

UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

HUMANITIES DIVISION

Code of Practice on Supervision of Graduate Students

2025-26

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A. The wider context

The Humanities Divisional Code provides guidance on the academic supervision of graduate research and graduate taught students, supplementing the University's [Policy and Guidance on Research Degrees](#) and [Policy and Guidance on Postgraduate Taught Courses](#). It sets out the basic expectations governing the responsibilities of supervisors, students, and faculties and departments. Attention is also drawn to [The UK Quality Code](#) which underlies all these documents.

B. Appointment of supervisors

1. *The supervisory structure*

- a. Patterns of supervision vary across the Humanities Division according to the nature of the research project and/or course. Each research student shall be assigned an appropriate sole supervisor or team of two or more co-supervisors.
- b. Each taught postgraduate student shall be assigned a dissertation supervisor.
- c. A candidate should not be admitted if there is no suitable specialist supervision in the collegiate university.
- d. Where more than one supervisor is appointed, the roles of each supervisor should be clearly defined at the outset and redefined as appropriate as the student's research progresses. Arrangements for co-supervision must be clearly communicated to the student.
- e. In all cases, the faculty shall ensure that each student has access to one or more named persons, in addition to the supervisor, to whom they can turn for support, such as the course convenor, Director of Graduate Studies or, where appropriate, the Chair of the Faculty Board/ Head of School.
- f. Where there is a sole supervisor, these other sources of support, and the provision of cover during the absence of the supervisor referred to at 4 below, are especially crucial.
- g. Faculties shall ensure that graduate students are not disadvantaged when a supervisor is absent on research leave or for other reasons. Normally regular contact by email between supervisor and student will suffice during a period of leave of up to one term.

Research students

- h. A co-supervisor must be appointed if a supervisor is on leave during a student's initial period of study, and co-supervision may also be appropriate in other circumstances later in a student's research degree, particularly following changes to a student's research project, support needs, or the outcomes of a milestone assessment. A supervisor shall not be granted University research leave unless the faculty is satisfied that suitable arrangements have been made for the supervision of their research students.

2. *The supervisor – general requirements*

- a. A supervisor shall normally be a permanent member of academic staff of the collegiate University. Where the appointed supervisor is not a permanent member of academic staff of the University, the Director of Graduate Studies shall have a supporting supervisory role; in this role, the DGS will satisfy himself/herself at least once every term that the supervision arrangement continues to be adequate for both parties involved.
- b. In appropriate cases (e.g. where a student's research is multi-disciplinary and specialist supervision is available in one or more but not all disciplines), a supervisor may be appointed who is external to the University of Oxford. A person holding a substantial external research post in the faculty (e.g. a British Academy Fellowship or equivalent on a fixed-term contract) may be appointed to act as a student's primary supervisor. In either of these cases, an experienced permanent member of academic staff of the University shall always be appointed as co-supervisor.
- c. A supervisor should have sufficient security of tenure to see a student's research through to successful conclusion. Nobody shall be appointed as sole supervisor when it is known at the time of appointment that they will not be in post when the student is due to complete their course. A supervisor who retires and remains research active in the specialist field may continue to supervise a student, and in such cases a current permanent member of academic staff of the University shall be appointed as co-supervisor and, if appropriate, clearly designated as the primary supervisor. A supervisor may elect to continue as co-supervisor after moving to a post outside Oxford, with the approval of the Board of the Faculty.
- d. At least one of a student's supervisors shall have sufficient experience of supervising in the University of Oxford to provide appropriate guidance about academic expectations, necessary procedures, support, resources, training and other essential matters.
- e. A student's supervisor or supervisors shall be able to undertake all the tasks assigned to the supervisor in the *Policy and Guidance on Research Degrees* or *Policy and Guidance on Postgraduate Taught Courses*.

Research students

- f. At least one of a student's supervisors shall have sufficient experience of doctoral supervision (at Oxford or elsewhere) in the relevant discipline(s) to ensure that the direction and monitoring of the student's progress is informed by up to date knowledge of the subject and research developments.
- g. A supervisor should be familiar with the [University Conflict of Interest Policy](#) and associated [guidance](#), in particular its requirements relating to research supervision, and to disclose any conflict of interest, or any circumstances that might reasonably give rise to the perception of conflict of interest, in accordance with this Policy.

