

Responsibilities of School: The Review of Research Student Policies

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Abstract: In every university, there is code of practice or policy for graduate research student which contained in the student handbook. Every student will be given this handbook during their registration at the university. What actually contained in research student policy? In general, research student policy contains information about responsibilities of student, supervisor, school and recommended practices which supposed to be done by student, supervisor and school. Part of this policy was designed to protect the student's interest and welfare. Hence, there were 40 graduate research student policies have been studied from 40 universities in the United Kingdom. This article will explore in detail about research student policies which focusing on responsibilities of school.

Key words: Graduate student, policy, PhD, school, supervision, responsibility

INTRODUCTION

PhD students should aim to complete their degrees within the time given, which is the period of most studentship awards. This is the reason why research student policies are designed as a guideline to enable students to complete their degrees successfully within the time limits. The research student policies typically also defines the responsibilities of students and supervisors, suggesting what each can reasonably expect of the other and gives examples of good supervisory practice. Basically, the research student policies can be used as a guideline by the supervisor, student and school/department. The policies are intended to provide a framework for research in an atmosphere of scholarship and collegiality.

Research student policies can be found under many different names, such as code of practice for research students, quality assurance in research degrees, research degrees regulations, code of conduct, ethical principles and guidelines, postgraduate procedures or memoranda to graduate students. Generally, research student policies are one of the main topics highlighted in the Student Handbook. These topics were: about the department, patterns of the programme, supervision and regulations relating to theses. They are referred to as a code of practice for the purpose of this research. Some of the universities have elaborated these four topics in detail, whereas others say relatively little about them. In practice, different universities have different ways of presenting their Student Handbooks. Generally the purpose of the Student Handbook is to introduce student to the school

as well as university-wide procedures, facilities and services for research degree students. It is compiled from a range of sources and serves a variety of purposes. Figure 1 has been developed to clarify the contents of the handbooks, summarising the relevant aspects. However this research will concentrate on the supervision section or research student policies and only focusing on the responsibilities of school.

The researcher has to study this policy in order to understand the benefits of systematic policies regarding the supervision of research students and to identify their impact on practice. Generally, the students are given the Student Handbook on their admission day so they should be aware of it and understand its contents clearly. In this way, they can get to know many things related to their life as a PhD student and how to manage their research throughout their programme. The guidelines in the handbook about the responsibilities of the student, the responsibilities of the supervisor, the responsibilities of the school/department and supervisory patterns and practices that appear in research student policies can be very supportive to the students during their study.

Research is an interactive process and requires the development of social as well as academic skills (Phillips and Pugh, 2000). A school's administrative function is commonly interpreted as referring to managing, operating or directing an organisation (Burton and Bruekner, 1955) in order to support students towards the completion of PhD. Some suggestions regarding the supervisory framework for supporting and defining the student's graduate programme include producing a definite plan in writing, probably different for each department, that

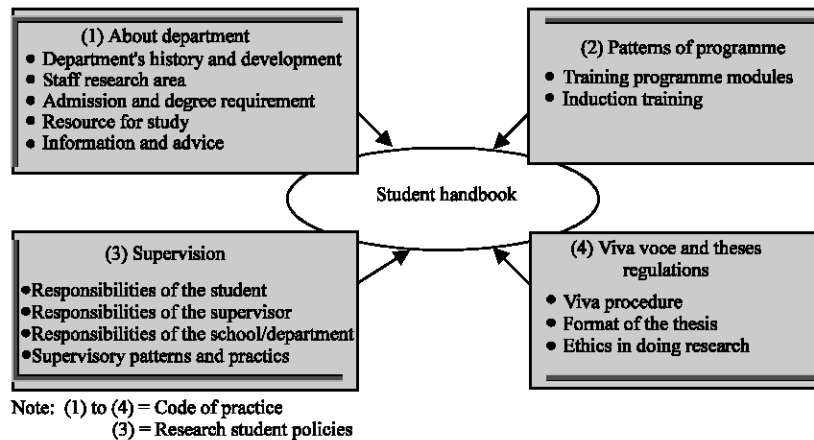


Fig. 1: The main topics listed in student handbook

describes the department's view on good supervisory practice; establishing regular meetings between student and supervisor (Frischer and Larsson, 2000) setting up adequate methods of assessing coursework, thesis or dissertation supervision record-keeping and project advancement (Brown and Atkins, 1988; Council of Graduate Schools, 1990) and submitting a comprehensive annual progress report to the supervisor (Donald *et al.*, 1995). Selby and Woods (1966) found that the most important people the foreign student encounters in solving their problems are the faculty, the community and other foreign students. However, the faculty is the major source of academic guidance for the foreign students and the foreign student goes there and feels at ease discussing his problems and asking for advice. On the other hand, the students consult their academic adviser if they have academic problems.

