Code of Practice for Postgraduate Training and Research for Research Degrees

Introduction

1. The Mission Statement of Birkbeck, University of London (referred to as "the College" throughout the rest of this Code of Practice) states:

    The **principal aims** of Birkbeck are to:

    -   Provide part-time higher education courses which meet the changing educational, cultural, personal and career needs of adults; in particular those who live or work in the London region.
    -   Enable adult students from diverse social and educational backgrounds to participate in our courses.
    -   Maintain and develop excellence in research and provide the highest quality research training in all our subject areas.
    -   Make available the results of research, and the expertise acquired, through teaching, publication, partnerships with other organisations and the promotion of civic and public debate.

    The **key supporting objectives** are to:

    -   Offer our students an integrated range of flexible, research-led courses across all levels of provision.
    -   Achieve and maintain strong research cultures in support of interdisciplinary work in each school and faculty.
    -   Ensure the College provides an inclusive working and learning environment for its students and staff so that all may develop to their full potential.
    -   Develop the College's capacity to respond rapidly to new and changing opportunities in higher and further education.
    -   Develop sustainable partnerships within the London region and beyond.

2. The College undertakes to provide the following for all research students, sometimes in conjunction with neighboring or collaborating university and college institutions:

    -   appropriate environments in which to work, which are conducive to interaction with fellow researchers and academic staff;
    -   appropriate library and laboratory facilities;
    -   access to appropriate computing facilities and accompanying technical support.

3. The purpose of this Code of Practice is to establish clear and explicit mutual expectations between the College and its research students, and to minimise the risks and problems of personal difficulties, inadequate supervision, or unsatisfactory student performance.

4. This Code of Practice is informed by the QAA Quality Code Part B, Chapter B11 (Research Degrees) as well as the expectations of Research Councils UK in relation to induction, training, monitoring, supervision, examination and award of research degrees.

5. In addition to this Code of Practice, Departments and/or Schools may publish as necessary more specific statements of School / Departmental requirements and arrangements.

Institutional Arrangements

6. All research students of the College are registered and enrolled within the Department that is the primary focus of their research.

7. The College awards research degrees of the University of London. The College's research degree regulations define the conditions that each student must satisfy in order to qualify for the award of this research degree.

8. The College has established a Research Student Sub-Committee, reporting via the Research Committee to Academic Board, to oversee the development and implementation of research student policy and regulation. The Research Student Sub-Committee will monitor postgraduate research programmes through the Annual Review of Research Degree Programmes process; including use of submission rate data and student feedback.

9. The College has established the Birkbeck Graduate Research School (BGRS) whose key aim is to enhance the student experience of the College's research students. The BGRS provides training and other resources open to all research students of the College. The BGRS is led by its academic director (Pro-Vice Master for Research), and managed from Registry Services; it reports regularly to the College's Research Student Sub-Committee.

10. In the case of funded Research Students the College will refer to Terms and Conditions of the funding body and support arrangements for payment of stipends, tuition fees or other costs as appropriate.

11. The College operates attendance monitoring processes for students with a Tier 4 Visa, in line with UK Government requirements.

Research Environment

12. Departments should outline to their research students the resources available to them and the opportunities to take part in seminar and other programmes, both to present their own research and participate in the research of academic colleagues and other students.

13. Postgraduate research students are expected to participate in and benefit from the postgraduate life of the College. It is the responsibility of the student's Department to create and sustain the sense of intellectual and academic community among its research students. Departments should encourage students to participate in College, School and Departmental workshops, research seminars and reading groups, especially those which provide an opportunity for students to present and discuss their own work. Departments should also encourage students to participate in academic conferences, in order to extend their understanding of the subject and its context, to present their work to specialists in their area of research, to make contact with researchers from other institutions and countries, and to provide opportunities for relevant collaboration.

14. The BGRS facilitates and advises departments in the provision of generic research training appropriate to their disciplinary research area and in other matters relating to postgraduate training and research. It delivers training for staff and students in a range of generic skills as well as facilitating the delivery of generic skills training within departments and schools.

