



UCL Academic Manual 2023-24

Chapter 5: Research Degrees Framework

Guidance on Appropriate Forms of Supervision of Research Degree Students

contact: [Elizabeth Halton](#), Deputy Director (Doctoral School)

Guidance

Introduction

1. Research degree supervision is about enabling the student to conceive, design, produce and eventually, disseminate their own research. The goal of the research degree programme, therefore, is to produce both a successful thesis in a timely way and a competent researcher trained at the highest level in research and transferable skills. Navigating the programme successfully includes for the research student:

- identifying the research question and designing theoretical and methodological research models
- conducting and managing the research
- communicating the results of the research in a satisfactory thesis that meets accepted academic standards in the discipline, and
- achieving confidence as a researcher with the ability to engage with experts in their field of study

2. A number of concerns about the nature and extent of appropriate supervision arise in each of these stages of the research process. Further, the supervisor and student must also be aware of the appropriate role others may play throughout the research process; and the role, for example, of peers, post doctoral colleagues, technicians, friends and family, individuals employed to help with specific areas of the research (i.e. research assistants, translators, professional proofreaders, etc.), research collaborators/co-authors, research funders/sponsors should be clarified at the outset of the programme and monitored throughout it.

3. The guidance set out herein aims to clarify the limits of supervisory and external input at key stages of the research process. It applies to subsidiary and tertiary supervisors (with

modifications as appropriate) as well as to principal supervisors. It is intended to complement and be read alongside the UCL Code of Practice for Graduate Research Degrees.

Identifying the research question and designing the research project

4. Identifying the research question and designing the research project must be a joint effort and a process of negotiation between the supervisor and the student. The student can expect from their supervisor:

- advice on the focus of and on refining the research question(s)
- advice on appropriate research methods available and (where applicable) laboratory techniques
- advice on appropriate theoretical models
- advice on planning the research project, e.g. its structure, aims, methods and methodology
- advice on appropriate research timelines, including timings of assessments
- advice and signposting of further training and development, including career support, e.g. via UCL Doctoral Skills Development Programme, Arena Centre, UCL Careers
- advice regarding research integrity and ethical research

5. The student should have significant input into this process, and neither of the two extremes – i.e. where there is no advice or guidance given by the supervisor or no input at all from the student – are appropriate or acceptable. It is up to students and supervisors to agree how they wish to conduct this process. Students and supervisors may wish, for example, to meet to discuss the project plan, or the supervisor might wish to ask the student to submit a piece of work demonstrating that they have considered all of the necessary elements, eg structure, aims, methodology, abstract, which could also serve as a developmental exercise to assess whether any further training in terms of writing skills is required. In addition, the student should also be required as part of this process to undertake a systematic review of the literature pertaining to the field of the research project, to ensure that they have an appropriate grounding in the 'knowledge landscape'.

6. It is at this early stage that an initial needs assessment for required training (e.g., language support, research techniques, research analysis) should be undertaken. The Research Student Log provides a tool for this assessment, and the Doctoral Skills Development Programme, along with specialist training available within the department and within the supervisory team, should provide the required skills (augmented as necessary by use of external resources).

7. Assessment of research and transferable skills should be ongoing as the research progresses and the student's needs and aspirations develop. Again, the Research Log offers a helpful tool for these needs assessments. Supervisors should support students in acquiring the skills, attributes and behaviours they need to perform successfully during their research programme and also for their careers as future research leaders.

8. Advice on research integrity and ethical research should be ongoing. Both the supervisor and student should ensure throughout the development of the research the ethics and integrity of their research practices regardless of whether or not ethics approval needs to be sought for the project. This should also encompass advice and guidance on academic integrity, e.g. referencing citations and plagiarism.

Conducting and managing the research project

9. Conducting and managing the research project will necessarily involve:

- advice from the supervisory team on planning the project, conducting the research, timeframe, etc.
- decisions regarding the nature and degree of monitoring and oversight that is required of the student's progress

10. Giving students sources/references should be regarded as permissible and part of the supervisor's role in providing guidance and assistance. However, students should be expected to gather their own information/data and to acknowledge information/data that someone else has produced. Ultimately, students should not be outsourcing any activities that are considered to be core to their research project. This means that any core data analysis should be done by the student, except where specialist/technical advice is required – in which case the supervisor should be expected to give appropriate guidance.

11. The supervisor should exercise their judgement and discretion in terms of how much third party research assistance is appropriate. In instances where the student is not directly involved in undertaking the research activities themselves (such as in particular kinds of lab work or the gathering of other empirical data), it is important that they fully understand why the particular methods are being employed and, conversely, why other methods have been rejected. Such questions are likely to arise at the Viva, and such an understanding is key to the student's training as a researcher.

Communicating the results of the research, including in the thesis, the oral examination and conference presentations

12. Supervision in communicating the results of the research, including in the thesis, the oral examination and conference presentations will encompass:

- advice and feedback regarding academic English appropriate to the discipline
- advice and feedback regarding written work
- advice and feedback regarding presentation of research, e.g. How to prepare for oral examination, when to submit, selecting examiners, how to prepare for conference presentations

13. Whereas large-scale re-writing of parts of a student's thesis should not be considered acceptable, the supervisor should be free to make suggestions and comments for improvement. Serious problems/issues with a student's written English should have been identified and dealt with at an early stage, but it should be considered permissible for supervisors or third parties to assist with editorial matters such as correcting idiom, vocabulary, syntax, etc. – i.e. issues of presentation rather than substance. Ultimately, a student's submission should be their own work and assistance provided by either supervisors or third parties should be limited to editorial and presentational advice.

14. It should be the responsibility of supervisors to agree with the student how the student wants to receive feedback on written work and within what timeframe, bearing in mind that satisfactory progress is required to be maintained.

15. Both the Code of Practice for Graduate Research Degrees and academic regulations and guidelines for research degree students in the Academic Manual contain comprehensive advice for supervisors and students around PhD thesis submission. While considerations around submission are matters for the student and supervisor to negotiate, the final decision on whether or not to submit should rest with the student.

The Confident Researcher: Beyond the Thesis

16. The role of supervisors in developing student confidence and excellence as researchers is not limited to purely academic matters and does not end with the submission of the thesis. It is important however that both parties are clear about what it is reasonable to expect, particularly with regard to the pastoral role of the supervisor during the programme and the periods beyond the Viva and beyond completion.

17. UCL prohibits close personal and intimate relationships between staff and students where the staff member has a direct responsibility for, or involvement in that student's academic studies and/or personal welfare, e.g. a supervisor. A student or supervisor should seek advice immediately if they feel they have been subject to unprofessional or inappropriate conduct, by speaking to their Departmental Graduate Tutor or Head of Department to ensure appropriate support is provided.

18. Post submission, in instances where the Viva outcome requires further work on the part of the student, the supervisor should be expected to continue to exercise responsibility for them. Supervisors should be available to assist with and advise on interpreting examiners' comments, and to advise on resubmission as appropriate.

19. Post completion, the supervisor's continuing role in advising and supporting students' wider development needs should be negotiated with the student. Whilst there are no obligations, supervisors are encouraged to continue to provide the following types of support and advice, expected during the registration period, on completion of the thesis:

- advice and assistance regarding public engagement
- advice on publishing research
- advice about professional and career matters
- assistance in creating and sustaining professional networks
- writing of references.