



# Policy for the Support and Development of Academic Staff Supervising Research Degrees

## University Research Environment and Training Committee (URETC)

*Birmingham City University (BCU) is committed to supporting and developing its academic staff, to enable them to provide excellent quality supervision for individuals undertaking research degrees, and to contribute to the continuous enhancement of BCU's research environment, culture, and capacity. Noting that research degrees form a distinct area of provision, this Policy for the Support and Development of Academic Staff Supervising Research Degrees ('the Policy') sets out BCU's baseline commitment(s) - with regards to overarching principles, roles and responsibilities of supervisors, and mandatory, optional, and specialist training and development mechanisms.*

### 1. OVERARCHING PRINCIPLES

This Policy and applicable academic regulations are to be interpreted in line with the following overarching principles:

#### A. Supporting and Developing *Our Community*

Birmingham City University's Doctoral Research College supports a substantial and diverse supervisor community, including hundreds of internal supervisors, and a significant number of external supervisors based locally, nationally, and internationally. BCU is committed to supporting and developing *all* supervisors as appropriate.

#### B. National Standards

Birmingham City University adopts the guidelines set forth by the UK Quality Code for Higher Education providing Advice and Guidance in relation to the provision of Research Degrees ('*The Code*'), including, but not exclusive to the following 'Guiding Principles':

- i. Provision of information is clear and accessible to research students and staff.
- ii. The research environment is supportive and inclusive for all research students.
- iii. Supervisors are appropriately skilled and supported.
- iv. Research students are afforded opportunities for professional development.

- v. Progression monitoring is clearly defined and operated.
- vi. Higher education providers offer clear guidance and processes on assessment for research degrees.

Specifically, relevant to the support and development of supervisors, this Policy notes:

**i. The extended guidance provided in relation to B(ii) that,**  
 “Providers should ensure that each student has an appropriately skilled and knowledgeable supervisory team, which includes a main supervisor as the key contact.”

**i. The extended guidance provided in relation to B(iii) that,**  
 “Supervisors should be provided with sufficient time, support and opportunities to develop and maintain their supervisory practice.”

### **C. Research Excellence Framework**

Birmingham City University acknowledges that:

- i. the provision of support and development opportunities for supervisors;
- ii. excellent quality supervision; and
- iii. the fostering of a high-quality research environment;

is fundamental to the institutional research environment and to Unit of Assessment submissions to the Research Excellence Framework, and to the institutional allocation of the Research Degree Programme (RDP) component of QR funding by Research England.

### **D. Procedure for Review**

Birmingham City University acknowledges *The Code*’s expectation that it is a common practice to review “core practices for standards regularly” and to use “outcomes to drive improvement and enhancement.” This Policy will be subject to URETC’s annual review and approval procedures. It was first presented to URETC for consultation in April 2019 and was considered subsequently by the Faculty Research Degree and Environment Committees (FREDC). It was last formally approved by URETC on 22 September 2020.

## **2. KEY ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES**

Supervisory teams provide academic guidance, intellectual challenge and pastoral support to doctoral researchers. Supervision encourages creativity, critical independent thought, ethical practice, and the originality of research outcomes. Decisions about the appropriateness of supervisory arrangements for research degrees are academic judgements made at faculty level and approved by the Faculty Research Degrees and Environment Committee. The standard roles and responsibilities of the supervisory team are as follows:

### **A. Director of Studies**

The Director of Studies (DoS) takes overall responsibility for all administrative matters related to the individual doctoral researcher’s programme of study and ensures there is appropriate pastoral support. To discharge this responsibility the DoS will:

- Support the doctoral researcher to develop a strong research project through the proposal, planning and implementation stages of their research degree.
- Focus on the project management of the research degree to ensure timely completion and provide intellectual, academic and pastoral support to the doctoral researcher