Given the length and complexity of graduate student supervision, it is understandable that various difficulties arise (Brown and Atkins, 1988; Moses, 1985) due to organisational or professional factors. Organisational factors could include policies and procedures established or not established for graduate student supervision (Donald *et al.*, 1995), the manner in which these are communicated to supervisors and students, the number of students being supervised, the supervisor's inability to manage a research group effectively and inadequate support services and equipment. Among the professional factors are a misinformed or inadequately prepared supervisor or a supervisor whose research interests are different from those of the student. All of these issues are related to the responsibilities of the school. The school should ensure that the student has been appointed a supervisor who has a similar interest and expertise in the student's research area (Donald *et al.*, 1995) and should match the personalities of supervisors and students

(Holdaway *et al.*, 1995; Sheehan, 1993). A school must ensure that an optimum student-to-supervisor ratio of less than or equal to 6:1 is established (Donald *et al.*, 1995). There are circumstances where a student can face a personality clash, barriers to communication, cultural or language difficulties or personal differences in the approach to work. Here, the school has to ensure that it provides the best solutions for the student (Donald *et al.*, 1995). Besides, the school should appoint an appropriate administrator to monitor the supervision provided to all graduate students and require that annual reports of students' progress be submitted to the graduate studies office or faculty (Holdaway *et al.*, 1995).

Spear (2000) agrees that the school should establish a reputation for research and a real commitment to the development of doctoral students. They also state that it has to provide the students with good facilities. The benefit in having good facilities is that it can be a factor in students choosing the school to pursue their study. Other issues that the school should emphasise have to do with the mechanics of getting the work done, for example, access to laboratory equipment, library facilities, potential samples and their availability and ease of access, the amount of support from secretarial staff, photocopying facilities and in the case of survey research, the potential for help with postage. This includes study cubicles, common room and desk in a small-shared room similar to those used by staff members. All university or school should offer student e-mail network and access to the internet since personal computers, e-mail and internet technologies are such an integral part of research.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Policies on research students have been reviewed from forty universities in the United Kingdom. The

researcher has managed to access the policies of each university by searching the website (the full website addresses are presented in the References). These 40 universities were selected because they are all top ranking universities in the United Kingdom. The majority of the research student policies were located by using the search column and typing in the words 'handbook' or 'code of practice'. Unfortunately, some of the top ranking universities do not display their Student Handbooks on their website, so that there had to be obtained by post.

RESULTS

The responsibilities of the school/department include the provision of the resources, support and facilities for postgraduate research students and the supervisor. Some universities reviewed have divided the department role into 2 main aspects, namely responsibilities of the Departmental Postgraduate Committee and responsibilities of head of school. However, in this discussion, the researcher will focus on the Departmental Postgraduate Committee responsibilities. The responsibilities of the department or school are very important and very closely related to those of the supervisor and student in relation to completion of the student's PhD.

Firstly, the school/department is responsible for providing resources to the research student. At the very beginning of student registration, the committee should prepare the admission and induction procedure for the research student. Some students are registered for an MPhil and only after they have met certain requirements can they be upgraded to a PhD. It is then the responsibility of the Departmental Postgraduate Committee to prepare the procedure for transfer to the PhD and to work towards this. It must produce information and guidance on department, faculty and university regulations as a guide to the student and supervisor throughout the PhD studies. The school/department should pay particular attention to ensuring through the system of annual reports that satisfactory progress is being maintained.

The student should also be informed about the complaints procedure, to which they may have recourse if dissatisfied with any aspect of their supervision or with the facilities available for their research. It is also the school's responsibility to provide a supportive environment for the research student and to put in place a clear procedure for the change of supervisor should the student/supervisor relationship break down. The school is responsible for the selection and nomination of examiners for research degree candidates. This includes

the responsibility to ensure that the oral examination or viva voice is normally held within three months of the date of thesis submission. Candidates should be informed within a few weeks of submission of the date actually set for their oral examination, even though this may be some time ahead. Schools should also be included the computing facilities and the library at the start of the academic year (and special provision should be made for those postgraduate research students who start at other times during the year). If the student needs a break from their study, the school has to ensure that the student is aware of the relevant rules and advised how to proceed within them.

