

Policy on supervised dissertations and research projects for taught students

Introduction

1. Many of Birkbeck, University of London's (the College's) taught programmes, at both undergraduate and postgraduate level, include a dissertation component. This will often be in the final year for undergraduate students or at the end of the programme for postgraduate students and will often comprise 60 or more credits.
2. The purpose of a dissertation is to enable students to undertake independent research on an agreed topic related to their programme of study. Typically, an academic member of staff will be assigned to each student undertaking a dissertation or project, to agree the topic with the student and to supervise the student while they are working on their dissertation or project.
3. This policy outlines the responsibilities of the programme director in relation to supervised dissertations and research projects, the role of the dissertation/project supervisor and the rights and responsibilities of both the supervisor and the student.
4. This policy does not apply to supervisors for research students, whose role is defined in the [College's Code of Practice for the Degrees of MPhil and PhD](#).

Responsibilities of the programme director

The programme director is responsible for ensuring that:

5. The supervised dissertation or project module meets the dissertation/project module design principles (see appendix)
6. Students are appointed a dissertation/project supervisor at the beginning of the dissertation/project period. The programme director is responsible for liaising with the Head of School,| to ensure that each supervisor has a sufficient workload allocation to support their students effectively and that students within a cohort are all able to access the same level of supervisory support
7. An appropriate topic or project is identified for each dissertation/project student
8. Students understand how any formative feedback will be provided on the draft section(s) of the dissertation/project
9. Students are provided with relevant legal and regulatory information and guidance

e.g. health and safety law, data protection law, research ethics approvals, copyright and intellectual property and correct citation/plagiarism.

10. Students understand how to access independent sources of help/advice should a problem arise during the dissertation process, e.g. module convenor or programme director
11. Dissertation/project supervisors and students understand their responsibilities as outlined in this Policy (see below). Staff and students should be briefed on the expected structure and coverage of dissertation/project meetings in their school, to enable them to prepare effectively
12. Students will have access to relevant facilities (e.g. laboratories) to enable them to complete their research work effectively and be advised clearly by the school of the timeframes when these facilities will be available to them
13. Arrangements are put in place to cover the supervisory arrangements of students, in cases where the dissertation/project supervisor becomes unavailable for a period of time (e.g. research leave/trip, sick leave or leaving the institution)
14. Where programme directors define a higher number of contact points than is outlined under point 23 of this policy, then such variation must be clearly published in the programme information and will supersede the requirements published in this policy.

Role of the supervisor

15. The role of the supervisor is to assist the student by providing advice and guidance on how to prepare, produce and improve their dissertation. This includes:
 - a. working with the student to choose a suitable topic
 - b. supporting the student to draw up a suitable preliminary bibliography
 - c. planning the primary and secondary research the student will need to do for the dissertation
 - d. identifying suitable research methods and ensuring that the student is trained in these
 - e. obtaining any necessary research ethics approvals and ensuring the student understands their duties under Health and Safety Law (including the drafting of suitable risk assessments where appropriate) and data protection legislation (including the drafting of suitable data management plans where appropriate)
 - f. being a source of information, advice and guidance in undertaking the dissertation and other general academic advice, including methods of improving the presentation of the dissertation

g. being available to advise the student on approach, coverage, questions to be asked/hypothesis to be tested and the outline structure and research design.

16. More specifically, the supervisor is expected to:

- a. assist the student in the definition and organisation of the project in the early stages of preparation
- b. advise the student on the feasibility of what they plan to do. This must include ensuring that the student understands the ethics approval process and the timeline for obtaining it, especially if external ethical approvals are required
- c. work with the student to identify a suitable topic for the student's dissertation and where this cannot be identified, the supervisor should raise this with the programme director for a resolution as soon as possible
- d. approve the dissertation proposal
- e. contact the student, if they do not contact the supervisor, to arrange a meeting within 10 days of the supervisor allocation. If the student does not respond, then the supervisor should inform the programme director
- f. inform students about how they can be contacted and advise them about any periods of unavailability in advance
- g. respond to emails from their project/dissertation students within three working days (this would not apply in cases where a supervisor has notified a student in advance about a planned period of unavailability).

The supervisor is under no obligation to:

- h. read full preliminary drafts of the student's work. The dissertation supervisor may read a proportion of the dissertation and comment on the structure, content of the section, research sources and methodology, referencing and style
- i. proofread the final draft.

It is not the role of the supervisor to direct the research or ensure that a dissertation is of sufficient quality to pass; this is the responsibility of the student. Any opinion expressed by the supervisor relating to the quality of the work should not be taken to represent the opinion of the relevant sub-board of examiners.

Responsibilities of the student

17. It is the responsibility of the student to initiate contact with their dissertation supervisor once the supervisor has been allocated. Students should contact their supervisors within 10 working days of the supervisor being nominated, to agree a date for an initial meeting or other working methods. If students do not receive a response from their dissertation/project supervisor within three working days (this would not apply in cases where a supervisor has notified a student in advance about a planned period of unavailability), then they should forward the email to the module convenor, so that

they can look into this to ensure that the student is provided with the necessary supervisory support as soon as possible.

