

STAFFORDSHIRE UNIVERSITY

CODE OF PRACTICE FOR POSTGRADUATE RESEARCH DEGREES

Introduction

- 1 The purpose of the Code of Practice is to demonstrate the University's commitment to excellence in postgraduate research and training and highlight examples of good practice that should be followed by students and those members of staff involved with the supervision, assessment and support of research degree students. The Code sets out the University's core standards for the recruitment, admission, supervision and examination of research degree students. It applies to research degree study undertaken on a full-time and part-time basis and also to students who are registered with Staffordshire University but conduct much of their programmes of work overseas.
- 2 The Code applies solely to the research degrees of Master of Philosophy and Doctor of Philosophy.
- 3 The Code of Practice is not intended to provide a comprehensive guide to the procedures involved in undertaking a research degree. Further information on these procedures is available from the Research & Enterprise Office or from Faculty Postgraduate Administrators.

Regulations

- 4 The University has in place a body of regulations that cover the progress of research students from registration through to examination and award. The regulations were adopted to enhance academic standards and protect the rights of individual research students. Copies of the regulations are available from the Research and Enterprise Office.

The Research Environment

- 5 The University believes that postgraduate research degree students should work within an environment that promotes and sustains creative research and scholarly work.
- 6 The University will only allow doctoral research programmes to be offered where it is certain that students can be trained and supervised in an environment in which high quality research achievement is taking place.
- 7 The University defines such an environment in terms of:

- being part of a research grouping whose performance in the 2001 Research Assessment Exercise was of at least 3b standard or above,
- the availability of supervisors with appropriate subject expertise ,
- the availability of facilities to support programmes of postgraduate research.

8.0 In the case of research groupings that do not meet the criteria shown above, the University may authorise the offering of postgraduate research opportunities providing that there is clear evidence that research of a national standard is being undertaken and sufficient supervision experience is available.

Pre-entry Information

9.0 To allow prospective students to make an informed choice when considering postgraduate research opportunities, the University will provide clear, accurate and comprehensive information on:

- the broad academic areas within which research activity will be undertaken and, if appropriate, a more specific project description and the name of the proposed supervisor(s),
- the personal, professional and educational experience and qualifications required for admission as a postgraduate research degree student,
- the time normally required for completion of the project,
- the resources, including supervision, which the University will make available to research students,
- the fees payable by the prospective students or on their behalf by a third party such as a research council or industrial/commercial partner,
- where appropriate, the type and likely monetary value of any research award, together with any restriction or condition attached to the award,
- a copy of the University regulations governing the award of a postgraduate research degree,
- a University contact point for further information.

Selection of Research Degrees Students

10.0 When applications from individuals wishing to undertake postgraduate research degree are received, the University will:

- ensure that the selection process involves more than one member of staff and that at least one of the staff taking part in the selection process shall have been trained in fair recruitment and selection under the University's training programme,
- where practical, ensure that an interview with the candidate forms part of the admissions process. In the case of prospective students based outside the UK, an interview may not be

feasible. The University would expect, therefore, for as much information as possible to be exchanged between the University and the student. This information should include as a minimum, a copy of a degree certificate, together with English Language proficiency certificates. In cases where degrees awarded by colleges and universities overseas are offered as evidence of suitability, the University will refer to the UK Naric guide to determine the status and equivalence of any qualification,

- ensure that applicants with disabilities are not unjustifiably disadvantaged or debarred by the criteria and procedures used to select research degree students, that appropriate support is offered and available at any interview, and that for applicants with disabilities who are offered a place, any support needs are identified in advance of the commencement of the programme of research,
- seek informative references commenting on the suitability of the candidate to undertake research degree activity,
- adhere to the University standard admissions criteria of a first or second class honours degree or higher degree from a recognised UK Higher Education Institute or the equivalent from an overseas institution. Advice will be taken on the equivalence of degrees and other qualifications.
- maintain an appropriate degree of confidentiality throughout the process

Whenever possible the appropriate postgraduate admissions tutor and the proposed research degrees supervisors will meet applicants and assess their suitability to undertake a research degree and confirm the capacity of the Faculty or Research & Enterprise Institute to support the proposed programme of research.

