



Teaching toolkits

Research and project supervision (all levels): an introduction

This guide provides guidance and recommendations on supervising students in their research. It offers general principles and tips for those new to supervision, at PhD, Master's or undergraduate level and directs you to further support available at UCL.

Supervision can play a vital role in enabling students to fulfil their potential. Helping a student to become an independent researcher is a significant achievement – and can enhance your own teaching and research.

Many academics say supervision is one of their favourite, most challenging and most fulfilling parts of their job.

Supervision is also a critical element in achieving UCL's strategic aim of integrating research and education. As a research-intensive university, we want all students, not just those working towards a PhD, to engage in research.

Successful research needs good supervision.

What supervision means

Typically, a supervisor acts as a guide, mentor, source of information and facilitator to the student as they progress through a research project.

Every supervision will be unique. It will vary depending on the circumstances of the student, the research they plan to do, and the relationship between you and the student.

At UCL, doctoral students always have at least two supervisors. Some faculties and departments operate a model of thesis committees, which can include people from industry, as well as UCL staff.

You will have to deal with a range of situations using a sensitive and informed approach.

As a supervisor at UCL, you'll help create an intellectually challenging and fulfilling learning experience for your students.

This could include helping students to:

- formulate their research project and question
- decide what methods of research to use
- become familiar with the wider research community in their chosen field
- evaluate the results of their research
- ensure their work meets the necessary standards expected by UCL
- keep to deadlines
- use feedback to enhance their work
- overcome any problems they might have
- present their work to other students, academics or interested parties
- prepare for the next steps in their career or further study.

Rules and regulations

PhD supervision

The supervision of doctoral students' research is governed by regulation. This means that there are some things you must – and must not – do when supervising a PhD.

All the essential information is found in the UCL Code of Practice for Research Degrees.

Full regulations are found in the UCL Academic Manual.

All staff must complete the online course 'Introduction to Research Supervision at UCL' before beginning doctoral supervision. See the professional development section of the Teaching and Learning Portal for more information.

Undergraduate and Masters supervision

There are also regulations around Master's and undergraduate dissertations and projects.

Check with the Programme Lead, your Department Graduate Tutor or Departmental Administrator for the latest regulations related to student supervision.

You should attend other training around research supervision which is available through UCL Arena.

Doctoral (PhD) supervision: introducing your student to the university

For most doctoral students, you will often be their main point of contact at UCL and as such you are responsible for inducting them into the department and wider community.

Check that your student:

- knows their way around the department and about the facilities available to them locally (desk space, common room, support staff)
- has attended the Doctoral School induction and has received all relevant documents (including the Handbook and code of practice for graduate research degrees)
- has attended any departmental or faculty inductions and has a copy of the departmental handbook.

Make sure your student is aware of:

- key central services such as: Student Support and Wellbeing, UCL Students' Union (UCLU) and Careers;
- opportunities to broaden their skills through UCL's Doctoral Skills Development Programme;
- the wider disciplinary culture, including relevant networks, websites and mailing lists.

Establishing an effective relationship

The first few meetings you have with your student are critical and can help to set the tone for the whole supervisory experience for you and your student.

An early discussion about both of your expectations is essential:

Find out your student's motivations for undertaking the project, their aspirations, academic background and any personal matters they feel might be relevant.

Discuss any gaps in their preparation and consider their individual training needs.

Be clear about who will arrange meetings, how often you'll meet, how quickly you'll respond when the student contacts you, what kind of feedback they'll get, and the norms and standards expected for academic writing.

Set agendas and coordinate any follow-up actions. Minute meetings, perhaps taking it in turns with your student.

For PhD students, hold a meeting with your student's other supervisor(s) to clarify your expectations, roles, frequency of meetings and approaches.

Styles of supervision

Supervisory styles are often conceptualized on a spectrum from laissez-faire to more contractual or from managerial to supportive.

Every supervisor will adopt different approaches to supervision depending on their own preferences, the individual relationship and the stage the student is at in the project.

Be aware of the positive and negative aspects of different approaches and styles.

Reflect on your personal style and what has prompted this – it may be that you are adopting the style of your own supervisor, or wanting to take a certain approach because it is the way that it would work for you.

No one style fits every situation: approaches change and adapt to accommodate the student and the stage of the project.

However, to ensure a smooth and effective supervision process, it is important to align your expectations from the very beginning.

Discuss expectations in an early meeting and re-visit them periodically.

Checking the student's progress

Make sure you help your student break down the work into manageable chunks, agreeing deadlines and asking them to show you work regularly.

Give your student helpful and constructive feedback on the work they submit (see the various assessment and feedback toolkits on the Teaching & Learning Portal).

Check they are getting the relevant ethical clearance for research and/or risk assessments.

Ask your student for evidence that they are building a wider awareness of the research field.

Encourage your student to meet other research students and read each other's work or present to each other.

Encourage your student to write early and often.

Checking your own performance

Regularly review progress with your student and any co-supervisors.

Discuss any problems you might be having, and whether you need to revise the roles and expectations you agreed at the start.

Make sure you know what students in your department are feeding back to the Student Consultative Committee or in surveys, such as the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES).

Responsibility for the student's research project does not rest solely on you. If you need help, talk to someone more experienced in your department. Whatever the problem is you're having, the chances are that someone will have experienced it before and will be able to advise you.

Continuing students can often provide the most effective form of support to new students. Supervisors and departments can foster this, for example through organising mentoring, coffee mornings or writing groups.

Be aware that supervision is about helping students carry out independent research – not necessarily about preparing them for a career in academia. In fact, very few PhD students go on to be academics.

Make sure you support your student's personal and professional development, whatever direction this might take.

Every research supervision can be different – and equally rewarding.

Where to find help and support

The Research supervision web pages from the UCL Arena Centre provide further information.

ucl.ac.uk/teaching-learning/professional-development/arena-open/research-supervision-ucl

This includes:

- details of the compulsory Research Supervision online course
- the PhD diaries
- The UCL Good Supervision Guide (for PhD supervisors).

bit.ly/ResearchSupervision: to access this full online guide, including links and further resources.

Copyright notice

This guide has been produced by the Arena Centre for Research-based Education at University College London.

You are welcome to use this guide if you are from another educational facility, but you must credit the UCL Arena Centre.