15. Departments should maintain and make available as required information on welfare and support systems for research students, as well as information regarding sources of professional and medical help and advice. Students should be made aware of specialised support available to them beyond the Department, particularly provided by Student Services; including support for disability, counselling, and careers.

16. Departments should ensure that students and their supervisors, are made aware of the procedures which allow suspension of registration in the case of illness or special personal problems. Please refer to the Break in Studies Policy.

Selection, Admission and Induction

17. The College's policy on admission of research students will be defined by its Admissions Policy.

18. Departments must ensure that all newly registered research students receive, following their admission, advice, information and guidance on the key aspects of the research degree

programme, the student's workplace environment, the Department's research environment and culture, the wider School and College environment, and access to library, computing and laboratory facilities. A copy of this Code of Practice should be distributed to research students, and the key responsibilities expected of research students discussed with them. Students should also be informed of the induction events offered by the BGRS.

Students' Responsibilities

19. The student should select his or her research topic, in consultation and agreement with the supervisor. In some cases, the choice may be determined by research projects in progress in the Department or by an external funding body.

20. A detailed research plan must be formulated in consultation between the student and the supervisor as soon as possible and no later than the end of the first term of study for full-time students or first two terms of study for part-time students, in the context of what is appropriate for the discipline. The student and supervisor will complete an agreed outline of the research plan, to include the scope and timescale of the programme of study, which will be submitted for approval via the appropriate process as stipulated by the Department.

21. Publicly-funded students must accept a commitment to make and maintain a research plan which ensures the completion of their thesis within the timescales specified by funding bodies. Funded students must familiarise themselves with the guidelines of their funding body and respond to requests by the funder for information as required.

22. Students should monitor their progress against their research plan, and keep their progress under regular review by maintaining a written "research log" or other appropriate form of periodic written self-evaluation which is made available to the supervisor. A formal progress report must be submitted annually to the Department for consideration in accordance with Departmental procedures. These reports will normally be made on a template provided by the Department and should include a self-assessment of academic progress, participation in the activities described within this code of practice in relation to supervision, provision of resources, administrative and any other relevant matters. Updated Training Needs Analysis should be completed as part of the annual review.

23. Students are responsible for maintaining written records which record their progress and forward plans and the need for future supervisory meetings.

24. Students should take the initiative in notifying their supervisors of any additional training needs they have identified or any difficulties that have arisen with the progress of their work, however elementary these problems may seem.

25. Students should discuss with their supervisors the type of guidance and comment they find to be most helpful, and agree a schedule of meetings for reporting to their supervisor on the progress of their work.

26. Students should take full account of the scholarly guidance offered by their supervisors and attend the required and recommended training programmes and research seminars. Students should accept a commitment to developing their presentational skills by making oral presentations of their research in their Department, School or College, and attending relevant conferences and workshops.

27. The student should decide when to submit the thesis, in consultation with the supervisor and within the maximum registration period. The supervisor's guidance will be of crucial importance in assisting the student to make this decision. If Departmental procedures require, the student must also consult with the relevant Departmental forum before reaching a decision.

28. Students are responsible for requesting any breaks in studies in accordance with the College Break in Studies Policy and the College Policy on Maternity, Paternity, Shared Parental and Adoption Leave for Research Students.

Supervision

29. All academic staff undertaking the supervision of postgraduate research students should have received training in respect of postgraduate supervision as part of their staff development. The training of supervisors and updating of supervisory skills, for example in the light of new research sources, methods and technologies, should be a normal part of continuing staff development, and should apply not just to new or inexperienced supervisors. Departments should ensure that the appointed supervisors have appropriate research expertise for the student's research project and can provide appropriate guidance on research techniques and methodologies. Supervisors who have not themselves successfully completed a PhD thesis will be expected to have equivalent research and publications experience.

30. In addition to at least one Principal Supervisor, a Second Supervisor should normally be appointed for every research student:

    Principal/ Joint Supervisors. The duties of principal supervisors are set out in subsequent paragraphs of this document. There may be occasions in which it is advantageous to have two or more joint principal supervisors, particularly in inter- or multi-disciplinary research projects. In cases of more than one principal supervisor, care must be taken to ensure that irresolvable conflicts between the principal supervisors are not likely to occur, by clarifying at the outset the role of each supervisor and reviewing this regularly. There will be occasions where it is appropriate to appoint as a principal, joint principal or second supervisor a person who is an externally-funded member of staff and/or a person who is a member of another academic institution or a collaborating body. In these cases the College's Guidance on the Appointment of External Supervisors must be followed.

