

Revised Policy on Models of Supervision in UCC

Academic Council Graduate Studies Committee

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Introduction

Traditionally, training of postgraduate research students at UCC has depended primarily on a one-to-one relationship between a student and their supervisor, predominantly in a departmental setting.

However, it is now accepted nationally and internationally that a policy of each research student being supervised by more than one staff member offers many potential advantages, in particular to the student, and also the supervisor and the institution, and it is now practiced in many of the best-ranked universities nationally and internationally. Team supervision is believed to contribute to greater transparency, staff development and mentoring, PhD quality control and improved retention rates for PhDs. Team supervision, or the use of supervisor panels, is recommended in the IUQB *Good Practice in the Organisation of PhD Programmes in Irish Higher Education*, National Guidelines (2009), and many panels of the research UCC Research Quality Review specifically made reference to the benefits of wider adoption of team supervision in UCC.

In addition, the practice of team supervision is now accepted practice in the UK, Australia, Canada and New Zealand. The United States has operated a system centered on the thesis/dissertation committee. The benefits of such systems are widely acknowledged, as long as they are implemented in tandem with other developments including staff training/education and PhD student training (both of which are now in place at UCC). The literature on advances in PhD education increasingly emphasises the importance of integration, team supervision and group supervision, as proposed in this document. The literature also lists various advantages for such supervision models, including providing students with a greater range of academic expertise and added input from multiple points of view, providing wider student choice and contact with supervisors, increasing networking possibilities, providing a safety net to deal with academic mobility and sabbaticals, and as a mentoring process for new supervisors. A study at the University of Newcastle, presented to the EUA, found that there was significant association between supervisory arrangements and submission of theses within 4 years; 54% of students with supervisory teams submitted in this time, compared to 32% with a sole supervisor. The study also noted that students with sole supervisors were more likely to withdraw, less likely to engage with the code of practice, and

less likely to engage with research training.¹

In 2011, Academic Council approved a policy recommending increased adoption of Team Supervision at UCC. However, recent data analysis has shown that over 70% of UCC PhD students still have a single supervisor, and evidence suggests that the lack of widespread adoption of team supervision is leaving UCC significantly out of line with national and international best practice, and increasingly the expectations of the HEA. In addition, the current UCC strategic plan gives a target of increasing the number of UCC staff supervising PhD students by 10% by 2017, and thus it is timely to revisit UCC's practice and policy in this regard. While feedback from Colleges, and subsequent discussion at ACGSC, indicated a lack of support for adopting team supervision for all students, the Committee recommends the adoption of a model that ensures that all students have support either through a supervisory team, or alternatively through the appointment of a sole supervisor and additional PhD advisor. This model corresponds to the HEA requirement for supervision and mentoring as part of the structured PhD and provides additional support for both student and supervisor, while also fostering increased inter-disciplinary research involving staff from different fields and facilitating development of less experienced supervisors. Hence, the ACGSC recommends the following updated policy on models of supervision at UCC.

Supervision of doctoral students at UCC

Each research student (Masters or PhD) requires supervision by experienced members of academic or research staff who are responsible for the overall direction of the student's research programme, manage administrative issues relating to the student's registration and progress, and support the student in preparation for examination and publication of their thesis work.

From October 2013 onwards, all UCC PhD students will have either (A) a supervisory team,

¹ QAA Code, <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/Code-of-practice-section-1.aspx> Estelle Phillips and Derek Pugh, *How to Get a PhD, (Online)*; Oxford Learning Institute, <http://www.learning.ox.ac.uk/supervision/supervisor/co-supervision/> Dr Robin Humphrey, Newcastle University, EUA Presentation, http://www.eua.be/Libraries/4th_EUA-CDE_AM_Madrid/4th_CDE_A_M_Session_2_2_Humphrey.sflb.ashx Wellcome Trust, PhD Research Training: The Supervisor's Perspective, (2001) 20, http://www.wellcome.ac.uk/stellent/groups/corporatesite/@policy_communications/documents/web_document/wtd003206.pdf Christopher Pole, 'Joint Supervision and the PhD: safety net or panacea?' *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, Vol. 23, No. 3, (1998), 263; Antoinette McCallina and Shoba Nayarb, 'Postgraduate research supervision: a critical review of current practice,' *Teaching in Higher Education*, Vol. 17, No. 1, (February 2012), 63-74; US Council of Graduate Schools, PhD Completion Project, <http://www.phdcompletion.org/promhttp://www.phdcompletion.org/promising/mentoring.asp#earlyising/mentoring.asp#early>

which consists of two or more staff members with significant responsibility for the direction of the student's research, or (B) a sole supervisor plus a PhD advisor. The overall priority is to provide the best supervision for all research students throughout their research programme.

It is also recognised that these models are complemented by the current UCC process for reviews of the progress of research students, through which a Progress Review Panel including staff members other than the supervisor(s) reviews and gives feedback on a student's progress in the period under review. As well as recognising good progress and providing formative feedback and encouragement for the students under review, these reviews present a key opportunity to identify and suggest measures for resolving problems which may arise. However, the role of such reviews on a punctuated basis (e.g., annually) is different from the presence of ongoing and continuous input and support through team supervision or the input of an Advisor.

(A) Team supervision Model

In scenario (A), more than one member of academic or research staff is named at approval stage as being responsible for the guidance of the research project of a research student. Co-supervisors may also provide specialist advice and ensure continuity of supervision when one supervisor is absent from the University.

This type of supervisory team may involve two or more staff members, from the same or different academic units and each member of the supervisory team bears significant responsibility for direction of the student's research. The frequency of meetings, distribution of tasks etc. should be agreed by members of the supervisory team at the outset with the student. The relative contribution made by individual supervisors should be clearly outlined for workload allocation purposes and also to recognise supervisory input for promotion and, where appropriate, authorship of publications².

