



UCL Academic Manual 2021-22

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 students. One such procedure that is gaining popularity involves the use of Thesis Committees (TCs). TCs are really nothing more than expanded “Supervisory Teams”, as defined in the UCL Regulations and Codes of Practice.

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

- A TC can provide a more rounded and objective measure of a student’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 student’s research.
- Regular meetings with a TC can give the student valuable experience of explaining their work to an “outside” audience.
- A TC provides the student with additional people who they know and from whom they can seek advice, independently from their Principal Supervisor.

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 students 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 student, agree. In any case, the student 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 student, taking into account the views of the student, PS, SS and the HoD. The members of the TC should be chosen on the basis of their academic experience. Although it is preferable for a TC member to have had experience of PhD supervision, it is not necessary that they should currently be supervising a student. 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.

5 Interaction between the Thesis Committee and the student

5.1 The TC should meet the student at set intervals, at least every 6 months. The TC should be prepared to meet the student more frequently, or outside the normal time frame, should circumstances require it. It is mandatory for the student 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 student to hold a meeting outside the normal time frame. Any dispute between the TC and student about when and where to meet should be resolved by the DGT.

5.2 The structure of the meetings between the TC and the student 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 student, 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 and made available only to the members of the TC, student, PS, and DGT. However, the minutes/reports of the meetings may be made available to the HoD, FGT and other authorised UCL officials, should any academic, disciplinary, health or other problems arise that require their input.

5.3 TCs work best if there are specific milestones that the student 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 student or supervisor, and be prepared to offer advice if necessary.