Above all, the school must allocate to the student an appropriately qualified supervisor, who has specific knowledge of the subject area of his/her proposed work and the research techniques to be used. As noted above, some students can be allocated more than one supervisor, as their research may require a combination of expertise. This supervisory arrangement is normally set up at the time of admission, when it is clear that the student's proposal involves interdisciplinary research. It can also be arranged at a later date, if the student's research takes an interdisciplinary direction. If a principal or particular supervisor is temporarily ill or absent for more than (say) 4 weeks, the department or school should ensure that alternative supervisory arrangements are made. However, the particular period of absence will vary with each university's practice. Should a supervisor leave the university, the school/department should ensure that an alternative supervisor with appropriate academic experience is provided. If this is not possible, the school/department should be responsible for finding an alternative institution for the student to transfer to.

Some schools will also allocate an adviser to a student. This person is not a supervisor of the research, but takes a more pastoral role and overview of student progress. The adviser deals, in particular, with personal problems faced by the student, including those between the student and supervisor. The PhD adviser can give advice on formal university regulations regarding doctoral research, departmental policy on PhD students and wider issues such as teaching and conference attendance. Some schools have appointed a postgraduate student adviser. Normally, students who are supervised by a Postgraduate Student Adviser should be assigned to a different adviser, or to a senior colleague who can act in that capacity, to avoid a conflict of interests. On the other hand, two of the universities reviewed have assigned their students a mentor, or member of staff with an equivalent role, who will undertake duties similar to those of a personal tutor, as shown in Table 1. As this role is

Table 1: Synthesising research student policies in forty selected universities

University	Student's responsibilities	Supervisor's *1 responsibilities	School/Department's*2 responsibilities	Supervision practices	Induction training	Code of practice*	Others
1. Aberdeen	✓	✓	✓	✓	X	✓	
2. Bath	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Important events from years 1- 3
3. Birmingham	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Responsibility of mentor
4. Bristol	✓	Adviser	✓	✓	X	✓	
5. Brunel	✓	✓	Head of department	✓	X	✓	
6. Cambridge	✓	✓	✓	✓	X	✓	
7. City	✓	✓	Research director	✓	✓	✓	Internally/externally registered student
8. College London	✓	✓	✓	✓	X	✓	Women advisers and graduate tutor
9. De Monfort	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
10. Dundee	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Good supervisory practice checklist, management of overseas students
11. Durham	✓	✓	Postgraduate director	✓	✓	✓	PhD year plan from 1st to 3rd year
12. Edinburgh	✓	✓	✓	✓	X	✓	Assistant and co supervisor's role
13. Exeter	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Peer support & mentor
14. Glamorgan	✓	Director of study	✓	✓	✓	✓	
15. Glasgow	✓	✓	Head of department	✓	✓	✓	
16. Greenwich	✓	✓	School director	✓	X	✓	
17. Heriott-Watt	✓	✓	✓	✓	X	✓	Mentor's role
18. Keele	✓	✓	✓	✓	X	✓	
19. Kent	✓	✓	✓	✓	X	✓	Technical support
20. Lancaster	✓	✓	✓	✓	X	✓	Special problems that international students could experience
21. Leeds	✓	✓	✓	✓	X	✓	
22. Leicester	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
23. Liverpool	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
24. London Goldsmiths	✓	✓	Departmental postgraduate group	✓	✓	✓	
25. Loughborough	✓	✓	Director of research	✓	X	✓	
26. Manchester	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
27. Middlesex	✓	✓	X	X	X	✓	
28. Nottingham	✓	✓	Head of school	✓	✓	✓	Women's adviser
29. Oxford	✓	✓	X	X	✓	✓	
30. Reading	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
31. Salford	✓	✓	X	✓	X	✓	
32. Sheffield	✓	✓	✓	✓	X	✓	
33. Southampton	✓	✓	✓	✓	X	✓	
34. St. Andrews	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
35. Surrey	✓	✓	Head of School	✓	✓	✓	Collaborative supervisor
36. Sussex	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Collaborative & independent distance student
37. UMIST	✓	✓	✓	X	✓	✓	Technician role
38. Wales Cardiff	✓	✓	Head of Department	✓	✓	✓	
39. Warwick	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Guidelines on stage of PhD research from year 1-3
40. Westminster	✓	✓	Director of Study	✓	✓	✓	

Note: *Code of Practice consists of:

- Information about the Department; Information, Advice and Support
- Patterns of the Programme/ Research & Induction Training
- Supervision

*1 and *2:

Some universities use different terminology, as stated in the column

pastoral and facilitatory, mentors or their equivalent need not be expert in their students' area of research and should not act as second supervisors. As highlighted in one of the university handbook reviewed, mentors should formally meet their mentees a minimum of four times during the first year or twice in term one and once in each subsequent term and 3 times during subsequent years. A personal tutor should meet the student as soon as possible after registration and at least once a term thereafter.