- 11.0** The selection process adopted by the University is designed to:
- confirm that the candidate has relevant personal, professional and educational experience and holds appropriate qualifications for entry onto a research degree programme,
 - assess the ability of the candidate to fulfil the objectives of the advertised research degree programme and to complete it within the time designated. This should involve, for example, as assessment of the candidate's potential:
 - to understand academic concepts relating to the proposed area of research,
 - to achieve objectives,
 - for independent thought and learning,
 - to cope with the demands of organising and producing substantial amounts of written material,
 - for developing constructive working relationships.

During the selection process, the financial and supervision arrangements, the facilities which will be made available to support the programme of research, the opportunities that might exist to undertake

teaching and demonstrating duties and student welfare matters should be explained to applicants. If the University proposes to nominate an applicant for a studentship, the eligibility requirements and conditions attaching to any such award must be made clear.

- 12.0** At the completion of the selection process:
- the selectors will decide whether or not the candidate has been successful and will record the reason (s) for their decision,
 - they will then advise appropriate academic and administrative staff,
 - the member of staff with designated responsibility for signing offer letters on behalf of the University will notify applicants of the outcome.
- 13.0** The offer letter will give details of the nature of the research project, supervision arrangements, the proposed start date, all relevant financial matters, the date by which the candidate should confirm (or otherwise) acceptance of the offer, and any other relevant conditions attached to the offer: for example, the involvement of external collaborating parties, English language requirements or any financial guarantees required.
- 14.0** The University will encourage the provision of constructive feedback to unsuccessful candidates.

Induction

- 15.0** To help ensure that new research students commence their research studies with an understanding of the environment in which they will be working, the University will ensure that new research degrees students attend an induction programme. This programme will include:
- the research portfolios of the University and the Faculty/Institute in which the student is based,
 - the challenges that a research student is likely to face during the course of his or her programme of research and where guidance may be sought in the event of these difficulties,
 - the University's registration and enrolment procedures and, if not previously addressed, the research degrees regulations,
 - information on the University's teaching and learning support infrastructure,
 - health and safety,
 - student welfare information,
 - the University's research supervision arrangements, including the process for dealing with difficulties that a student might encounter concerning supervision,
 - details of the research training programme provided by the University,
 - opportunities to meet other research staff and students.

16.0 The research student's supervisor(s) will provide more specific induction that relates specifically to the programme of work, including general and more detailed background reading material to encourage more detailed research activity.

Academic Facilities

17.0 The University recognises the benefits of a vigorous research student community. We believe that quality academic facilities, social and welfare provision and the involvement of research students in the University's decision-making processes are essential in countering the isolation that can be a feature of research degrees study.

18.0 Whilst the facilities made available to research students will differ according to the nature of their projects, as a minimum the University expects every student, irrespective of his or her mode of study, to have reasonable access to:

- library resources, including appropriate use of Inter-library loans or study visits to other libraries,
- access to information technology facilities,
- appropriate working space with a desk or equivalent, together with storage facilities, preferably within the student's immediate work environment,
- where appropriate to the research project, access to laboratory facilities, laboratory consumables, scientific information and photographic services commensurate with the nature and possible scope of the research,
- photocopying facilities and access to internal and external telephone networks.

19.0 The University expects faculties to provide reasonable support, training and guidance, so that research students can make effective use of these facilities.

Social and Welfare Provision

20.0. The University is committed to providing a range of social and welfare services for postgraduate research students irrespective of their mode of study or whether much of the research will be conducted away from the University. Therefore, as a minimum the University would expect the following services to be made available to students irrespective of their mode of study:

- details of induction events,
- details of the advisory and counselling facilities available through the University,
- careers guidance and development,
- guidance on accommodation,
- social facilities available to postgraduate research students.

21.0 Research students should have an opportunity to provide feedback on the services and support made available to them. Faculties should encourage research students to take part in decision –making processes throughout the University.

Research Training

22.0 As an integral part of the programme of research, students will be required to complete the Postgraduate Certificate in Research Methods. Unless a student can offer evidence of an award in postgraduate research methods doctoral level research, registration for the Certificate is mandatory and the certificate must be completed before the viva is held. The aims of the programme are to:

- support the development of a network of researchers across the University,
- develop a research student's competence as a scholar and researcher,
- assist students to locate their work within different academic traditions and forms of enquiry,
- extend knowledge of the research process,
- promote the sharing of experience across disciplinary boundaries.
- provide guidance on the administrative procedures and requirements -that underpin research degree programmes,
- provide training in research methodologies,
- encourage students to find different ways of looking at their work.

