SECTION 19: THE MAJOR RESEARCH PROJECT

You will be working on your major research project over all three years of the course, and it will obviously require a substantial commitment of time, effort and emotional energy. These guidelines are intended to describe the process of doing the project, to outline the timetable, describe the main tasks and give you the information needed for submitting the completed thesis.

We hope that doing your major research project will be a stimulating and rewarding experience. It gives you the opportunity to explore your chosen topic in depth, and possibly will convey a sense of the excitement that comes with learning something new. Also, since research competence is important for the work that clinical psychologists do, the project will help you acquire professional skills of lasting value.

Criteria
The research thesis should be an original piece of empirical work relevant to clinical psychology, which demonstrates your ability to apply scientific principles and undertake rigorous investigation. The course supports a pluralistic approach to research. You may choose from a range of approaches and paradigms: what is important is that the research methods be appropriate to the questions being investigated.

The thesis should be of publishable quality. The course regulations state that it should make a distinct contribution to the knowledge of the subject and afford evidence of originality. The work done for the thesis must not have been submitted in fulfilment of the requirements of any other degree.

If you are working in a team, or analysing previously collected data, the boundary of what is your personal contribution can become hard to define, but the central criterion is that you should be making a substantial independent contribution to the study.

Past theses completed from 2011 are available via UCL's e-thesis repository in UCL Discovery.

Project support
In order to guide you through the process of carrying out your major research project, several sessions have been organised within the project support subunit. These take place across the three years of the course, corresponding to various milestones in completing the project. They start with the project orientation session and project clinics in the first year, which are aimed at helping you to find a suitable topic. Details are given in the Research Project Support section of Moodle.

Topic and setting
We encourage trainees to find projects within existing research groups led by course staff or staff in the wider Division of Psychology and Language Sciences or other local institutions. Potential supervisors may have a specific project to offer or will be able to help you develop one within their area of expertise. Given the limited amount of time available for the major research project, it is often difficult to carry out research on an independent topic of your choice.

All projects must have an internal supervisor who is a research-active member of the DClinPsy course team, so it is important that you discuss your ideas early on with any potential internal supervisors to make sure that they would be willing and able to supervise it. Course staff members' research interests are given on their web pages.

Projects will normally be carried out within the London Region. Other than that, there is no restriction on the setting: it can be one of your placement settings if you prefer, though this is not necessary. If a research supervisor indicates that you need to be on placement with them in order to undertake the project, you must discuss this with a member of the clinical tutor team at the first opportunity. This is because placement planning is usually determined by clinical training need (so the "research" placement would need to fit into your overall training plan). In addition, other trainees (from this and other courses) may have a greater claim on the placement. On the whole, the tutor team will try to reconcile any problems, but can do this more effectively if the link between research and clinical placements is signalled at an early stage.

Recommended timetable

Although different projects vary in their demands, there is usually a common sequence of events that you need to consider in order to plan your time. The most frequent causes of problems are a slow initial start and unexpected delays later on, often out of your control (typically research governance procedures and recruitment of participants). Because of this, we recommend that you keep closely to the following timetable.

First Year

Term 2	Decide on the topic, start reading the background literature, and formulate preliminary research questions. Approach potential internal and external supervisors.
Term 3	Statement of intent due (date to be notified).
June to September	Prepare the research proposal. Discuss the project in the setting in which you will carry it out.

Second Year

Beginning of term 1	Research proposal due (date to be notified).
November to February	Modify the proposal and finalise the research plan as necessary. Complete the data protection and departmental risk assessment forms. Submit ethics application and project registration.
February to September	Begin recruitment of participants as soon as the protocol is finalised and research governance approvals are obtained. Begin data collection. Write the first draft of the literature review.

Third Year

Term 1	Submit literature review to internal supervisor and make consequent revisions. Complete data collection.
Term 2	Analyze the data. Write a first draft of the empirical paper and draft the critical appraisal. Title and abstract due (for allocation of examiners: date to be notified).
April to May	Revise the empirical paper and the critical appraisal. Give the final draft of the whole thesis to your supervisors for comment.
June	Submit thesis (date to be notified).
September	Viva (dates to be announced).