The role of personal tutor involves providing advice and support to the student across the programme and extends to personal difficulties such as accommodation,

financial difficulties and sickness. However, it is possible that a personal tutor will also be one of the student's academic tutors. The nature of the relationship means that meetings cannot always be scheduled in advance and the student must be able to initiate them.

In addition, one of the handbooks reviewed refer to the graduate tutor, who is responsible for giving advice on a wide range of problems, academic and personal, whenever this is needed. Also, 2 of the handbooks reviewed mention that women students are pleased to see any women adviser in the department if they are facing any emotional difficulties during the study. In fact, there is a range of titles used to refer to the persons who

function as advisers, from whom students can get advice when dealing with problems or if they feel uncomfortable discussing the issue with their supervisor.

Secondly, the school/department is responsible in providing support to the supervisor for the benefit of research student and the supervisor himself. This includes ensuring that no student is allocated to a supervisor who has insufficient knowledge of the student's area of research. As mentioned by one of the universities reviewed, a supervisor also cannot be overloaded with supervisory responsibilities. The recommended maximum number of registered research students per supervisor is 8. On the other hand, one university has stated that no supervisor should be responsible for more than 6 students. However, most of the universities reviewed agreed that the normal maximum number of research students to be allocated to any one supervisor may vary according to the nature of the discipline and the size and commitments of the school concerned. Such a maximum should be agreed at school level and should be exceeded only in exceptional circumstances.

It is also advisable for the supervisor to have the training and support to undertake effective supervision. The support might include recommending that a supervisor attend various training courses, conferences and seminars. In cases where a supervisor is criticised for poor supervision, the Departmental Postgraduate Committee is responsible for discussing the complaint with the supervisor and, if necessary, recommending training. Besides, most of the universities reviewed have mentioned that all new research supervisors should be provided with appropriate training in research supervision, including the nature and practice of research supervision, thesis writing, the responsibilities of students and supervisors, selecting research students, monitoring and reporting on progress and project management skills in order that they may be able to make a positive contribution to the students' research endeavours. For this purpose the school/department must allow them proper time for both the tasks of supervision and training and development and is recommended to give proper resources to these activities.

Thirdly it is important to know that the school's responsibility is to provide facilities to research students. Research students spend most of their time in front of computers, searching for journals or writing up. So the school/department is responsible for providing reasonable access to a desk or room in secure office space, which may be shared with other students within the school/department. Ideally, postgraduate working areas should be adjacent to departments, so that access

to supervisory staff is facilitated. The room is suitable if fixed with lockable storage for personal belongings. Another task that should be undertaken by the school/department is to issue all students with a computer username and password on registration, which will allow student to use the university computing service machines anywhere on campus. There should be sufficient computer terminals within a school/department to satisfy the demand from students, who should have access to computing facilities including appropriate software such as word processing and spreadsheets, statistical and graphics packages, databases and electronic mail. These terminals should be identified for postgraduate use only and should be secured against use by other groups.

In accessing journals, some have to be ordered through inter-library loans from other places. It is then the school's responsibility to ensure sufficient library provision. Where this needs to be supplemented, the school should, within reason, bear the cost of inter-library loans. Besides, the school/department should provide departmental photocopier facilities, reasonable access to both internal and external telephones and fax facilities for thesis related work. Students should have easy access to stationery and postage. The school must provide postgraduate pigeonholes for student post and notify the students by e-mail if an item arrives which is registered or special delivery. The school must also make appropriate arrangements for access to facilities out of normal office hours by taking into account the security and safety of the students and the facilities. It is also the school's responsibility to give some support to enable students to attend conferences.