    Second Supervisor: A second supervisor must be familiar with the student's work throughout the programme of study, and available to the student for consultation about the student's research. A second supervisor should be able to take on the role of principal supervisor during any periods of leave of absence of the principal supervisor e.g. absence due to illness, unless the Department is able to make alternative arrangements in such cases. It may also be appropriate for the second supervisor to have a role in the pastoral care of a research student.

31. Individual members of staff with a normal teaching load should not normally act as Principal Supervisor for more than 8 students; any proposal to exceed this limit should be considered by the Research Student Sub-Committee or its Chair acting on behalf of the Sub-Committee.

32. The supervisory team should provide the student with advice on the nature of research and the standards expected; about the planning and due scope of the student's research programme; about the primary sources and secondary literature required to support the project; about the availability of and requirements for attendance at relevant seminars and taught classes; about research techniques (including arrangements for instruction where necessary); and questions of originality, plagiarism and publication of research results.

33. The Principal Supervisor should normally meet with the student for formal consultation three times a term in the case of full-time students, and twice a term in the case of part-time students. The Second Supervisor should be available to meet with the student at least once per term. The number of formal consultations may be varied by mutual agreement as circumstances may require, and may include "virtual" supervision[1], with the agreement of both parties. Supervisors may also maintain contact through regular seminar meetings. Supervisors are responsible for structuring at least the minimum number of supervisory meetings.

34. Supervisors should be accessible to students at other appropriate times when advice may be needed.

35. A clear understanding between the supervisor and student should be established at an early stage about the supervisor's responsibilities in relation to the student's written submissions. The understanding must accord with University or College regulations, of which the student should be made aware, and must cover the nature and frequency of guidance or comment that the supervisor will offer.

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[1] For instance by use of internet-based software that will enable telephone or video conferencing

36. Supervisors should give detailed advice on the importance of planning and the necessary completion dates of successive stages of the work so that the thesis may be submitted within the required time.

37. Supervisors should advise on matters relating to the presentation of work in the form of conference and journal papers, including the avoidance of plagiarism and the process of due acknowledgement.

38. Supervisors should, when appropriate, facilitate contacts with specialists in other institutions and, where possible, access to necessary materials and facilities in other institutions and research sources.

39. Written work should be requested as appropriate, and returned with constructive criticism in reasonable time.

40. Arrangements should be made as appropriate for the student to talk about his or her work to staff or research seminars, and to have practice in oral examinations or poster presentations as appropriate.

41. Guidance should be given to award-holders regarding the submission of periodic reports on their progress, and other regulations and procedures stipulated by their funding bodies.

42. Supervisors should ensure that students are made aware of any inadequacy of progress or of standard of work which is below that generally expected.

43. Where appropriate, supervisors should be prepared to refer students for professional guidance in respect of personal or other problems not necessarily directly related to the research.

44. Students should be provided with appropriate support to prepare them for the oral examination. Supervisors must inform students at the appropriate stage: about procedures for the submission of the thesis; about arrangements for the oral examination; about what will be expected of them in defending their thesis; about the range of possible outcomes of the examination; and about sources of support in preparing for the viva (such as the BGRS Moodle site). Students should feel well prepared for their viva through having presented their research in their Department, School or College, and attending relevant conferences and workshops (see section 26) but occasionally it may be appropriate to prepare students for the oral examination with a mock examination in the Department. Supervisors should discuss the format of the viva in advance including whether an online or in person viva is proposed.

45. Particular care should be taken with overseas students who may need greater support in the early stages of their research. The assistance needed may include help with language problems and advice about language training. The supervisor should be aware that the period of time available for the completion of the thesis will normally be determined by the funding available and in many instances will be less than the maximum four-year period prescribed above.

