Insufficiency Process

### 4.1 Informal Actions Arising from Poor Performance

**Student and Supervisor**

When there is evidence that an individual is not performing at an acceptable level, the Supervisor should investigate this without delay and endeavour to ascertain the reasons for the unsatisfactory performance (see above).

It is good practice to involve the Subsidiary Supervisor at an early stage, and the supervisory team should arrange as soon as possible for an informal meeting with the student to discuss the areas in which the student's performance is below expectations. During the meeting the supervisory team should explain the grounds and evidence for believing that the student is under-performing, with the aim of identifying any problems or reasons for the under-performance and discuss possible resolution. Solutions could include additional more regular/closer supervision, training, providing a mentor, coaching or some other kind of ongoing additional support.

The Supervisor should ensure that the student is aware of the level of performance / productivity required in relation to each element of the work and responsibilities about which there is a concern. At this point, the student should be given the opportunity to explain their under-performance and to raise any concerns they may have about their research project, or the support and guidance they have been given to do it and any general concerns they have regarding their work and place at UCL.

It is important to set a reasonable time frame, agreed by all parties, within which improvement is expected and arrange a further meeting at the end of this time to review the situation. When establishing "reasonable timescales" for improvement, Supervisors must consider the complexity of the tasks involved in relation to the qualifications and experience of the individual, but 1 month is typically sufficient. To reduce the chance of misunderstandings, the actions and time scale agreed should be confirmed by the Supervisor in writing to the student.

It is important that Supervisors are alert to differences in individual students' learning styles and abilities whilst maintaining a view of the "objective" standards that can be expected from all UCL research students. This is not always easy, and informal support and advice from senior colleagues might be useful at this stage (whilst maintaining the confidentiality of the student). Supervisors must bear in mind the provisions of the Disability Discrimination Act, in particular the obligation to make reasonable adjustments when dealing with students with disabilities. In cases where physical or mental health issues are or are believed to be contributory factors to the under-performance, advice should be sought from the Director of Student Support and Wellbeing who will be able to advise on appropriate educational and pastoral support for the student, and whether a period of interruption is advisable/necessary (see Student Mental Health Policy).

**4.2 Formal Actions: Referral to DGT and Academic Insufficiency Procedures**

**Referral to Departmental Graduate Tutor**

If there is continued unsatisfactory performance or where a first instance of unsatisfactory performance is sufficiently serious to warrant formal action (e.g. where health & safety is at risk or significant costs or other liabilities are involved) the student should be invited to an interview with the Supervisors and Departmental Graduate Tutor to discuss the matter. At the interview the student has the right to be accompanied by a "friend" who must be a member of UCL or a representative of UCL Union.

At this meeting the student will have the opportunity to explain their unsatisfactory performance. They will be reminded of the earlier discussions (where these have happened) and the steps taken to support an improvement in their performance. They will be told as precisely as possible the reasons for the Supervisors continued concerns about their performance.

If, having heard any explanations offered by the student, the Supervisor and Departmental Graduate Tutor remain concerned, the content and outcome of this meeting will be confirmed by the Departmental Graduate Tutor in writing to the student. This communication should include information on the type of improvement required, any additional support or training that could reasonably be provided to enable the student to reach the required standard, and any other agreed actions.

A reasonable time period will be set within which improvement is expected and a further meeting arranged at the end of this time to review the situation. 1 month is typically sufficient.

If a student is referred to academic insufficiency after failing the second upgrade attempt, this step in the process may be skipped; however, the DGT should always be involved in the process and included in any correspondence to the Faculty Graduate Tutor regarding this decision (unless the DGT is conflicted for any reason and an alternative independent advisor has been sought).

**4.3 Academic Insufficiency Process**

*The following two stages together form* **UCL's formal Termination of Studies on the Grounds of Academic Insufficiency for Research Students**. *The process can involve a lot of work on behalf of UCL to ensure that the student is given a fair opportunity to continue and that the department understands what is required of it and that it may be required to provide additional assistance if in the Faculty Graduate Tutor's final opinion there are not grounds for terminating the students studies on the basis of Academic Insufficiency. It is hoped that few cases will get to this stage, and this process should be considered as a last resort and implemented only if the informal actions outlined above fail to resolve the matter.*

*A student's registration may be terminated on the grounds of Academic Insufficiency, as set out in the current UCL Regulations for Management; in such cases, the Academic Insufficiency must be deemed to be irretrievable. Only the Faculty Graduate Tutor is empowered to terminate a research student's registration on the grounds of Academic Insufficiency.*

- **Stage 1 - Referral to Faculty Graduate Tutor**

If there has been insufficient improvement in performance within the timescale following the meeting with the Supervisor/s and the Departmental Graduate Tutor, the case should be referred to the Faculty Graduate Tutor. These formal stages constitute the Academic

Insufficiency process for termination of a research student's research. The Departmental Graduate Tutor should write a report to the Faculty Graduate Tutor summarizing the case and including any relevant correspondence with the student. A formal interview will then be held with the student by the Faculty Graduate Tutor. The student should receive at least 7 working days' notice in writing of any formal interview arranged with the Faculty Graduate Tutor. At all such interviews (in Stage 1 and Stage 2) the student has the right to be accompanied by a "friend" who must be a member of UCL or a representative of UCL Union, who can provide moral support for the student.

