

justask

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# A GUIDE TO... RESEARCH SUPERVISION

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From Bristol SU, providing support for:

- Understanding your rights and responsibilities
- What to do if things go wrong
- The University's "At Risk" procedure



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This guide is intended to be read alongside the document "Regulations and Code of Practice for Research Degree Programmes" ("The Code") for your current academic year. The relationship between you and your supervisor is possibly the most pivotal one that you will have as a Research student.

This guide is intended to explain your rights and responsibilities when it comes to supervision, what guidance and support you can expect from your supervisor, tips for maintaining a productive relationship, and what to do if you experience difficulties with your supervision.

## WHO SHOULD BE SUPERVISING ME?

Arrangements for supervision will vary between academic disciplines and research environments, but the University has a minimum set of requirements for the supervision of Research students as set out in The Code:

[bristol.ac.uk/academic-quality/pg/cop-research-degrees.html](http://bristol.ac.uk/academic-quality/pg/cop-research-degrees.html)

Students must have access to at least two named members of staff from whom they can seek support. At a minimum, you should have a main supervisor (who will normally be your principal point of contact) and a second member of staff as another point of academic contact. If you conduct your research across schools, in two institutions, or in industry, you should be appointed a co-supervisor from each area. These members of staff are your "supervisory team".

All members of the supervisory team must have defined roles and responsibilities which should be agreed with you when you commence your studies. Ordinarily your main supervisor will have an input on the academic issues of your research, and the second member of staff will provide guidance on meeting the University's regulatory requirements (for example, advising you on the upgrade procedures).

# YOUR MAIN SUPERVISOR SHOULD:

- Be an academic member of University staff, be active in your area of research and be expected to remain research-active in the University for the duration of your studies
- Normally have also supervised at least one doctoral student through to successful completion and have a minimum of three years experience of research degree supervision
- Have the appropriate knowledge and skills to support and guide your research, and to be reasonably accessible

If your research requires you to work away from the University, appropriate supervisory arrangements should be put in place to cover the time you are away.

# WHAT IS EXPECTED OF ME?

As a Research student at the University of Bristol, you have the following responsibilities in addition to those outlined in the Student Agreement:

- To register with the University before commencing your studies and at the start of each academic year, and to pay any relevant fees
- To keep your personal details up to date via Studentinfo
- To ensure you have adequate financial resources to enable you to complete your programme
- To treat all University staff and students, and your supervisor(s), with due respect and consideration
- To maintain regular contact with your supervisor(s), especially if you are away from the University
- To comply with all relevant University regulations and its Code of Practice
- To meet the University's requirements for good academic conduct (for example, by ensuring written work is submitted on time, that you meet with your supervisor(s) regularly, that you keep appropriate records of your research and meetings with your supervisor(s) etc.
- The progress of your research is primarily your responsibility – this includes preparing and submitting your dissertation, and for your personal and professional development

# WHAT AM I ENTITLED TO?

As a Research student at the University of Bristol, you are entitled to a high-quality research environment, both within the University and/or any collaborating institutions that offer relevant and sufficient expertise and appropriate facilities to support your research.

To achieve this, you should expect to receive the following support:

## COMMENCING YOUR PROGRAMME

You should normally be given the name of your main supervisor and their contact details before you begin your studies. Your supervisor should then arrange a meeting between you, normally within a week of your registration. At this first meeting:

- You should come to a mutual agreement on how often and for what duration you will meet formally during your first term.
- A normal schedule for students and their supervisor(s) to meet to review progress is on at least a monthly basis
- If you have more than one supervisor, you should initially meet both supervisors to discuss how their responsibilities will be allocated
- You should discuss any taught components of your course and your academic responsibilities. You should also discuss your outline research plan and any financial considerations, such as the requirements of your sponsor (if appropriate).



## INPUT AND INTERACTION WITH YOUR SUPERVISOR

As a Research student you can expect the following minimum input from, and interaction with, your supervisors:

- Adequate opportunity to meet your supervisory team for formal and informal discussions. You are likely to have a mixture of both sorts of meetings with your supervisory team – it is important to agree on the purpose of each meeting, and what will, or will not, be discussed. **For formal meetings, you are normally expected to make a record of the meeting**
- You are entitled to receive appropriate feedback and comments on your written work promptly to ensure that your progress is not held up. If you find that you are getting insufficient or delayed feedback – tell your supervisor!
- Your supervisor can play an important role in ensuring that you can access alternative sources of support within your school and the wider University – e.g. careers advisers, the Centre for English and Foundation Studies for students whose first language is not English, the Counselling Service, etc. They should also ensure that they help you network with others in your field of research, and help you with submitting papers to journals and for conferences
- If your main supervisor leaves the University or goes on sabbatical, a replacement supervisor must be appointed

## YOUR DISSERTATION/THESIS AND ASSESSMENT

- Supervisors can offer guidance to students on the preparation of their dissertation and on making corrections required by the examiners, but such guidance is only advisory – **the ultimate responsibility for the content of the dissertation rests with you, the student**
- Having said that, it is the supervisor's responsibility to ensure you have understood their comments and feedback so you can incorporate their guidance if you feel it is appropriate
- You should also be given opportunity to practice for your oral examination