- Be responsible for progression assessments undertaken by the doctoral researcher during their research degree programme.
- Meet with the doctoral researcher regularly to review their progress within the academic year and ensure supervision meetings are documented appropriately. The Dos will play a key role in the annual and progression point reviews and evaluations of student progress.
- Identify promptly any problems to the Research Degrees Coordinator / PGR lead for the doctoral programme.
- Support a doctoral researcher identified as 'at risk' to produce a retrieval plan and conduct the monthly reviews required with the Research Degrees Coordinator/PGR lead and, where necessary, the Research Centre Director.
- Ensure that doctoral researchers are recording their personal and professional development as required.
- Work with the other supervisor(s) to help the doctoral researcher prepare for examination. The Dos may, at the invitation of the candidate, attend the doctoral researcher's viva voce exam.
- Where necessary (for instance, when an externally-funded PhD studentship scheme uses this terminology) the DoS may also be identified as the primary supervisor.

## **B. Supervisor**

A supervisor provides relevant subject and/or methodological expertise and advice to the doctoral researcher. As such their responsibilities may be summarised as follows:

- To support the doctoral researcher by collaboratively exploring the intellectual, creative or performative debates, literature and practices in appropriate fields.
- To engage in academic discourse with the doctoral researcher on appropriate frameworks.
- To guide the doctoral researcher's specialist research practice and evaluation of the material generated and the intellectual frameworks within which it is to be presented.
- To be responsible for assessments undertaken by the doctoral researcher as required.
- Draw on their own academic expertise and research practice to help structuring of the doctoral researcher's explorations and to challenge assumptions and expectations, setting high intellectual and creative standards to which the doctoral researcher will aspire.
- To engage meaningfully with the doctoral researcher's work, providing formative feedback that is detailed and constructive.
- To help the doctoral researcher take a systematic approach to their research project within the structure set out by the research proposal and plan.
- To liaise with the doctoral researcher's other supervisor(s) to ensure that there is a coherent, but diverse and challenging intellectual environment within which the doctoral researchers can prosper.
- Normally to read at least one full draft of the final thesis and / or view the work to be presented for examination.
- To identify promptly any significant problems in the doctoral researcher's work to the Director of Studies.

## **C. An Advisor**

An advisor is appointed by the Faculty Research Degrees and Environment Committee at the request of the supervisory team. They need not be in exactly the same research area as the doctoral researcher and supervisors, nor necessarily in the same department or faculty, but should be able to bring sufficient expertise to the team in a

specific aspect of the study (for example methodological or technical skills). The responsibilities of the Advisor can therefore be summarised as follows:

- To act as a further point of contact for academic or technical advice for the doctoral researcher.
- To read sections of work and discuss progress as reasonably agreed with the doctoral researcher/supervisory team.
- To participate in the formal assessment of progress and registration exercises but only in collaboration with the supervisory team (DoS and supervisor).

The advisor is not normally expected to provide regular, formal supervision nor to provide pastoral support for the doctoral researcher.

#### **D. A Supervisory Mentor**

A supervisory mentor is an experienced and SEDA-accredited research degrees supervisor who provides advice and guidance to the supervisory team as a whole. A mentor does not have direct contact with the doctoral researcher nor input to the direction of the research project. A supervisory mentor should have at least two doctoral research degree completions but does not necessarily need to work in the same cognate subject area as the supervisors or the doctoral researcher.

The supervisory mentor is appointed by the Faculty Research Degrees and Environment Committee where the combined experience of the supervisory team does not include two completions or when the supervisory team request the appointment of a mentor.

The supervisory mentor's responsibilities include:

- Meeting with the supervisory team as requested by the team and not less than twice per academic year.
- Provision of advice relating to the nature and practice of the supervision rather than the overall direction of the study.
- The supervisory team should ideally guide the discussion / agenda of meetings. Pastoral support for the supervisory team should also fall under the mentor's role where this support relates to the supervision of doctoral researchers.

### **3. TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT SUPPORT**

#### **A. Mandatory Training**

As part of its commitment to supporting and developing its academic staff to enable them to provide excellent quality supervision for individuals undertaking research degrees, Birmingham City University (BCU) requires all supervisors to undertake regular mandatory development activities.