At this interview the Faculty Graduate Tutor will review the history of the case, including any pertinent evidence from the upgrade process and the Research Student Log, and information on the steps that have been taken to support the individual to achieve the required level of performance. The student should be given the opportunity to put forward their argument that they are academically sufficient to continue their studies. If, having heard the explanation offered by the student, the Faculty Graduate Tutor remains concerned then he/she in conjunction with the Department and supervisors will set a series of tasks to be completed within a defined period of time (one month minimum)—this could be putting together work towards submission of an MPhil if the process is being undertaken post two failed upgrade attempts. It is important that the Faculty Graduate Tutor ensures that the tasks are reasonable and appropriate—the main role of the FGT in this process is to provide objective oversight, guidance, and adherence to the regulations. The student must be made aware of the criteria against which the tasks will be assessed including the quality of the material produced and the timeliness of its completion—the criteria can be set by the supervisory team and/or DGT but should be reviewed for legitimacy and fairness by the FGT. Further consideration should be given to any additional training or support that could reasonably be provided to enable them to reach the required standard of performance. A further meeting should be arranged with the Faculty Graduate Tutor once the tasks have been assessed by the supervisory team and/or DGT and Faculty Graduate Tutor.

The student will be informed that they are at risk of being deregistered if satisfactory performance levels cannot be achieved and subsequently maintained.

- **Stage 2 – Final Decision re Termination of Studies**

If there has been insufficient improvement in performance within the timescale following the meeting with the Faculty Graduate Tutor, a further formal interview with the student will be held. At this interview the Faculty Graduate Tutor will review the history of the case, including the steps that have been taken to support the individual to achieve the required level of performance. The individual's explanation will be heard and considered. A decision will then be taken as to the likelihood that the student would reach the relevant standards required for a PhD, or whether to deregister the student due to Academic Insufficiency or to extend the final caution to allow further time for improvement and maintenance of any improvement.

The Faculty Graduate Tutor and Supervisors will confirm this decision and the reasons for it in writing to the student. The option of allowing further time for improvement may only be considered if there is evidence to persuade the Faculty Graduate Tutor that further time is likely to lead to the required improvement in performance. The letter should also outline that the student may appeal the decision using UCL's standard Student Complaints Procedure, and ultimately to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator should they feel that the processes adopted were inconsistent with UCL's procedures.

Despite the fact that the student will have been given full information on the process and eventual outcome, if the Faculty Graduate Tutor's decision is to terminate studies he/she should

be aware that this meeting may be difficult and the student not necessarily in agreement with the decision. It is advisable for the Faculty Graduate Tutor to involve a third party at this stage and careful thought should be given to the selection of an appropriate person. A senior colleague or administrator from the Faculty would be an appropriate choice. In the case of students with mental health issues or who are considered to be in a vulnerable state, the Director of Student Support and Wellbeing must be informed and if necessary consideration given to asking a member of the Student Psychological and Counselling Services to be available for the student immediately following the meeting.

## 5. Overview of Process and Indicative Timescales

**Student/Supervisors** [informal]
Meeting
Review Meeting
*Timescale - 1 month*

**Student/Supervisors/Departmental Graduate Tutor** [skip if Academic Insufficiency recommended as part of failed second upgrade attempt]
Meeting
Review Meeting
*Timescale - 1 month*

**Student/Faculty Graduate Tutor**
Stage 1 Meeting
Tasks and assessment
*Timescale - 1 month*

Stage 2 Final Meeting and Potential Notification of Termination of Studies

## 6. Resources and Sources of Advice for Students and Staff

- Doctoral School
    - Doctoral School Essential Information Webpage, including:
    - A Code of Practice for Graduate Research Degrees
    - Doctoral School Handbook
    - Professional Development Programme for Research Student Supervisors
    - Essential Forms/Procedures for Research Degrees
- Academic Manual - academic regulations and guidelines for research degree students; UCL Student Complaints Procedure; roles and responsibilities of DGT, FGTs etc.
- Student Support and Wellbeing Teams and Contacts
- Current Students Support and Wellbeing Pages
- Disability, Mental Health and Wellbeing team in Student Support and Wellbeing (SSW)
- Students' Union, UCL Advice Service
- UCLU Postgraduate Students' Sabbatical Officer
- Vitae Researcher Development Framework