Supervisors

All projects require an internal supervisor, who must be a member of the DClinPsy course staff (in order to be familiar with the requirements for the thesis). Many projects also have an external supervisor, usually an NHS clinical psychologist working in the setting where the project is being conducted.

Role of the supervisors

The role of the supervisors is to provide specialised academic research expertise, e.g. on the study's theoretical and empirical background, research methods, data analysis and writing up the thesis, and generally to ensure that the research meets the appropriate standards for the Doctorate. The supervisory team typically also advises on the practical feasibility of the study, assist with obtaining a sample, and provide clinical supervision, where relevant.

Projects typically have two supervisors and the role each supervisor takes will vary from project to project, but you can expect one or other of your supervisors to suggest readings, help you plan and design your study, advise you on analysing the data and interpreting the findings and read at least one draft of the thesis (although work must be submitted in sufficient time – please do not ask your supervisor(s) to read a lot of material just before the due date!). It is advisable to meet with your supervisor(s) about every 3-4 weeks in the initial stages to set up the project; meetings will usually become less frequent as the project progresses (twice a term is the usual minimum). We do not have a formal research contract on this course, as we hesitate to introduce too much formality and regulation into what should be a flexible and mutually rewarding supervisory relationship. However, at the start of the project, the supervisors and the trainee should agree what each party's main roles and responsibilities will be and you will be asked to confirm that this has been discussed and agreed when you hand in your project proposal. We will ask you to feedback on supervision during the course, and the Research Directors would like you to get in touch if you have concerns about your supervision.

In addition to advice from your supervisors and the research staff, the course also provides specialist statistics advice, via a statistics demonstrator who has bookable time slots.

An external supervisor is one external to the course even if they are based at UCL. Internal supervisors are members of the course staff team. All projects that have an external supervisor must also have an internal one. The course guidelines for internal supervisors and for external supervisors describe their respective supervisory roles. These are written for supervisors, but trainees might find them useful to consult.

Finding a supervisor

The project orientation session and the project clinics will help you in finding supervision for your potential project. We typically release a 'project catalogue' with a list of projects being offered to trainees each year by supervisors from within the course, within the wider UCL staff, and from external organisations, including the NHS and beyond. If you have an idea for a project that is not listed in the 'project catalogue', you are welcome to approach staff members on an individual basis. Many academic and NHS clinical psychologists, including most UCL academic staff members, are happy to discuss supervising projects in their areas of interest, although there is no guarantee that a person approached will be able to supervise.

External supervisors may be active researchers and experts in their field. They will usually be a clinical psychologist, but could also be from another relevant discipline, such as psychiatry or sociology. There are no restrictions on institutional affiliation or location, though supervisors will normally be found within the Region.

The Research Directors are responsible for ensuring that every trainee has appropriate supervision in place and for monitoring the supervision loads of course staff. All projects being offered by an external supervisor should also have a supervisor internal to the course. Should trainees experience any difficulties in finding an internal supervisor for a project that is being offered by an external supervisor, the Research Director will help to resolve these.

Keeping supervisors informed

In the early stages, when you are exploring potential projects, you may talk to several potential supervisors – up to three in the first instance. In the past, we have had some complaints from supervisors saying that they have been treated casually by trainees, who have either seemed underprepared for meeting to discuss the project, or who have not been good about communicating their intentions after an initial meeting. Please only approach supervisors if you have done some background reading first, so that you know what the supervisor's interests are and what the main literature is in the topic of interest. Also, it is vital to keep them in touch with your plans – especially if you decide to do your project with someone else.

Once the project is under way, you are responsible for keeping your supervisor(s) informed about its progress. In particular, if you are thinking of making any changes to the research protocol, you must first discuss this with your supervisors (and permission from the Ethics Committee may also be needed). This is especially important when ethical approval for the project has been given in your supervisor's name.