As previously mentioned, at the beginning of the academic year, students are requested to attend an Induction Training Programme, which should occur within a short period of enrolment. This is a very useful event, which includes briefing and the provision of appropriate documentation about the institution and its postgraduate portfolio. The school or department should plan and make full preparation for the Induction Training Programme. Induction for all new research students covers topics such as a presentation of the department's portfolio of research activities, life as research students including the challenges that will typically face them during the course of their studies and where they may seek guidance in the event of difficulties. It should also provide information on registration, enrolment, appeals, complaints procedures, assessment requirements and research degree regulations and supervision arrangements, including the rights and responsibilities of research supervisors and students and monitoring of the students' progress. Research students should be made aware of the role of the adviser and the

research training programme. If appropriate, where necessary, they should be introduced to their supervisors and to the department's Director of Postgraduate Research Studies during the induction training.

Other important information that the school/department should provide includes details of the opportunities that exist for meeting other research students and staff, for developing scholarly competence and independence of mind and for sharing experience and understanding beyond a research student's immediate study area. It is also recommended that there should be guided tour of the school/department and an introduction to its facilities and learning support infrastructure and staff and to university and departmental notes of guidance and codes of practice relating to health, safety and welfare and initial guidance on university and departmental requirements. Therefore, every school/department must provide a complementary programme and provide all new research students with written information or a handbook and appropriate notes for guidance.

All research students must receive training appropriate to their individual academic needs and objectives, so as to enable them to undertake their study programmes effectively and to complete them successfully and within the time-scale prescribed by senate regulations. Therefore, all universities reviewed have placed considerable emphasis on training in techniques and methods of research appropriate to the academic discipline and many have minimum requirements for the training necessary in certain subjects. This training in research techniques and appropriate generic skills is an integral part of the research programme and will be assessed within this context in order for a student to acquire basic competence. In practice, the formal research training varies considerably from one school/department to another, but usually covers some of the following topics: the research processes, research methods and literature surveys which include library use, computing and other such practical skills relevant to the discipline, the ethics of research, time management, the writing of theses and papers, communication skills, intellectual property rights, avoidance of plagiarism, data protection legislation and university and departmental safety procedures. Also, one of the universities reviewed has highlighted personal skills, career development and advanced study skills. This training is required by research students in the first year of study. Generally, schools are seen as responsible for running a series of training courses including workshops or seminars for PhD students.

DISCUSSION

The school has certain responsibilities in relation to the research students' supervision topic. A school's administrative functions are commonly interpreted as referring to managing, operating or directing and organisation in support of students in the completion of their PhD. There are circumstances where students can face personality clashes, barriers to communication, cultural and language difficulties or personal differences in the approach to work. All of these should be handled effectively by the school. Good facilities are very important as the mechanics for getting the work done. Student should work hard towards completion of the PhD by taking into account the school/department and university regulations. As a mature student, one should work independently although the supervisor is there to provide guidance, advice, support and encouragement where appropriate. Those who think the Research Student Policies are very useful and helpful may see the handbook as a place of reference if something goes wrong or the student needs more explanation in relation to supervision or studies.

Reflecting the literature (Donald *et al.*, 1995; Holdaway *et al.*, 1995; Sheehan, 1993; Spear, 2000) the findings show that the school's most important responsibility is to ensure that the facilities are excellent and all properly equipped. Students need an up-to-date laboratory, postgraduate study rooms, photocopying services and printing because they want the facilities provided to be equivalent to the amount of the tuition fees paid by their sponsors. A good school should have good supervisory support systems. This includes the school's responsibility to appoint an adviser. This finding is also similar to Selby and Woods (1966) where their findings concluded that the students consult their academic adviser if they have academic problems. Students think that this is very important when the student and supervisor are facing problems. The new finding which cannot be found anywhere in the literature is about the responsibility of the school on giving safety instructions to the students, supervisor and staff members. Other important support that school should give includes providing a substitute supervisor in the absence of the student's supervisor from the university for a certain period of time and this finding is also supported by Donald *et al.* (1995). Reflecting the literature (Donald *et al.*, 1995) this study also suggests that the school has to provide care for overseas students, who may need frequent contact and advice and have language problems.

CONCLUSION

By study the Research Student Policy, we can understand the benefits of systematic policies regarding the supervision of research students and to identify their impact on practice. All 40 selected universities have properly presented their Research Student Policies in the Student Handbook. However, the differences between one university and another are some of them have added a few important aspects as stated in Table 1. Generally, most of the universities reviewed have quite similar aspects been discussed especially under the topic of the responsibilities of school.

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