Responsibilities of the University Research Degrees Sub-Committee

23.0 The University Research Degrees Sub-Committee is responsible for the registration of PhD students, confirming any changes to the status of students and approving the appointment of examiners. The Sub-Committee will ensure that the University's Research Degrees Regulations and procedures are observed and will promote good practice in the induction, supervision, assessment and training of research degree students. In addition, the Sub-Committee will oversee the processes that have been put in place to monitor the progress and performance of research students.

Responsibilities of the Faculty

24.0 Faculties should establish and maintain a committee or group that has specific responsibility for receiving and assessing registration applications for the degree of MPhil and MPhil with transfer possibility to PhD. In addition, Faculties will monitor the progress of research degree students and liaise with the University Research Degrees Sub-

Committee on any issues relating to the development of research degrees activity within the Faculty.

- 25.0** Faculties are responsible for ensuring that students have a place to work and can access the facilities needed to support their programmes of work.
- 26.0** Faculties should alert students to the facilities that are available to support research degrees study and organise induction programmes that offer guidance on the use of facilities and explain the procedures adopted by the Faculty to support research degrees activity.
- 27.0** Faculties must ensure that supervisors monitor the progress of students.
- 28.0** Faculties are encouraged by the University to arrange seminars on a regular basis at which students can present their work.
- 29.0** Faculties should draw the attention of students to the training in research methods provided through the Certificate course and ensure that students have the opportunity to undertake training in generic skills such as keyboard skills, computing skills, communication and presentation skills and report writing.

Roles and Responsibilities of Supervisors and Research Students

- 30.0** The successful completion of a programme of study leading to the award of a research degree requires considerable commitment from the research student, the student's supervisors, the University and, if appropriate, any collaborating body. At the outset of the research project, the various roles and responsibilities of all the parties involved with the research project should be identified and understood.
- 31.0** There are different approaches to supervision. Diversity is essential and inevitable due to the very individual and personal nature of the student/supervisor relationship. Many problems encountered during a research degree programme can be traced back to a breakdown in communication between student and supervisors, often caused by the different expectations each has of the other. For these reasons, it is essential that a clear definition of their basic roles and responsibilities is agreed before the project commences. The following represent indicators of good practice, but may be implemented in a variety of ways:-
- **involvement:** supervisors can encourage and stimulate the student by showing their own research experiences and by discussing philosophical as well as technical issues,

- **encouragement:** research students can become discouraged when facing difficult issues and a combination of the academic and pastoral roles of the supervisor(s) can help in identifying and addressing problems of this kind at an early stage,
- **participation:** research students should feel part of a larger team, not isolated. Supervisors can help to achieve this by linking the student to other research work and researchers, not necessarily in the same area of research,
- **criticism:** the provision of constructive criticism is central to the role of supervisors. An over-sympathetic or uncritical approach can be counter-productive,
- students should be actively encouraged to question existing literature critically, the assumptions of the research project and the results he or she secures,
- students must be encouraged to develop ownership of the direction and detailed development of the research project as it proceeds beyond the initial stages.

Supervisors

32.0 The University requires that the supervision of research degrees students should normally be undertaken by a team consisting of a Principal Supervisor is an active researcher in the proposed field of study and one or more additional or second supervisors.

33.0 The responsibilities of the supervisory team should include:

- being accountable to the appropriate academic authority within the Faculty for the satisfactory progress of the project and the student,
- possessing sufficient knowledge of the research area to provide accurate guidance and advice on the project's originality and direction,
- having the appropriate skills and experience to facilitate the production of high quality research work by the student and to monitor, support and direct the student's programme of research,
- maintaining regular contact with the student,
- reading written work produced by the student and providing constructive criticism within a specified time,
- taking an active role in introducing the student to other workers in the field and the appropriate academic bodies and societies,
- ensuring that the student is made aware if either the student's progress or standard of work is unsatisfactory and arranging any supportive action felt to be necessary,
- keeping up to date with advances in good supervisory practice,
- providing guidance, encouragement and advice regarding the future career plans of the research student,

- exercising his/her formal duties in terms of health and safety legislation.