18. The student and supervisor should agree a timetable at the outset for completion, which should include provision for at least three meetings in advance of submission. Meetings should be face-to-face (i.e. either online using MS Teams or in person). It is recommended that the supervisor and student meet in person at least once wherever possible.
19. Students are responsible for providing their supervisor with drafts of work to be discussed, as agreed with the supervisor and no later than five working days before any meeting.
20. Students are responsible for ensuring that approval from any appropriate body is obtained in relation to research ethics but they should seek and receive advice from the dissertation supervisor in relation to whether ethical approval is likely to be obtained in the timeframe required for the project.
21. Students should keep brief notes of their supervisory meetings and send these to the supervisor for approval following the meeting, to ensure that there is a shared understanding about progress to date and any action points.

Responsibilities of the supervisor

22. The parameters for consideration of drafts should be set by the schools and made clear to students based on local frameworks. Supervisors should make clear to students (according to the framework) how many drafts supervisors are required to read, when they should be submitted by and include sizes of drafts they are able to accept during the supervisory period (e.g. chapters or whole dissertations).
23. Once a timetable for submission of drafts and for supervision meetings is agreed, supervisors should ensure that appropriate feedback is provided on submitted draft work at supervision meetings. Where written feedback is agreed, this should be provided within a reasonable time from the agreed date for submission of draft work.
24. The student is entitled to have at least three meetings with their supervisor prior to submission of the dissertation. These could be, for example:
 - a. an initial discussion identifying the topic, questions and methodology, identifying any research ethics approval that will need to be obtained and sketching out an

initial action plan and bibliography

- b. an intermediate meeting to assess progress on the dissertation and discuss the likely structure of the first draft
 - c. a final 'troubleshooting' meeting.
25. The student and supervisor should agree, prior to their first meeting, in what format supervision meetings will take place. Examples might include face to face meetings, online video sessions, telephone conversations, or email exchanges, or other working formats as required and agreed.
26. Many dissertations are carried out when staff may be on leave or otherwise unable to meet with the student. Where a supervisor will be out of contact for a period longer than two weeks, then they, or their school, should ensure that an alternative supervisor is available to cover during this period.
27. As stated in paragraph 7, it is not the role of the supervisor to ensure that a dissertation is of sufficient quality to pass. Supervisors should refrain from commenting on the likely outcome of an assessment and focus solely on advice on how to improve the dissertation.

Complaints

28. Where a student considers that their supervision is not adequate, they may request a change of supervisor by writing to their programme director or Head of School. Any change will be at the discretion of the relevant Head of School.
29. Formal complaints about supervision should be submitted in accordance with the College's [Student Complaints Policy and Procedure](#).

Appendix

Dissertation/project module design principles

1. A supervised dissertation or project module should:
 - a. be designed carefully within the overall structure of the programme of study
 - b. prepare students for their research and give adequate time for students to finish the work (60 credits = 600 hours, 30 credits = 300 hours)
 - c. include an example for students about how their time could be structured, including timetabled sessions, supervisions, work with others and their own work
 - d. include opportunities for students to gain feedback on their developing dissertation/project work before its submission. This should include feedback from their dissertation/project supervisor, but it would also be good practice for the school to provide structured opportunities for feedback and support from their peers and the module/programme director (e.g. presentation sessions)
 - e. have a Moodle shell that meets the College Baseline: Minimum Moodle Standards.

2. Dissertation/project students should be provided with information about the supervised dissertation/project process at the beginning of the programme. This should cover:
 - a. all the relevant milestones for both part-time and full-time students (see 3 below)
 - b. how students will be supported by the school, including how they will be prepared to develop the research skills necessary to undertake the dissertation/project module effectively e.g. either through prerequisite modules or dissertation workshops delivered as part of the dissertation/project module itself
 - c. who to contact if they have any questions about the dissertation/project module
 - d. what form of primary data collection would be acceptable in this discipline
 - e. the scheduling of a briefing session about the supervised dissertation/project module at the beginning of the programme of study, to allow students to ask questions about the process. A record of the briefing (including the answers to any questions asked) should be made available to students following it (e.g. recording or notes of the briefing).

3. The timeline for a dissertation/project module should include:
 - a. the deadline by which the proposal/project must be approved/allocated by the school. This should include confirmation that the dissertation or project has obtained ethical approval and is achievable within the dissertation period
 - b. the date by which a first meeting with the supervisor must have taken place
 - c. the date by which an action plan and schedule of future meetings should be agreed with the dissertation/project supervisor
 - d. the date by which draft section(s) should be submitted to obtain feedback from the dissertation supervisor

- e. the date by which feedback will be provided to the students
- f. final deadline for submission.

4. All dissertation/project modules should be included in the College dissertation module survey annually, so that improvements can be made to their delivery based on student feedback

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