46. Supervisors should ensure that students are aware of their responsibilities, as set out in this code of practice.

47. Occasionally cases can arise in which difficulties in the relationship between the supervisor and student begin to jeopardise the successful completion of the thesis. Departments should ensure that procedures for requesting consideration of a change of supervisor in such cases exist, and are clearly communicated to research students during their induction period. Such procedures should state that any request for a change in supervisor must be made in writing to the appropriate officer of the College. It is important that Departments make clear that, if a student feels that an effective working relationship is not being established with the supervisor, these procedures provide a means of discussing the possibility of changing supervisors. It is necessary that these procedures should operate expeditiously to avoid loss of time in regard to the research or its funding. However, it should be noted that it is the Department that is responsible for the allocation of supervisors, and that a Department may refuse a request to change the supervisory arrangements where it considers it appropriate to do so. Any allegations of misconduct by supervisors should be dealt with via the Student Complaints Policy and Procedure.

48. Departments should provide and communicate to research students procedures by which students can make representations to the Director of Graduate Studies within that Department, or other designated person, if they feel that their work is not proceeding satisfactorily for reasons outside their control.

Progression and Review Arrangements

49. It is the responsibility of Departments to monitor the progress of their research students, to ensure that they are progressing satisfactorily towards completion, normally within 4 years (full-time) or 7 years (part-time), including any time spend in Writing Up Mode. Extensions beyond the maximum registration period are considered by the Research Student Sub-Committee – see Regulations for Research Degrees.

50. The student and their principal supervisor(s) will report annually to the Department on the student's progress and any problems encountered during the year; the Principal Supervisor will also comment as appropriate on the student's annual report. The Department will decide annually whether re-admission should be offered to a student, in accordance with the College's Policy on the Termination of a Student's Registration, and will agree the targets proposed by the supervisor and student to be met in the following academic year; the Department will communicate these targets to the student. Departments must report progression decisions for each research student to the BGRS in the Registry.

51. Students on Writing Up Mode status will be expected to produce a full thesis plan and a timescale for completion against which their progress will be monitored.

52. In the case of funded students, supervisors are responsible for submitting formal reports on progress as required by the funding bodies.

53. The regular consultation between supervisor and student should be used to establish and maintain an agreed view of the direction and progress of the research and to identify in a timely fashion any remedial action necessary to redirect the student's work or to revise the agreed schedule for completion within the specified period.

54. If at any time the supervisor forms the view, on the available evidence, that the student's rate of progress is such that the student is unlikely to achieve within the specified period the degree for which he or she is registered, the supervisor should notify the student in writing without delay and discuss with the student ways of achieving the objectives of the student's research plan. If progress remains unsatisfactory the Department should proceed in accordance with the College's Policy on the Termination of a Student's Registration.

55. Departments should give students the opportunity to comment on all supervisory and other arrangements which bear on their work at regular intervals. Research students should be consulted where appropriate on matters of policy relating to their supervision. Students should be made aware that they can also raise issues for discussion at meetings of the Department Student/Staff Exchange Committee or for forwarding to the Research Student Sub-Committee via the student representative on that committee.

Transfer from MPhil to PhD

56. For students who are registered initially for the MPhil or MPhil/PhD, the procedures and timescales for upgrading to PhD registration should be clearly set out in Departmental documentation and communicated in writing to research students. MPhil/ PhD transfer is usually considered during the second year for full time research students or during the third or fourth year for part time students.

57. Departments must have a formal procedure for considering the transfer of students' registration from MPhil to PhD. All staff concerned with the supervision of research students should be familiar with the procedure and should comply with it in all respects.

58. The Department's procedure for transfer must indicate the criteria for consideration for transfer together with deadlines and any documentary requirements. It should specify the point in a student's course when such consideration would normally be appropriate if satisfactory progress is being made. If award-holders have received funding from UK public sources, their transfer from

MPhil to PhD registration should occur in accordance with the funding body's guidelines and requirements.

59. Applications to transfer should be agreed by the student's Principal Supervisor and considered by panels, the majority of whom will not be the student's supervisors. Panel members considering the student's MPhil/PhD transfer may not subsequently take part in the final PhD examination and viva. Transfer procedures should specify the constitution of panels that will consider applications to transfer, and the appeal process.