## OTHER ENTITLEMENTS

- You should have the opportunity to participate in teaching, with access to appropriate training and mentoring. For teaching work you should normally be paid. Please see the University's policy on "Postgraduate Research Students who Teach" for full details:
- **[bristol.ac.uk/academic-quality/pg/pgrswhoteach.html](http://bristol.ac.uk/academic-quality/pg/pgrswhoteach.html)**
- You are entitled to 25 days annual leave, in addition to University closure days

## IF THINGS GO WRONG...

Most Research students have a mutually beneficial relationship with their supervisor, with the student receiving expert advice, support and guidance in the course of their research. However, due to the often intimate relationship students have with their supervisors, and the very nature of doing research itself, things can sometimes go wrong. Examples of disagreements which have previously occurred between students and their supervisory teams include:

- A breakdown in communication in the supervisory relationship. This is one of the more common problems, and can be caused by a variety of factors, such as a personality clash between student and supervisor, disagreement on what the research is "about" and where it should be headed, lack of communication either from the supervisor or student, or a perception that feedback provided is not comprehensive enough
- Issues around "ownership" of the direction of the research – although the Code highlights that it is the student's ultimate responsibility for content, in practice this does not always seem to be true. Sometimes students can feel that they are being pressurised into researching something that lies outside their field of interest
- Conversely, occasionally a student's research can be deemed to have strayed too far from their original research proposal and what they originally registered to study, something which can add to the confusion around "ownership" of the research
- Similarly, there can be ownership issues surrounding intellectual property and publishing papers – sometimes Research students can feel that their supervisor is unfairly benefitting from their intellectual property.
- A lack of, or inadequate, pastoral support – for example supervisors

failing to signpost to the University's Support Services, or lacking awareness that they even exist

- Failure to inform students about relevant research events, conferences, or training opportunities to assist them in their research
- Teaching: either not providing Research students with teaching opportunities, or forcing students to teach when they don't wish to do so
- Not adequately monitoring and informing students of their progress (or lack of). For some students the first time they are made aware that their performance is not deemed up to scratch is when they are informed they have been placed "At Risk" (which is a formal University procedure, set out below). Sometimes there are issues around whether this procedure has been followed correctly

## RAISING YOUR CONCERNS INFORMALLY

If you experience any of these problems, or otherwise feel that your supervisor(s) are failing to meet up to the minimum supervision requirements, tell someone at the first opportunity. Although many students don't want to rock the boat and risk damaging their relationship with their supervisor, it is important that you **raise issues when they happen** because:

- The University will not be aware that there is a problem until you inform them otherwise. It's much easier to resolve issues informally when they first arise, rather than further down the line when problems may have deepened or bad feeling developed
- If you later wish to submit a complaint or appeal to the University (see below), the relevant regulations state that any appeal or complaint may be rejected if it concerns events that happened some time ago.

It is important to keep a record of any correspondence you have regarding your concerns, and for this reason we would advise you to raise them in writing (email is fine!). This ensures that you have a "paper trail" of your attempts to resolve the problems you have experienced, in case you choose to take matters further.

If you are unsure whether your concerns are justified, please speak to a Just Ask Adviser who can help clarify things. We can also help you to identify the most appropriate person to raise your concerns with, and advise you on how best to phrase your concerns in a diplomatic way (if you're worried about causing offence)

## TAKING YOUR CONCERNS FURTHER

If the initial steps you take fail to resolve the issues, or create further difficulties, then the next step may be to lodge a complaint with your School or Faculty.

A Just Ask Adviser can talk you through the process of submitting a complaint and help advise you on the content of your complaint. Please see our Complaints guide for further details on this procedure and the support available from Just Ask

## WHAT THE UNIVERSITY CAN DO ABOUT YOUR CONCERNS

The most appropriate course of action will depend on the precise nature of your concerns. However, if you or your supervisor no longer wishes to work with each other, you can request a change in supervisor via your Head of School.

Changing supervisor is not a **right** - supervisory arrangements can only be changed with the mutual agreement of the student and the University.

## IF THE UNIVERSITY HAS CONCERNS ABOUT YOU

If you are failing to make satisfactory academic progress, the University may deem your progress as being "of concern". This is the first stage of the University's "At Risk" procedure (see annex 3 of The Code).

If this does happen to you, we would advise you to consult a Just Ask Adviser **at the first opportunity**. The "At Risk" procedure is designed to help the University decide whether or not you are capable of attaining

Get in touch with  
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advice



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the required academic standard for your degree. Although it is intended as a mechanism to get students back on track, it could ultimately lead to your registration being downgraded to a lower degree, or even terminated.

A Just Ask Adviser can:

- Guide and support you through the stages of the “At Risk” procedure
- Advise you on steps you can take to demonstrate you have the ability to remain registered on your degree.
- Advise on appeals against decisions made by the Research Degrees Examinations Board, the Dean of the relevant faculty (on the recommendation of a Registration Review Panel), or an upgrade or progression panel. See our Academic Appeals guide for more details of this process.



## CONTACT US

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If you have a question that is not covered in this leaflet please email [bristolsu-justask@bristol.ac.uk](mailto:bristolsu-justask@bristol.ac.uk)