Guiding Principles for PGR Supervisors

Background and Fundamentals

These guiding principles are not intended to be a prescriptive set of rules. They aim simply to augment and adapt existing advice about how, when and for what purpose to meet with your postgraduate research students.

Staff should continue to refer to the Code of Practice for Supervisors and Research Students (updated as of August 2021) to guide their interactions with students. In addition, new supervisors and those who have not undertaken College and School supervisory training within the last five years should undertake the new online module Fundamentals of PhD Supervision which has been been created by academic staff in collaboration with the Institute for Academic Development (IAD).

The IAD has further information and guidance for staff who supervise postgraduate research students.

For Distance PhDs, the application of these Guiding Principles may be slightly different, albeit it is acknowledged that the nature and frequency of support required may differ this year due to the impact the pandemic may have had on studies.

Students should

- have the opportunity to meet their supervisory team in person, where safe to do so, or online to discuss their academic development and plans at appropriate and timely intervals
- know who they can approach in their School/Deanery to discuss pastoral matters
- be contacted proactively, and for new or earlier-years students, more frequently, by supervisors and not only in times of need or concern, bearing in mind that many of these students will have experienced unprecedented levels of disruption to their lives and education over the last 18 months
- be signposted by supervisors to the relevant specialist services (e.g. Student Counselling, Student Disability and Chaplaincy services, Careers and Employability, Institute for Academic Development, the Advice Place) when necessary. Links to these can be found in the Code of Practice and on the Doctoral College webpages.

In-person on-campus support

The key principle is that that in every School / Deanery, and every University student service, a student (UG, PGT and PGR) should be able to speak to and get support from someone in-person, on-campus, between 0900-1700 (UK time) Monday to Friday from the start of the academic year, (noting that the start time of the year may vary per programme, and some PGR students may start their studies at other times). This support may take a number of different forms, including on campus and in person or online as appropriate. The in-person support will provide a responsive service including listening to students, directing students to specific services or places, advising on how to make an appointment to speak to a colleague about a particular query in more detail. Each School / Deanery / service should ensure that the colleagues undertaking this role have clear instructions about accessing services within their area. Information about University-wide services will be provided centrally via the Academic Year Planning SharePoint site.

Meeting your students

As the Code of Practice advises, students must maintain contact with their supervisor at least twice in every three month period, and in practice meetings may take place more frequently and even weekly in some subject areas. It is important that both student and supervisory team agree, at the start of the programme, how often meetings will be held and the purpose of meetings. It is important that students can easily contact their supervisors for advice, so supervisors may also be available for additional non-scheduled meetings, or for e-mail contact when the student is on a period of interruption. Students can initiate meetings but supervisors need to ensure that the minimum contact requirements are met.

The amount of contact between student and supervisors will vary depending on the length of the programme, how the research is being done and how much support the student needs. For example, there may be more meetings in the first few months when the research project is being defined, but also for the sake of those who might need more support (e.g. care-experienced students; new entrants who might have come through particularly challenging circumstances over the previous year; continuing students who had a particularly disrupted first or second year experience; students known to be either in quarantine or self-isolating as a result of the pandemic – noting that central contact and support is being provided to students in self-isolation as well).

Please ensure a record of meetings is kept, preferably on EUCLID.

Communications

Supervisors should make it clear whom the student should contact for what kind of support, noting that structures and roles may vary across the University. A range of toolkits have been developed to help supervisors support students.

Typically, the Supervisory team will enable discussions relating to research, academic choices, initial pastoral support, development, and progression, and issues which might have a direct bearing on these. Postgraduate offices will provide more detailed guidance about administrative processes, while Student Support teams may provide further pastoral support. Specialist professional services teams across the University (including Student Disability and Student Counselling Services and Careers and Employability Service) may be accessed by the student proactively, with or without a school referral.

It is more than ever important that the tone and style of communications are friendly and supportive. Please endeavour to avoid communication styles which might put students off contacting staff about their concerns. Where appropriate, please encourage students to seek advice and support.