For each full-time and distance learning MPhil/PhD supervision:

- Normally 30 hours per student loading (normally 20 hours for principal supervisor and 10 hours for second supervisor) in the 550 workload model, i.e. the equivalent of one hour per week in the 18 hours class contact model in the current contract of employment,

For each part-time MPhil/PhD supervision:-

- Normally 21 hours per student loading (normally 14 hours for principal supervisor and 10 for second supervisor) in the 550 workload model, i.e. the equivalent of 0.7 per week in the 18 hours class contact model.
- Where full-time PhD students have exceeded three years of study (taking into account any period of intermission) then these loadings are reduced by 50%, comparable conditions apply to part-time and distance leaning students.

34.0 The University's Research Degrees Regulations (**revised June 2002**) stipulate that principal supervisors must have either previously supervised to the successful completion of two postgraduate research degrees (at least at the level they are intending to supervise), or have successfully completed the University's Research Degrees Supervision Module, and be actively researching (paragraph 33, page 6, University Research Degrees Regulations).

Training for Research Degrees Supervisors

35.0 The University will ensure that staff involved with the supervision of research degrees students are provided with appropriate training and support in order that they are:

- able to monitor, support and direct the programme of work,
- able to advise on how to make effective use of the learning resources that might be able to support the programme of work both within and outside the University,
- aware of the support available to research students through the University's student welfare and counselling services,
- conversant with the University's regulations governing the award of higher degrees by research,
- aware of individual responsibilities and duties under health and safety legislation.

Responsibilities of Research Students

36.0 The responsibilities of research students shall include:

- accepting responsibility for his/her own research activity and candidacy for a higher degree by research,
- ensuring that satisfactory progress is made, at all times, with respect to the research project and any programme of work agreed with the supervisor(s),
- submitting written work for comment and evaluation in advance of meetings with members of the supervision team,
- completing the programme of work within the maximum registration periods stipulated in the research degree regulations,
- alerting supervisors to any activities, commitments or responsibilities that may influence or determine the progress of the project,
- completing a student enrolment form and, if appropriate, paying the annual tuition fee stipulated by the University,
- ensuring that any problems regarding the project are drawn to the attention of his/her supervisor and providing an adequate explanation of any failure to attend meetings or to meet other commitments, so that appropriate guidance and support may be offered,
- preparing progress reports on the research project and complying with the processes adopted by the University to monitor the progress of research students,
- successfully completing any training programme arranged by, or through, the University,
- acting as a responsible member of the University's research community,
- communicating to others in the academic community, his/her research findings,
- making appropriate use of the teaching and learning facilities available within the University,
- ensuring that any circumstances that might require his/her mode of study to be modified or his/her University registration to be extended, suspended or withdrawn are brought to the attention of his/her supervisors,
- following customary academic protocols for the acknowledgment of supervision support and guidance.

37.0 The University expects mechanisms to be in place that would allow the student to discuss issues that he/she would prefer not to raise with members of their supervision team. Both students and supervisors should have access to independent and impartial guidance on issues relating to the supervisory process.

Monitoring the Progress of Research Students

- 38.0** Supervisors must carefully and regularly monitor the student's work. Supervisors should ensure that students understand when the quality of the work and the progress of the project fall below expected levels.
- 39.0** Students and supervisors should agree a framework for the development of the project that will include indicative deadlines for the completion of distinct stages of the research programme and the completion of written work, to include such reports as may be required as part of the registration, annual review and examination processes of the University.
- 40.0** In monitoring progress supervisors must analyse and evaluate the student's achievements in the programme of research against the objectives set out in the original plan of work. When problems arise, corrective action should be clearly identified and full guidance and advice given to the student.
- 41.0** Faculties will provide opportunities for research students to maintain a record of personal progress, which will include reference to the development of research and other skills. When recording their skills and learning, students will be encouraged to use the personal development planning tools available within Faculties. Students who, at the start of their programmes of research, are unfamiliar with maintaining records of their progress and development will receive additional guidance and support from their supervisors.

Contact between Supervisors and Students

- 42.0** Supervisors have a responsibility to maintain regular and frequent contact with research students. The frequency of contact is likely to be high during the initial stages of the programme when design and preparation work are being undertaken: decline slightly once the project is underway and increase as a major monitoring stage approaches, for example, consideration of an application to transfer registration from MPhil to PhD, or as the final compilation of the thesis commences.
- 43.0** An outline plan for future meetings should be produced. The plan should also be aligned with the schedule for monitoring meetings. Where internal or external collaborative partners are involved with the research, then representatives should attend from time to time.
- 44.0** Meetings should be 'quality time', namely, as free from interruption as is practical.