3. *Training and support for supervisors*

- a. Members of academic staff will be given appropriate support and training, especially those in their first period of office:
 - The faculty board shall appoint a mentor for new academic staff who will, amongst other duties, provide confidential advice, guidance, and support on the supervision of taught and research graduate students;
 - All members of staff, and especially new members of staff, are encouraged to seek advice, guidance, and support on the supervision of graduate students from the Director of Graduate Studies and Chair of Faculty Board.
 - The faculty board shall ensure that all newly-appointed staff attend the University's online course on [DPhil Supervision in Humanities and Social Sciences](#). The course is also strongly recommended for all academic staff with responsibilities for supervision.
 - All members of staff, and especially new members of staff, are encouraged to familiarise themselves with the [online resources](#) on supervision available through the Centre for Teaching & Learning (CTL), particularly the guidance on accessible and inclusive teaching.
 - Alongside the faculty's responsibilities for providing support, new supervisors should take responsibility for obtaining appropriate training in the supervision of graduate students. The supervision records of new members of academic staff are included in the review prior to appointment to retiring age.

Research students

- b. Supervisors with no previous experience of supervision will be paired with an experienced permanent member of academic staff as co-supervisor who will also, if appropriate, be clearly designated as the primary supervisor. The experienced member will be expected to act as mentor to the new supervisor.
- c. Faculties shall put in place mechanisms to ensure that the quality of supervision is not put at risk as a result of an excessive range and volume of burdens assigned to individual supervisors.
 - A supervisor is expected normally to meet with a research student for a detailed discussion of the student's progress at least twice a term during the period of study. Meetings are likely to take place more frequently during the early stages of a research project, and to involve reading and commenting upon substantial amounts of written work during the latter stages. A supervisor must therefore be able to provide at least this typical level of support for each research student.
 - The Humanities Division has agreed that staff carrying a normal administrative load and a normal burden of undergraduate and/or postgraduate teaching for their faculty should supervise no more than six research students; individuals who undertake less administration and/or less teaching may supervise more research students, up to a maximum of twelve. The appropriate standard supervisory load will normally be less than these limits, and faculties should establish clear and transparent expectations for different categories of academic staff that can be factored into annual workload planning.
 - Exceptions should only be made after consideration by and with the approval of a faculty's graduate studies committee.

4. *Change of supervisor*

- a. Where a student believes that there are good grounds for contemplating a change of supervisor, for whatever reason, this should first be discussed with the supervisor or, should the student prefer, with the Director of Graduate Studies or the Chair of Faculty Board (or their deputies) or with their College Adviser (see Policy on Research Degrees, 4.1)
- b. Should a student's research project change direction so that their current supervisor may no longer be the most appropriate person to provide guidance, the faculty, in consultation with the student and the supervisor, shall consider whether or not an additional or alternative supervisor should be appointed. Such a change of focus is unusual, and always requires prior permission from the faculty.
- c. Should the student have concerns over the quality of supervision, they should seek to resolve the matter where possible by discussion with the supervisor, Director of Graduate Studies, Chair of Faculty Board, or College Adviser, but should be made aware of the University's formal complaint procedures, as described in the [Student Handbook](#) and the relevant regulations of Council.

Research students

- d. Should it be decided that a change of supervisor is desirable, and should no alternative specialist supervisor be available within the collegiate university, a specialist supervisor outside Oxford may be appointed and an experienced permanent member of academic staff of the University appointed as co-supervisor (see para. B, 2, b, above).

5. *College Advisers*

- a. All students should have access to a college adviser, to act as the main point of contact between students and their college and to be available to provide general academic or pastoral advice as required, including signposting to appropriate college services and resources. College advisers will meet with graduate students during their first term at Oxford, and will be available to meet continuing students subsequently at least once a year. Advisers will receive termly supervision reports and reports on transfer and confirmation of status, and may be involved in annual progress reviews. Colleges also have procedures to monitor the overall wellbeing of graduate students, including discussion of academic progress and supervision reports.
- b. College advisers can serve as a neutral source of support for students experiencing problems with any aspects of their academic provision. If a college identifies any concerns that might impact upon the academic progress of a student and that have not been recognised in supervision reports, it may refer these in confidence to the Director of Graduate Studies in the faculty concerned, who will take appropriate action.
- c. The nature of arrangements for college advisers, and support for graduate students more generally, varies considerably between different colleges. However all colleges adhere to a series of recommendations on support for graduate students, which are approved by the Conference of Colleges and reviewed on an annual basis.