In cases where the contribution of one staff member to supervision is very limited (e.g., they are contributing expertise relating to a certain specific aspect of the research project) the term co-supervisor may not be appropriate and such a contribution may be best recognised in other ways, e.g., through co-authorship of publications to which that staff member has contributed.

² Attribution of authorship in publications should be inline with UCC's Code of Research Conduct, 2010 (http://www.ucc.ie/research/rio/documents/CodeofGoodConductinResearch_000.pdf)

This model of team supervision is encouraged in all cases and **must** apply in the following cases:

a) where a proposed supervisor for a PhD student has not previously supervised or co-supervised a PhD to graduation.³ Team supervision will enable new or inexperienced supervisors to have the support and guidance of an experienced supervisor during their first few years in the role, i.e., a named member of staff who can guide them on the important aspects of supervisory practice, and who should also have experience in the broad research field concerned.⁴ Co-supervisors should be established supervisors who have experience of supervising one or more research students to successful completion of their degree and who have a good understanding of University policies and procedures concerning research students. Inexperienced staff may also gain experience through co-supervising the student of an experienced supervisor, while bringing expertise to the benefit of the student in question, and benefitting from the mentoring of the more experienced supervisor;

b) where the proposed supervisor is not a permanent member of staff. In such cases, a co-supervisor who is a permanent staff member must be appointed. Co-supervision should also apply in cases of permanent staff members who would be retiring within the timeframe of the PhD project concerned;

c) where the proposed supervisor does not have a doctoral degree (except in cases where the Head of Unit is satisfied that the staff member has significant experience of supervision at PhD level and has current and active involvement in research appropriate to the field of study);

d) where a student is undertaking inter-disciplinary or multi-disciplinary research involving two (or more) academic units.

The role of Progress Review Panels (PRP) or Graduate Studies Committees in reviewing the progress of a PhD student on an annual basis does not constitute team supervision, as the members of such a panel do not have day-day responsibility for the direction of the student's

³ According to the revised UCC Probation and Establishment scheme (applying to new staff appointed after September 2009), joint supervision of research students will be required for staff with no or limited previous experience, and particularly where the students' period of study will be longer than the duration of Establishment. It is also stated in that scheme that new staff (within the terms of the revised scheme) may not be principal supervisors for PhD students until they have been co-supervisor to a student through to completion

⁴ Inexperienced supervisors will also benefit from the introduction of training in supervision of research students as from January 2010.

research. The PRP, which is convened for the purposes of annual reviews of a student's progress, must include at least one staff member who is not a member of the student's supervision team.

Some additional points about co-supervision of students are as follows:

1. The co-supervisors play a role throughout the student's study, i.e., the student will meet formally and regularly with their supervisors to set objectives and timelines, and review progress. The supervisors will be specified on the PhD approval form subject to sign-off by the Head of Academic Unit.
2. At the point of consideration of student applications by heads of academic unit, the current workload of the proposed supervisor(s) should be considered to ensure that approval of additional students is not unfair to the staff member of student involved. The number of students that an individual can supervise satisfactorily will vary with the nature and size of the research group, and with the scope of their other duties. In cases where a supervisor wishes to have more than eight full-time equivalent research students at any one time, the Head of Unit must be satisfied that the research group would be able to support the students.
3. Post-doctoral researchers on temporary contracts may play a role in the supervision of research students, and may be members of a supervisory team, working closely with a doctoral student. This is to be encouraged as such researchers can provide valuable day-to-day research guidance. However, where this occurs, the exact responsibilities of the researcher must be defined and agreed by the student and supervisor/supervisory team. A researcher cannot be a formal member of a supervisory team unless their contract extends beyond the period of registration of the student in question.
4. Co-supervisors may not act as Internal Examiners for a student's thesis.

(B) Advisor Model of Supervision

In cases where it is not deemed necessary, either for academic or other reasons as highlighted above, for students to have more than one supervisor, a **PhD Advisor** must be approved. The role of the Advisor is to act as a point of contact on pastoral, procedural and student support issues. The main role of the advisor is in pastoral care, in providing a person to whom the research student can go to in order to discuss any issues that they do not wish to discuss with their supervisor. The advisor should also be a point of contact for the student if the supervisor/student relationship breaks down. In this role, the Advisor should be aware

of the student support facilities the University offers. The advisor does not offer specialist academic support, but is expected to meet the student twice per year at a minimum. This model of supervision may assist smaller Departments/Schools who may otherwise find it difficult to operate a co-supervision model while satisfying the requirements for independent internal examiners.

The PhD advisor serves the student in many different ways, including acting as a point of contacts within the School/Discipline. They also act as a guide to the procedures of the PhD process and administration, and provide students with pastoral direction and information on the various student support services and facilities. They can play a role in induction and integrate and encourage the student to engage in a variety of School/Discipline/Graduate School opportunities. They should also increase and enhance the student contact with staff and other students and advise the student on options that they have in relation to a number of potential difficulties that might arise in the supervisory process. Overall, they provide one additional 'safety net' that should enhance the student experience, retention and time to completion.

The Advisor should be named at the point of approval of a student's application, and any changes during a student's period of registration should be approved as for changes in supervisor. There is no limit as to the number of students for which a staff member can act as Advisor, and indeed it may prove useful for a single staff member to act as Advisor to a cohort or cluster of students. This may be the chair of the local Graduate Studies Committee, but should not be the Head of School/Department.

An Advisor may be an Internal Examiner for one of their advisees unless their input to that point has been significant enough that to act in this role would present a conflict of interest.