- 45.0 Supervisors should be accessible to research students at other appropriate times, but informal day-to-day contact should not be a substitute for scheduled meetings.
- 46.0 Scheduled meetings should be geared to milestones of achievement and complement the supervision process. These meetings should be recorded and the outcomes summarised in a brief informal note, agreed between the supervisor(s) and student. This record should include a summary of progress to date; actions required and agreed targets for the next stage of the work. A draft agenda should also be agreed for the next meeting.

Collaboration with External Organisations

- 47.0 As part of their studies, research students may be required to spend extended periods of time with a collaborating establishment. The University believes that appropriate arrangements should be put in place at the start of the project to ensure that, although away from the principal place of study, the progress of the student is monitored. Supervisors should make periodic visits to the collaborating establishment to meet both the student and the designated organisational supervisor. Reciprocal visits will be encouraged.

Feedback Mechanisms

- 48.0 The annual monitoring process put in place for research degree students will provide a mechanism through which students can comment directly on the progress of their programmes of work and the support made available for the development of their research degree studies. This process will also provide an opportunity for supervisors to comment on the organisation and management of research degrees programmes. Through the preliminary reports prepared as part of the assessment process, examiners can comment directly on issues relating to the quality of the work, the level of supervision support and the operation of the assessment regulations.

Assessment and Appeals

- 49.0 The University will ensure that assessment rules and regulations for research degrees awards are published in a full and accessible form and are made freely available to research students, staff and external examiners. Through the Research Degrees Sub-Committee, the University expects regulations and procedures for the assessment of research degrees students to be applied rigorously, fairly and consistently and carried out to a reasonable timescale. The research degrees regulations set out the criteria adopted by Staffordshire University for the assessment research degrees programmes and the award of postgraduate research degrees.

- 50.0** The University expects that supervisors will inform research students of the assessment procedures that apply to their awards. Advice and guidance should be given by supervisors on deadlines for submissions, the examination process and the possible outcomes of examinations.
- 51.0** Students will be required to complete a declaration that the material presented for examination is their own work
- 52.0** Students will be required to complete a declaration that the material presented for assessment is their own work and will be reminded by their supervisors of the penalties for plagiarism.
- 53.0** Under the regulations for the award of research degrees adopted by Staffordshire University:
- the student is examined on the basis of an appropriate body of work and an oral examination (viva voce) should be held,
 - a minimum of two appropriately qualified examiners of a postgraduate research thesis must be appointed, of whom one must be external to the University,
 - supervisors cannot viva students whom they supervise,
 - examiners are required to prepare and submit independent preliminary reports before examination is held and a joint report after the viva voce,
 - membership of the examination panel must contain an independent non-examining Chair who will ensure that the University's regulations for the assessment of research degree students are followed.
- 54.0** At the conclusion of the examination, examiners must prepare a report that is sufficiently detailed to enable the University to be assured that a well-founded recommendation has been reached. The report should contain a recommendation for one of the following options:
- the award of the degree without amendment of the thesis,
 - the award of the degree subject to minor amendments being made to the thesis,
 - revision and resubmission of the thesis,
 - formal submission for a lower degree with or without amendments,
 - rejection without right of re-submission.
- 55.0** Before the formal conclusion of the viva, examiners should ensure that the student is informed of the recommended outcome. If the award of the degree is conditional on amendments being made to the thesis, the examiners must ensure that the student is advised of the changes required, aware of the deadline for submitting the revised work and knows which examiner or examiners have responsibility for ensuring that the amended material meets the requirements agreed at the viva.

56.0 The University believes that the examination process should be completed within a reasonable process (1-4 months) following the submission of the research student's thesis for assessment.

Appeals

57.0 The University will ensure that the appeals procedure in place for research students allows a student appellant a fair and full opportunity to present his/her case. The regulations for the award of research degrees define the grounds for an appeal and explain how an appeal should be lodged. Impartial guidance will be made to research students in the following areas:

- the circumstances in which an appeal might arise,
- the grounds on which an appeal might be lodged,
- the procedures for considering and hearing an appeal,
- the reparation available to a student if the appeal is upheld,
- the further process open to the student if the appeal is rejected.

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