C. The supervisor's responsibilities towards the student

1. *Preparation and induction*

The supervisor's responsibilities are as follows:

Taught students

- a. To hold a meeting with the student to establish a clear framework for the student's learning and dissertation research. The supervisor should at least:
 - Agree a clear plan with the student for beginning their research, providing advice and giving accurate reference to appropriate reading, sources, and other relevant research materials;
 - Establish the frequency and dates of subsequent meetings to discuss the student's research in more detail and provide support for the completion and submission of their dissertation;
 - Discuss with the student any adjustments or variations in supervision support that might be required in order to support their individual learning needs.

Research students

- b. To hold an initial meeting with the student in 0th or 1st Week of the first term in order to establish a clear framework for the student's doctoral research. The supervisor should (at least):
 - Agree a clear plan with the student for beginning their research, providing advice and giving accurate reference to appropriate reading, sources, and other relevant research materials;
 - Agree a programme of work for the first term with the student, establishing clear expectations and timetable, including identification of milestones in subsequent terms;
 - Establish the frequency and dates of meetings to discuss in detail the student's research;
 - Discuss with the student any adjustments or variations in supervision support that might be required in order to support their individual learning needs;
 - Ensure the student understands the procedures for monitoring their progress and performance;
 - Encourage the student to attend any appropriate classes, lectures, and seminars;
 - Carry out an assessment of the skills training required by the student and arrange for its provision. A tool for Training Needs Analysis and logging of activities is available via the [Humanities Researcher Development and Training](#) website.
 - For projects involving co-supervision, to ensure that all initial advice and guidance is agreed and coordinated by the supervisory team, and that the responsibilities of co-supervisors are clearly defined and made known to the student.

General

- c. To encourage the student to attend all faculty and/or departmental induction sessions, and all appropriate induction courses into the libraries and IT resources needed for their research.
- d. To ensure that the student is aware of the University's [Guidance on plagiarism](#), and of any ethical and legal issues, issues concerning health and safety, and issues concerning intellectual property arising from the student's research.
- e. To ensure that the student completes the mandatory online Research Integrity '[Introductory Core Course](#)' and encourage the student to attend [research ethics training](#) for social sciences and humanities (online or in-person) provided by Research Support
- f. To ensure that the student is aware of the research resources available in the faculty and elsewhere in

the University, including: libraries, museums and other research facilities and infrastructure; financial support for conferences, fieldwork, and travel; and IT support.

- g. To assist the student to become part of the academic community, by encouraging them to engage in the common research activities of the faculty, and to meet other students and members of staff working in the same or adjacent fields.

2. *Progress, monitoring and feedback*

The supervisor's responsibilities are as follows:

General

- a. To agree with the student a clear plan of research and identify milestones and set a timetable towards its completion.
- b. To produce termly supervision reports via [Graduate Supervision Reporting](#), and to discuss such reports with the student.
- c. To ensure that the student is aware of, and has taken appropriate action with respect to any health and safety issues connected with the research, including fieldwork.
- d. To ensure that the student has sought ethical approval (if necessary) for their research. Further information is available at: <https://researchsupport.admin.ox.ac.uk/governance/ethics>
- e. Should the supervisor become aware of any particular concerns with a student, they will discuss them at an early stage with the Director of Graduate Studies and, if appropriate, with the student's college.

Research students

- f. To meet regularly with the student, normally at least two times a term when the student is working in Oxford, to review progress against the agreed plan of research, milestones and timetable.
- g. To ensure that the student is aware of the formal requirements and timetable for transfer of status, confirmation of status and final thesis submission, and that this information is incorporated into the plan of research.
- h. To agree with the student a timetable for the regular submission and return of written work, and to return work, with constructive criticism, within a reasonable time. The minimum expectation should be one instance of substantive engagement per term, which will normally involve the submission of a piece of written work.
- i. Should a research student decide to go out of residence before submitting the thesis, they must agree a clear reporting structure with the supervisor or supervisors. Students who are not working in Oxford must submit progress reports and written work to the supervisor. The timeframe will vary but students normally ought to submit a substantial progress report and a piece of written work at least once a term.