##### **1. Initial Supervisory Training**

All academic staff must attend an Initial Supervisory Training event ideally before beginning to supervise a doctoral researcher and no later than three months from beginning supervision. New staff joining BCU who are experienced in research degree supervision must attend an Initial Supervisory Training event within six months of joining the University.

Each Faculty is responsible for the delivery of tailored Initial Supervisory Training development programmes. These programmes outline the key responsibilities of supervisors and supervisory teams, codes of practice for

research degree study relating to regulation and policy, and the roles of key university support units (Doctoral College officers, Student Affairs, International Office etc.).

It is envisaged that an online Initial Supervisory Training programme should also be made available to external supervisors to enable them to better understand the specifics of the policies, procedures and practices relating to doctoral supervision at BCU.

## **2. Communities of Practice for Doctoral Supervision**

BCU has developed a 'Community of Practice for Doctoral Supervision' as a professional development programme assessed through the Staff and Educational Development Association (SEDA) Professional Development Framework on Supervising Postgraduate Research. [This was known as a Community of Practice around Research Supervision from 2015-2020.]

The Community of Practice for Doctoral Supervision positions research supervision as a professional academic practice developed through on-going reflection and learning dialogues. Participation in this structured community of practice is viewed as a stage in a continuing professional development that assists in developing the habit of mind of reflection and professional dialogue and that encourages the active participation of supervisors in the broader communities of practice around research and research supervision.

All academic staff are required to participate in a Community of Practice programme. Completion must occur within either three years of beginning to supervise doctoral researchers at BCU, or, within three years of the adoption of this policy.

## **3. Supervisor Development Refresher courses**

Supervisor briefing/ refresher courses will be mandatory for all existing supervisors and will be taken every 2 years following SEDA accreditation.

Each Faculty is responsible for the delivery of tailored Supervisor Development Refresher courses. These will outline any changes in the codes of practice for research degrees study at BCU, current provision from key university support units and provide a refresher on best practice in the responsibilities of supervisors and supervisory teams.

## **B. Specialist developmental workshops (optional)**

As part of Birmingham City University's commitment to supporting and developing its academic staff and the continuous enhancement of the university research environment, culture, and capacity a range of optional additional developmental workshops is made available to existing staff with supervisory responsibilities. These seminars and workshops are designed to provide supervisors with additional skills and knowledge as well as the opportunity to reflect, discuss challenges and share best practice with other supervisors.

Optional specialist workshop provision may include, but is not limited to:

- Preparing PGRs for Examination
- Examining Doctorates
- Independent Chair Training
- Supporting PGRs' mental health
- Library & Learning Resources provision and support for PGRs

- Supervising Creative Practice
- Supporting PGRs with academic writing
- Supervising international PGRs
- Supervising colleagues
- Leading a supervisory team as Director of Studies
- Becoming a Critical Reader for a Doctorate
- Group Supervision: Pedagogy and Possibilities

These workshops are provided both within and cross faculty and are developed and delivered in collaboration with relevant specialist University provision.

A programme of dedicated support and development events is also provided to academic staff in relation to Birmingham City University's membership of the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) funded Midlands4Cities Doctoral Training Partnership (M4C). This includes consortia supervisor training on the M4C systems for monitoring of progression and additional funding schemes as well as Birmingham City University specific recruitment briefings and supervisor forums.

### **C. On-going support and recognition for supervisors**

The Doctoral Research College, Faculties and schools also provide on-going community support and resources for academic staff engaged in the supervision of research degrees. This includes:

- Handbooks
- Moodle Resources
- Supervisor lunch clubs,
- An annual supervisor conference.

Academic staff who are engaged in the supervision of research degrees are supported by a distinct workload allocation for supervision, recruitment, and research degree examination. Our aim is that research degree supervision is recognised as a specialist academic practice through the BCU Extra Mile Awards.