



UCL Academic Manual 2023-24

Chapter 5: Research Degrees Framework

Guidance on Change of Supervisors

General

It is expected that once entered into, supervisory arrangements are for the entirety of the student's research programme. However, there are a number of reasons why a supervisory team may need to change mid-programme. The proper process must be followed to change supervisors regardless of reason.

Reasons for changing supervisors

- Temporary unexpected absence of a supervisor, e.g. illness

Where a supervisor is temporarily absent for an unexpected reason (for example, through illness), it is the responsibility of the Graduate Tutor and the remaining supervisory team to provide support to the student in the absence of the supervisor until a suitable temporary replacement can be identified or the original supervisor returns, depending on the expected timescales. The student must be kept informed of their first point of contact during this period.

- Temporary planned absence of a supervisor, e.g. parental leave

Where a supervisor has a planned temporary absence that prevents them from being reasonably accessible, they should notify the Graduate Tutor as soon as possible so that plans can be made. Alternative supervisory arrangements should be sought if the principal is absent for longer than 4 weeks and the subsidiary for longer than 8 weeks. It is the responsibility of the Graduate Tutor and the remaining supervisory team to provide support to the student in the absence of the supervisor until a suitable temporary replacement can be identified or the original supervisor returns, depending on the expected timescales. The student must be kept informed of their first point of contact during this period.

- Breakdown in the supervisory relationship

If the relationship between a research student and their supervisor/s starts to break down, the Graduate Tutor and/or Head of Department should be notified immediately so that the issue can be addressed and safeguarding put in place, if necessary. The Graduate Tutor should carefully document the progression of the case and the advice given to the student and/or the supervisor. Help should be sought from UCL's student mediator where possible. In cases where the

relationship suffers an irreconcilable breakdown, new supervisory arrangements or further options may be considered.

If a student cites a breakdown in supervisory relationship but has no/little evidence of this, e.g. they did not attempt to contact the Graduate Tutor for support, a request for a change in supervisor may not be deemed necessary.

- Supervisors who move to other institutions

When a supervisor plans to move to another institution, the Graduate Tutor should be notified as soon as possible so that plans can be made and the options available to the student can be explored. Options available must take into account any sponsor requirements. It may be possible for the supervisor to be given honorary status and for supervision to continue at a distance; however, it is recommended that an additional supervisor based at UCL be added to the team as an additional supervisor. If this is not possible, then a permanent change of supervisor should be sought.

In some circumstances it may be more appropriate for the student to transfer to the supervisor's new institution.

Students must have the available options discussed with them prior to the supervisor moving institutions.

- Supervisors who leave academia, e.g. retirement

When a supervisor leaves the University but does not move to another institution (for example, through retirement), the Graduate Tutor and Head of Department where necessary will decide whether an honorary appointment is applicable and whether the member of staff should maintain their supervisory role. Regardless, a larger supervisory team is recommended and the normal regulations regarding the appointment of supervisory teams applies.

It is possible for emeritus staff to supervise, as per the Guidance on Eligibility for Supervising Research Students, provided further criteria are met.

- Supervisors whose roles change within the institution, e.g. becoming part-time or taking on a leadership position

It is normally expected that supervisors and their line managers plan changes to the supervisor's workload to accommodate the students to whom they are already committed. However, where this is unexpected or unavoidable, e.g. owing to changes in caring responsibilities, it is recommended that an additional supervisor be appointed to the supervisory team to pick up some of the responsibilities while still allowing the student to benefit from the expertise of the original supervisor. This may be particularly helpful when reviewing drafts of work, for example.

Process for changing supervisors

If a change of supervisor is requested or thought necessary by the student or the supervisor, the relevant Graduate Tutor must be notified in writing so that the case can be reviewed and discussed with the Head of Department, if necessary.

If a change of supervisor is deemed necessary, the Graduate Tutor and Head of Department must work with the student and remaining supervisors to identify a suitable alternative supervisor.

However, students must be aware that any changes of supervision could affect the following: the supervisor may be based in a different department than the supervisor being replaced; the supervisor could be external to UCL; the supervisor may not have the same research experience or as relevant research experience; the funding situation may be affected.

If a change of supervisor is **not** deemed necessary by the Graduate Tutor and/or Head of Department but is desired by the student, it is the student's responsibility to identify a suitable supervisor. Regardless, the new supervisory configuration must be approved by the Graduate Tutor as normal.

On rare occasions, it may not be possible to make replacement supervision arrangements, and as a consequence, the student may have to withdraw from their programme.

N.B. Adding additional supervisors throughout the programme may be done without additional scrutiny, if the student and supervisory team are in agreement. Additional supervisors, i.e. creation of a larger supervisory team, can often provide a more straightforward solution to issues that arise within the supervisory team.

**Agreed by UCL's Research Degree Committee
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