Statement of intent

In term 3 of the first year, you will be asked to submit a "Statement of intent." This is a one-page form that states the intended topic of your research, with the potential supervisor(s) and setting(s). The research director will review them, but will contact you only if something seems problematical.

Proposal

A proposal of approximately 2500 words is due early in term 1 of the second year (date to be announced). The proposal form is very structured to ensure you cover everything needed to assess the project, including (1) the background to your topic, (2) your research questions or hypotheses, (3) the proposed research methods, (4) the institutional arrangements, e.g. setting, NHS research supervisor and ethics committee, and financial implications (see the following paragraph on expenses). The proposal will be reviewed by one of the academic staff who will give you written feedback on it. For further details, see the course document on preparing the proposal.

Expenses

You will need to consider the costs of your project when you are putting together your proposal. As the course has limited funds, you may need to look into various sources of funding. If you plan ahead, you can apply to grant-giving bodies for support (although there is much competition for grants). You may also be able to obtain funds from the NHS Trust in which you are doing your research. See the course document on funding for the major research project for more details.

If you are applying for DClinPsy research funds, the research committee needs a written application in term 2 of year 2, in advance of the planned expenditure, outlining how much you are requesting and why. Normally, the amount available from the course is up to £250 per person. However, in some special cases funding up to a maximum of £400 will be granted if a strong case can be made that such additional money is essential for a project to be viable. Note that projects costing more than £400 cannot be funded by the course, so you

must ensure that alternative funding is available if your budget is likely to be over that amount.

If you will be paying research participants, you need to obtain in advance a Departmental "participant payment form", which each participant will need to sign.

Research governance and ethics
The study must conform to the BPS Code of Ethics and Conduct, the BPS Code of Human Research Ethics and the HRA's UK Policy Framework for Health and Social Care Research. All of the research governance procedures that you need to complete are outlined in the research governance checklist and its associated FAQ list.

As discussed in the research methods lectures, clinical psychology research almost always requires ethical approval. When the research proposal has been approved, apply for NHS or UCL ethics approval (see the research governance checklist for further information). It is important to do this as soon as possible, as there is a lot of paperwork, and several past projects have been seriously delayed by the process of gaining ethical approval. The appendix to your thesis will need to include a copy of your official letter of approval from the Ethics Committee, as well as copies of the participant information sheet and consent form. There is a specialist member of the course team to assist with NHS research governance issues.

Health and safety issues
Personal safety issues are particularly important in clinical research, especially if you are planning to make home visits or to work with a potentially dangerous client group. All trainees must, together with their project supervisor, complete a Risk Assessment Form. It is your responsibility to familiarise yourself with the Departmental health and safety policies and to follow the guidelines in practice.

Discovering evidence of abuse or danger
It is possible that while seeing participants during your study, you become aware of an instance of abuse or potential danger, either to the participant or to others. Examples include child maltreatment, the abuse of older adults or of people in residential settings, and participants with active homicidal or suicidal intentions. In this situation, you must consult immediately with your research supervisor. You have a duty of care that obliges you to break confidentiality if not to do so would result in harm, or further harm, to the participant or to others (see the BPS code of ethics and conduct).

Monitoring research progress
The research director is responsible for having an overview of the progress of all trainees' projects and for giving general advice (although your internal supervisor should be the first port of call). You will be asked to complete regular progress reports in the Second and Third Years, in order for the research director to monitor how things are going. Should any serious problems arise with the project at any point, you should let the research director know and they will try to help sort these out.

If you experience difficulties working with your supervisor, and you do not feel able to resolve these through discussion with them, please get in touch with the Research Director and/or your course tutor. Another means of seeking help with any supervision difficulties is provided by the 'Supervisor Appraisal Form'. This is completed as part of the research review process, and is a chance to pass on feedback about your experience of supervision in confidence.