60. If the application is unsuccessful, the student should be informed within 10 working days in writing and given the reasons for its rejection. In appropriate cases, the student should be given detailed guidance on the measures to be taken before any further application for transfer would be considered. Students have a maximum of two attempts to pass the MPhil/ PhD upgrade.

61. A student whose application for transfer is unsuccessful and who disputes the decision on grounds other than the academic judgement of the panel making the decision should have the right of appeal within one month of notification of the decision. Appeals should be made in writing within the Department and should be considered by the PGR Director (or appropriate replacement, to be appointed by the Assistant Dean with responsibility for the Department concerned, where the PGR Director was a member of the original panel). The PGR Director or appropriate replacement may choose to reject the appeal, or to convene a new panel to hear the application; their decision will be final. The outcome of the appeal should be conveyed to the student in writing.

62. There will be no further right of appeal. If, however, the student has good reason to believe that the case has not been fully and fairly considered in accordance with the School's declared procedures, the student has the right to make a written complaint to the Academic Registrar. On receipt of the complaint the Academic Registrar may consult with other members of the College as considered appropriate. This review will be confined to considering whether the Department, in reaching its decision, did so fully in accordance with its procedures. The conclusions will be conveyed to the student in writing. If the Academic Registrar finds that Departmental procedures have not been observed the Assistant Dean with responsibility for the relevant Department will be asked to arrange for further consideration of the student's application in accordance with those procedures.

Development of Research and Other Skills

63. Departments should ensure that training in research methods appropriate to the discipline is made available during the first year of study and is adequately publicised to students. Training needs should be considered in subsequent years using Training Needs Analysis. In the case of some Departments, it may be appropriate to arrange training in collaboration with other Departments or external bodies.

64. Departments should ensure that training is available to their students in generic research skills, as identified through Training Needs Analysis. Such training may be provided in collaboration with other Departments and Institutions or with the Birkbeck Graduate Research School.

65. The College will develop and facilitate training for teaching duties undertaken by research students. Departments should monitor the amount of teaching/demonstrating offered to and undertaken by research students, in order to ensure that these do not adversely affect the timescale for submission of the thesis or the terms and conditions of the funder

66. Throughout their studies, students should be encouraged to develop their knowledge of their research field and their presentational skills by such activities as participating in seminars, making oral presentations of their research in the Department, School or College, or attending relevant conferences or colloquia.

Feedback Mechanisms

67. Departments should provide mechanisms that enable students to comment on all aspects of their studies and to receive responses from the Department, School and/or College, on at least an annual basis. This may be by survey, student representatives, establishment of student / staff liaison committee, representation on existing committee or other consultative method and may be conducted at School level where appropriate. These mechanisms will be published in

Departmental documentation.

68. The College will participate in the annual Postgraduate Research Experience Survey, with results analysed and fed to the College's Research Student Sub-Committee and appropriate School body for information. The College's Research Student Sub-Committee will invite a student representative to its membership and the BGRS will facilitate meetings for Research Student Representatives.

Assessment

69. Examiners will be appointed by the College's research degree examiner panels; examiners will normally be nominated by supervisors. The detailed procedures on the appointment of these examiners is defined within the College's "Procedures for the Appointment of Research degree Examiners", (available at http://www.bbk.ac.uk/reg/assessment/phd_external/appointment_examiners or from the Registry). Examinations are conducted in accordance with the College and University research degree regulations.

Student Representations and Complaints

Appeals

70. Any appeal against the decision of the examiners for a research degree will be considered in accordance with the College's Appeals Policy and Procedure (Research).

Related policies guidelines
The following policies and guidelines are referred to in this code of practice:

- Postgraduate training and research for the MPhil and PhD degrees: Code of Practice
- Regulations for the degree of MPhil and PhD.
- Appointment of Research Degree Examiners
- Break in studies policy
- Maternity, Paternity, Shared Parental and Adoption Leave for Research Students
- Writing up policy
- College Policy and Procedure for the Termination of a Student's Registration on a Programme of Study
- Appeals policy
- Guidance on the Appointment of External Supervisors

Academic Board

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