

UCL Academic Manual 2023-24

Chapter 5: Research Degrees Framework

Thesis Committees

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Good practice

1 Benefits of the Thesis Committee model

1.1 It is recognised that many departments/divisions have introduced procedures at a local level to ensure 'best practice' in the supervision and monitoring of MPhil/PhD Doctoral Researchers. One such procedure is Thesis Committees (TCs); the Doctoral School is strongly supportive of their use and encourages this best practice to be applied wherever possible. In their simplest sense, TCs are expanded 'supervisory teams'.

1.2 The chief benefits of operating the Thesis Committee model are:

- A TC can provide a more rounded and objective measure of a Doctoral Researcher's performance, because at least one or two (depending on the specific TC format, see below) of its members will not be directly involved in the Doctoral Researcher's research.
- Regular meetings with a TC can give the Doctoral Researcher valuable experience of explaining their work to an 'outside' audience.
- A TC provides the Doctoral Researcher with additional and potentially more diverse people whom they know and from whom they can seek advice, independently from their Principal Supervisor. This lessens the highly interdependent master-apprentice culture and can ameliorate many issues arising from difficult supervisory experiences, from both the supervisor and Doctoral Researcher perspectives.

2 Thesis Committees in the departmental context

2.1 The decision as to whether or not TCs are introduced into a particular department rests with the Head of Department (HoD). The following model should be used when introducing new TCs, which should be applied in a consistent manner for all Doctoral Researchers in the department and not on a piecemeal basis.

3 Composition

3.1 A TC should consist of a minimum of two, but preferably three, academics. External members can be co-opted if required. Ideally, the Subsidiary Supervisor (SS) should be a member, possibly the Chair. The Principal Supervisor (PS) should not normally be a member unless all parties, including the Doctoral Researcher, agree. In any case, the Doctoral Researcher should have the right to ask for the PS not to be present should he/she wish to discuss something with the TC that would be difficult if the PS were present. Some smaller departments may decide that the Departmental Graduate Tutor (DGT) should be a member of every TC, but this is not mandatory.

3.2 It is the DGT's responsibility to determine the composition and operation of the TC for each Doctoral Researcher, taking into account the views of the Doctoral Researcher, PS, SS and the HoD. The members of the TC should be chosen on the basis of their academic experience but may be able to contribute to aspects of training not directly related to the research, e.g. training, development, and mentorship. The DGT, in consultation with the HoD, may wish to make sure that the membership of the department's TCs is spread equitably across the academic members of the department to share the workload.

4 Upgrade

4.1 A TC which does not contain the PS as a member can morph seamlessly into the Upgrade Committee (UC). If the TC contains the PS, then it can still evolve into the UC, but the PS must be removed or possibly replaced with another member of the department. Alternatively, a different UC can be used, keeping in mind that the members of the UC cannot act on the final examination panel.

5 Interaction between the Thesis Committee and the Doctoral Researcher

5.1 The TC should meet the Doctoral Researcher at set intervals, at least every 6 months. The TC should be prepared to meet the Doctoral Researcher more frequently, or outside the normal time frame, should circumstances require it. It is mandatory for the Doctoral Researcher to meet with the TC should they request a meeting. Similarly, it is expected that the TC will comply with any reasonable request from the Doctoral Researcher to hold a meeting outside the normal time frame. Any dispute between the TC and Doctoral Researcher about when and where to meet should be resolved by the DGT.

5.2 The structure of the meetings between the TC and the Doctoral Researcher can be flexible, but should normally consist of a discussion based on plans recorded in the Research Student Log, a written submission and oral presentation by the Doctoral Researcher, and a short written submission by the PS. After the meeting, the TC Chair should write a short report which includes the TC's view of progress so far, and targets for the future. The reports should be considered confidential.

5.3 TCs work best if there are specific milestones that the Doctoral Researcher is expected to have achieved by specific dates. The milestones can include presentations, for example in the form of posters or seminars, to the rest of the department, in addition to the TC. Milestones, when set, should be considered mandatory.

5.4 The TC should be sensitive to the issues raised by the Doctoral Researcher or supervisor and be prepared to offer advice if necessary. A key expected outcome of implementing TCs is fewer complaints and requests to change supervisors.

5.5 TCs should make sure the Doctoral Researcher is meeting their submission expectations as set out by the Funder and the Institution as well as any collaborators, e.g. industrial partners. A key expected outcome of implementing TCs is improved submission rates.