Taught students

- j. To agree with the student a clear plan for the dissertation and set a timetable towards its completion.
- k. To meet regularly with the student, to review progress on the course generally and progress against the agreed plan of research for the dissertation, as appropriate.
- l. To agree with the student a timetable for the submission and return of written work, and to return work, with constructive criticism, within a reasonable time.

3. Skills training for research students

- a. A supervisor will monitor a student's skills training needs as they develop over time, including both subject-specific research training and personal and professional training, including training and opportunities for teaching, acknowledging the range of career destinations made available through pursuit of the DPhil.
- b. Faculties shall ensure that research students' skills training needs are assessed and that training is made available to every student, including that specific to the research being undertaken and general training in personal and professional skills. The skills are outlined in the Humanities Division's [Researcher Development Strategy](#). This Strategy takes into account the [Vitae Researcher Development Framework](#) and the [AHRC Research Training Frameworks](#).
- c. It is the responsibility of the supervisor, under the oversight of the Director of Graduate Studies, to ensure that the skills training needs of each of their students are assessed and met.
- d. A student's skills training needs shall be assessed formally at three specific points in the programme:
 - as part of the initial general review of the student's needs;
 - at Transfer of Status;
 - and at Confirmation of Status.

On each occasion, the supervisor should make a written record of the formal assessment, and copies shall be given to the student, the student's college, and the Director of Graduate Studies.

- e. It is, however, an integral part of the supervisor's role, at regular supervisory meetings, to continue to monitor and advise a student on skills training needs, to draw to the student's attention, and to encourage the student to take up, such opportunities as are available for the further development of these skills.
- g. Research students are encouraged to evaluate their own [skills training needs](#), and to discuss these regularly with their supervisors. Students should provide a record of their research skills development in the relevant GSO form when applying for Transfer and Confirmation.

4. *Assisting research students in preparing for a career*

- a. The supervisor will assist and encourage the student to participate in the wider academic community, at University, national and international level, through presentation and, if appropriate, publication of their research.
- b. Students who wish to pursue an academic career are encouraged to discuss this with their supervisor, who may be able to advise them upon such matters as attending conferences, publishing research, preparing *curricula vitae*, job applications, and attending job interviews. When seeking such advice or asking for letters of reference, students should ensure that they give their supervisor reasonable time to respond. Students should understand that their supervisor may not always be in the best position to advise them on such matters, and that it is not a supervisor's duty to find jobs for their students.
- c. Supervisors may be able to assist students who wish to follow one of the many other career avenues opened up through doctoral study by advising them on personal and professional training in transferable skills and by preparing references emphasising the range of skills, academic or otherwise, acquired during their doctoral studies. Supervisors (and other academic staff responsible for graduates) should ensure that students are aware that the University's [Careers Service](#) advises graduates as well as undergraduates.

5. *Summary of Supervisor's responsibilities*

- a. To have the specialist knowledge necessary to supervise the student's research.
- b. To have sufficient time to supervise the student.
- c. To accept a student only if able to ensure continuity of supervision until completion.
- d. To advise, guide and support the student in all aspects of research, providing clear intellectual leadership and giving precise guidance about academic expectations.
- e. To produce termly supervision reports.
- f. To ensure that the student completes the mandatory online Research Integrity course (<https://researchsupport.admin.ox.ac.uk/support/training/ethics#collapse409401>) before Transfer of Status (and ideally within six months of their start date) and encourage the student to attend research ethics training for social sciences and humanities (online or in-person) provided by Research Support (<https://researchsupport.admin.ox.ac.uk/integrity-and-ethics-training>).
- g. To encourage the student to explore the resources and further training related to research practice, available at [Research Practice Guidance | University of Oxford](#) and [Research Practice Training | University of Oxford](#).
- h. To monitor a student's skills training needs as they develop over time.
- h. To assist and encourage the student to participate in the wider academic community, and/or beyond it where appropriate.