Research journal

We recommend that you keep a private research journal throughout the duration of the project. You can use this to note down ideas and thoughts about conceptual or methodological issues, decisions you make, observations and reflections about the data you are collecting, etc. This provides very useful material to draw upon when you come to write part 3 of the thesis, the critical appraisal. It is also essential for qualitative research, in which reflexivity and awareness of the influence of the researcher on the research process needs to be documented.

Writing up the project
The major research project forms Volume 1 of your thesis; Volume 2 contains three clinical reports and the service-related research report. Details on the format of the thesis, and guidelines for writing up and final presentation, are given in the course document on writing and presenting the thesis.

Marking and viva
All theses will be assessed by two examiners, one external and one internal. Candidates will be examined by an oral examination (viva voce) in September of the third year (the date will be finalised several months in advance). The viva gives you a chance to defend your work and to explain some of the conceptual and methodological choices you made and the conclusions you reached.

The potential outcomes of the examination are: (1) pass; (2) pass conditional on minor corrections (one month); (3) referred for stipulated revisions (three months); (4) referred for major revisions (one year); and (5) fail (see the criteria for evaluating the thesis). Most trainees are usually asked to make some corrections to their thesis, so it is better to resist the temptation to plan a holiday immediately after the viva.

What next?
If you have survived all the above, and still can bear to think about research, course staff will be happy to help you think about disseminating and publishing your project and also about how to continue doing research in your future career. We encourage all trainees to publish their studies. It is relatively little effort in comparison with the work involved in producing your thesis, and your supervisors will usually collaborate with you to produce a publishable paper. It's usually very rewarding to see your work in print.

Research study leave

From the second year of the course onwards, trainees can apply to take up to six days of Research Study Leave from a six-month placement.

There are two broad reasons for taking research study leave:

a) Trainees only have limited time for research in each week, and this lack of continuity can make for inefficiency. Research study leave gives a period of time to focus solely on research

b) Some projects may require trainees to undertake research on specific days of the week (for example, collecting data or attending research meetings), and this may create a clash with placement days. Research study leave is a way of giving extra flexibility, should this be needed.

Some caveats

1) Trainees are not usually expected to take research leave from *every* placement

2) Trainees should ensure that if they are taking Research Study Leave they will have undertaken enough days on placement to meet the BPS/HCPC criteria, as indicated in the Training Handbook.

3) There is no automatic entitlement to this leave; there should be a good rationale for applying for it. Leave can be taken as a single block or as a series of days over a period of time, with the number of days taken reflecting need.

Examples of times a trainee might take study leave could include:

- A trainee who wishes to work on the systematic review over successive days in order that they can maintain the flow of their ideas
- A trainee whose research is predicated on attending clinical meetings which are always scheduled for a placement day, and who therefore needs to take days of research study leave over a period of time in order to attend the meetings
- A trainee who needs to attend a research ethics committee
- A trainee whose data-collection is best achieved using a block of time, or who needs to schedule data-collection around hard-to-book lab times

As should be clear from the above examples, decisions about taking research study leave as a block or as a series of days will depend on the need the leave is addressing.

4) There are only so many days in a year; in some placements there may well be a clash between meeting placement attendance requirements, taking annual leave and taking research leave. If this is so trainees will need to come to a judgment, deciding how best to apportion their time.

Procedure

a) Applications for research leave must be negotiated with the Clinical Supervisor, either early in the placement, or as soon as the need for leave becomes clear.

Clinical supervisors are entitled to balance the needs of the clinical placement against the trainee's need to undertake research. This means that trainees may have to take fewer than six days study time, or even no study time at all. On occasion it may be that Research Study Leave is requested later in the placement (for example if there have been unforeseen difficulties with recruitment and the study time is required to manage this)

b) If the clinical supervisor is agreeable to the leave being taken, trainees need to email their research supervisor and the Research Director, copying in the placement administrator:

a) indicating how much leave they are planning to take
b) briefly (but clearly) stating the rationale for taking the leave
c) stating that their clinical supervisor has approved the leave