Setting expectations

The pandemic has heightened student anxiety about their own preparedness for research, complicated or derailed previously agreed research plans, and introduced unforeseen challenges to their lives. Supervisors have always been advised to work with students to set realistic expectations and key milestones towards completion, but it is now especially important to spend time on these tasks. Accordingly, you should discuss the past and ongoing impact of the pandemic on academic progress, set realistic goals for progress and completion, and advise students about concessions (eg. Authorised Interruption of Studies; Extension) as appropriate. You should also provide students with relevant signposting and information about the university's wider network of specialist support, guidance and advisory services and acknowledge the limits to which privacy and confidentiality can

be offered. It is not always possible or appropriate to maintain confidentiality. For example, if a student makes a disclosure which indicates they or somebody else might be in danger / at risk of harm; in which case, you must consider sharing this information. For more guidance consult this resource. You should ensure you set appropriate time limits and have an appropriate environment for your discussions and be clear on the best way to contact you (e.g. by email or other electronic communications). If you are in a position to host 'office hours' (either virtual or physical) and if so, what these are, and the typical time in which you are likely to respond. We suggest including this information in your email signature. Do set expectations on what is not appropriate or reasonable in terms of when you will respond to correspondence and maintain appropriate boundaries.

Meetings, Communications and Technology

Clarity of communications is crucial in any learning environment. Over the past 18 months, the University community has adapted to using an increased variety of digital communication tools. In many cases, the frequency of the usage of these tools has also increased. Given the experiences over the past year and a half, it is more than ever important to be friendly, compassionate and supportive in all communications and ensure students know they can approach you for support if needed. Please consider the nature of the discussion or meeting you are having, and the need for appropriate levels of privacy, when choosing the tool by which you communicate with your students. If you need assistance with this, ISG has developed a tool for helping you to decide which technology may be best suited for your situation. Examples of the kinds of tools supported by the University are provided by ISG. If you meet your student online, do set expectations on what is not appropriate or reasonable and maintain appropriate boundaries

If it is deemed appropriate and safe to meet in-person with your student(s), consider what the best venue for your meeting might be based on Scottish Government guidance at the time. If you need access to your computer and/or need to have a more private discussion, meeting in a University office space may be most suitable, provided you can be confident that adherence to the current Scottish Government guidance can be maintained, and that the set-up is consistent with the health and safety guidance provided in the Academic Year Planning SharePoint site. Some supervisors have favoured meeting outdoors for a 'walking meeting', or in an appropriate outdoor space, and this can have added benefits in line with the Five Ways to Wellbeing. Please do not invite students into your home or private space for a meeting.

Supporting student development

Supervisors should be proactive in advising on student professional development needs, encouraging transferable skills development and signposting relevant training and opportunities. A training needs assessment may be carried out at the start of the degree and reviewed throughout the studies. Resources and tools for this can be found on the IAD webpages. The Doctoral College webpages link out to services which offer professional development training. These include the Institute for Academic Development, the Careers Service, Digital Skills and Training and Edinburgh Innovations.

Supporting students from particular cohorts or profiles

Students from particular backgrounds or with particular characteristics may have unique sets of concerns about their learning, the support available to them or the impact of the pandemic. These groups may include, but are not limited to mature students, students with caring responsibilities, students from widening participation backgrounds, students impacted by disability, students of

colour, LGBTQ+ students, part-time students, students on distance learning PhDs, students with significant commutes to the physical campus.

Students/groups of students may also find themselves in a variety of different situations which may affect their ability to engage in their studies. These may or may not be related to background, characteristics or mode of study. For example, some students/groups of students may be self-isolating or in travel-related quarantine at various points during the year and may require further support (noting that these students will be contacted and supported by central teams); balancing a variety of competing priorities alongside their studies (including but not limited to work and caring responsibilities); key workers who may have had increased disruption to their research and personal lives as a result of the pandemic; anxious about their preparedness for university research; be living (either temporarily or permanently) in countries with different Covid-19 guidance, regulations and healthcare provision to that of the UK. It is important to be mindful of these varying cohorts and student profiles and ensure that support is appropriate, considered, and meaningful as these factors may have a bearing on how the student can, and needs, to engage in their studies and with staff. It is encouraged that you to make regular proactive contact with your students, to ensure students are aware of the support available and that they need not feel isolated from the university community.

As noted above, a range of toolkits have been developed to help supervisors support these students.

Online and in person vivas

Oral examinations for PhDs have taken place online during the period of the pandemic due to Scottish Government restrictions. From September 2021 vivas may take place wholly online or with one or more participants (eg. The External Examiner) online following University guidance, or may take place fully in person following the usual guidance. Our buildings will be open and rooms or staff offices will be available for vivas following guidance on safety measures. Some Covid-19 restrictions will have to continue, such as face coverings and hand hygiene measures. We expect regular testing will form part of the experience this year, as we're already seeing in the rest of the UK. For further information about buildings and safety measures see our website

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