D. General responsibilities of the supervisor

1. *Reporting*

- a. The Supervisor must produce a detailed report on the student's progress at the end of each term, using the online Graduate Supervision Reporting tool – there are also sections for the student to complete; it is not currently compulsory for students to complete reports on their progress, but they should be encouraged to do so.
- b. Supervisors should establish whether students have funding from bodies such as the research councils and, if so, what terms and conditions are attached to the grant, including thesis submission deadlines, in order to ensure that students meet those requirements. In the case of doctoral awards, failure to meet the AHRC's submission requirements may jeopardise funding for students in the University in the future.

2. *Enquiries from prospective students*

- a. A prospective graduate student who makes a direct enquiry to a potential supervisor must always be referred to the relevant contact in the Faculty or School office. All applicants must apply through the [graduate admissions process](#).
- b. In answer to a direct enquiry from a prospective student, a member of staff may:
 - Give a clear undertaking as to whether they have the time and necessary specialisation to supervise the student;
 - Discuss and give guidance on the proposed research project;
 - If appropriate, give advice as to whom else the applicant might approach;
 - Inform the applicant that their qualifications must meet the requisite general entry requirements (e.g. high 2.1 or equivalent first degree, the relevant English language requirement, etc.), and any other requirements specific to the particular course of research.
- c. No individual member of staff may accept or reject a prospective student.

E. Conflicts of interest in supervision

- a. The nature of supervision means that a supervisor stands in a position of authority relative to the student being supervised. Supervisors and students negotiate this dynamic to form close professional working relationships. While these close professional working relationships are essential for the progress of a student's research, supervisors are prohibited from seeking to form personally intimate relationships with their students (including, but not limited to, marital, sexual, romantic, or emotionally intimate relationships) and they may not stand in such relationships to any students they supervise.
- b. If such a relationship develops, or is foreseeably likely to develop, it creates a position of conflict of interest between the supervisor and the student whom they are supervising, and steps should be taken to manage that. The relationship must therefore be reported in writing, either by the student or the supervisor, in order for alternative supervisory arrangements to be made without detriment to the student. The implementation of alternative supervisory arrangements will not preclude the supervisor and student continuing to collaborate with one another, but the formal responsibility will cease.

- c. Reporting must take place as soon as practically possible and no later than one week after the relationship has commenced, and should be made to the Director of Graduate Studies, the Faculty Board Chair or the Head of Administration and Finance.
- d. A supervisor seeking out a personally intimate relationship with a student whom they are supervising will be subject to disciplinary procedures under the appropriate [processes](#). Should a supervisor fail to disclose a personally intimate relationship with a student whom they are supervising, or with a student whom they might foreseeably come to supervise, the supervisor will not be permitted to supervise in future, and the supervisor may be subject to further disciplinary processes.
- e. Where a personally intimate relationship exists or develops between co-supervisors of a student, a conflict of interest may develop. This should be reported as outlined above. In such a case, an additional senior academic colleague should be identified to act as a source of independent advice and support for the student concerned. This should be an individual of sufficient seniority to resolve any issues effectively, normally the relevant Faculty Board Chair.

Annexe A: Research supervision: a brief guide for students

The role of the Supervisor is to:

- Advise, guide and support you in all aspects of your research, providing clear intellectual leadership and giving precise guidance about academic expectations.
- Agree with you a clear plan of research, identify milestones and provide information on the availability of research resources
- Agree with you a timetable for:
 - regular meetings (normally twice per term) for detailed discussion of your progress
 - the submission of written work, which the supervisor should return to you within a reasonable time
- Produce a detailed report on your progress at the end of each term, using the online Graduate Supervision Reporting tool – there are sections for the student and the supervisor to complete.
- Ensure that you are aware of the formal requirements and expected timetable for transfer of status, confirmation of status and final submission, and that these are incorporated into your plan of work.
- Discuss subject-specific and general research skills required for your doctoral studies; work with you to identify areas where you require additional training to develop these and other skills; advise you on how these needs may be met, and assess your skills development and training requirements at least once a year.
- Assist and encourage you to participate in the wider academic community.
- Ensure that you are aware of relevant University guidelines and regulations, e.g. Student Handbook, programme handbook, Examination Regulations, guidance on plagiarism, and lecture lists.
- Ensure that you are aware of the relevant guidelines and advice for students undertaking fieldwork.
- Ensure that you are aware of the requirements to undertake research on human subjects, if relevant, including obtaining ethical approval.

The role of the Student is to:

- Attend induction sessions arranged by the faculty, Bodleian Libraries and IT Services.
- Meet with your supervisor regularly and take note of their advice and guidance.
- Draw up a research plan and timetable of work in consultation with your supervisor, and to keep relevant records of all aspects of your work.
- Produce a detailed report on your progress at the end of each term, using the online Graduate Supervision Reporting tool – there are sections for the student and the supervisor to complete.
- Inform the supervisor immediately of any circumstance which might lead to interruption of study
- Work with your supervisor to draw up a programme for identifying and developing your subject-specific and general research skills, and personal and professional skills through participating in Faculty, divisional and other training opportunities throughout your studies.

- Attend appropriate classes, lectures, and seminars.
- Be aware of relevant University guidelines and regulations, e.g. Student Handbook, programme handbook, Examination Regulations, guidance on plagiarism, and of any ethical or legal issues, health and safety requirements, or intellectual property issues arising from your research.
- Work with your supervisor to pursue opportunities to engage with the wider academic community at University, national and international level.

Annexe B: Supervisors' responsibilities for students undertaking fieldwork

Fieldwork

The University has a legal duty of care to its students undertaking fieldwork. University Policies and Procedures are in place to set out how this duty of care is to be discharged. These procedures require that risks are assessed and proportionate measures and arrangements put in place to mitigate those risks to an acceptable level.

Responsibility

Supervisors play a key role in this process in terms of a) ensuring risk assessments are carried out b) ensuring their students are properly prepared for their fieldwork, as well as c) bringing their own experience and knowledge to guide, advise, assess and check arrangements. All University employees have a legal duty to take reasonable care for the safety of those affected by their [the employees] acts or omissions.

Employees, and students, are therefore expected to comply with [the University's health and safety policies and statement of safety organization](#) and to follow the University's [Ethical Fieldwork Code of Conduct](#).

A key requirement for field trips is careful planning to reduce the likelihood or impact of something going wrong. Supervisors must therefore be able to demonstrate this planning by ensuring assessments are in place, appropriately prepared, documented where necessary, reviewed and authorised in line with the above policies.

Specific duties of Supervisors are to:

- Be aware of relevant University Safety Policies and Faculty procedures.
- Consider the health and safety implications of any research proposal.
- Ensure their students have received training appropriate to their needs.
- Ensure that risk assessments have been made and the safety provisions relating to the work exist and have been discussed with those doing it.
- Ensure that suitable arrangements are in place for regular contact to provide support and checks on the student's welfare while they are away.
- Review arrangements with the student after the fieldwork to identify any problems and learn any lessons

Training

The Safety Office provide a [range of training on fieldwork](#) for both students and supervisors.

Annexe C: Norms for Master's programmes in the Humanities Division

The provision of Master's programmes across the Division has grown and evolved organically over many years in the various Faculties. The Division's Graduate Studies Committee has agreed divisional norms for the structure and format of Master's programmes, in accordance with the University's [Policy and Guidance on Postgraduate Taught Courses](#). Of particular relevance in this context is the following expectation in the *Policy and Guidance*: "The assessment or examination norm for a Master's level course which is completed within a year is traditionally the equivalent of two or three three-hour examination papers and a dissertation or thesis of 10,000 – 20,000 words."

The following norms have been agreed for the Humanities Division:

(i) Length of Master's programme

- A one-year Master's course will normally be completed in 9 months.
- A two-year Master's course will normally be completed in 21 months.

(ii) Length of Master's dissertation

- The length of the dissertation for a one-year Master's course will normally be 10,000-20,000 words.
- The length of the dissertation for a two-year Master's course will normally be 20,000-30,000 words.
- Where a dissertation is required for a Master's course involving a practice-based element of assessment, such as those offered by the Faculty of Music (which may require performance or composition) or the Ruskin School of Art (which may require artwork), its length may be lower than the divisional norm, or the dissertation may be optional. For the Master of Theology in Applied Theology, which offers training for the ministry and involves reflection on pastoral practice, the length of the dissertation may also be lower than the divisional norm.
- Where a Master's course involves the study of a language (or languages) *ab initio* the length of the dissertation may be lower than the divisional norm, or the dissertation may be optional.