



Royal College of Art

Research Supervision Policy

1. Introduction

Team supervision is an essential requirement to ensure that research degree candidates are supported to progress and complete their degree in a timely manner.

Research supervisors are the first port of call for students during their time at the RCA. This can be an intense relationship, but extremely rewarding too. We are extremely grateful for the many ways in which Research Supervisors support, encourage and train out research degree candidates during their research programme and beyond.

The following guidance relates to the supervision of doctoral degrees at Royal College of Art and applies to full-time and part-time research degree candidates of the following degrees:

- Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)
- Master of Philosophy (MPhil)

This Guidance is intended for use by research degree candidates, staff supervising research degrees and staff supporting research degrees in faculties, research centres and professional services departments.

It sets out the requirements regarding who can be a supervisor, how teams are appointed and the key roles and responsibilities of research degree candidates. The policy recognises that local needs and practice may vary depending on the discipline and that the Head of Doctoral Programmes and the Research Office will provide more specific guidance where necessary.

2. The supervision team

The supervision team should have the appropriate skills and subject knowledge to encourage and monitor research degree candidates effectively.

The supervision team members should have at least one of the following:

- a PhD
- extensive supervisory experience to completion (the number and dates of all completions should be logged with the Research Office (research@rca.ac.uk) before any supervision starts

All primary supervisors of research degree are required to have:

- at least one PhD completion (where they have supervised for the majority of the project)

- undertaken a Research Supervisors Training Course (or an equivalent training course provided by the RKE office).

Research degree candidates will have two supervisors; the **primary supervisor** is the one with the key administrative responsibilities and where a student is supervised across Schools, this supervisor would come from the lead School and the **second supervisor** who is a member of staff appointed to supervise a postgraduate research student but who does not have primary responsibility for the student. As part of the supervisory team, the secondary supervisor may provide independent advice and support, bring subject or research/practice expertise to the team, provide support if the primary supervisor is absent for a period and may in some cases provide pastoral support.

A supervisor, whether primary or secondary supervisor, may supervise up to the equivalent of six full time research students at any one time.

3. The appointment of the supervisor

Each research degree candidate will be supervised by two members of staff. All supervisory teams are nominated by the School Dean by support from the postgraduate research lead for approval by the Head of Doctoral Programmes for ABCD. Teams will be allocated according to supervisory expertise and capacity.

Any changes to supervisory teams must be approved by the Head of Doctoral Programmes for ABCD and these will be confirmed in writing.

4. External Supervisors

Requests to appoint external supervisors are exceptional and rare. Where the need to recruit an external supervisor is deemed essential, the request should be submitted to ABCD as a memo, with an up-to-date CV, and a supporting statement from the Dean/Centre Director. All requests must be approved by the Head of Doctoral Programmes and ABCD. All costs for external supervisors will be borne by the School/Centre and commitment to sustaining the arrangements until submission should be assured.

External Supervisors will be recruited through the Casual Worker model and should be contracted for 6 days across each academic year.

External Supervisors: It is College policy wherever possible to provide supervisory support from within the existing contracted staff team. Exceptionally it might be necessary to appoint an individual external to the College as a second supervisor or advisor.

External supervisors should not be acting as Primary Supervisors. External Advisors – these are experts within the field whose expertise might be drawn upon for a short period of time during the project to advise on a specific aspect of the research. They do not form a formal part of the supervisory team and are not required to have formal supervisory training, but should understand the nature of research within an art and design university setting. All costs for external supervisors and advisors will be borne by the School/Centre, based upon College-wide agreements and commitment to sustaining the arrangements until submission should be assured.

5. The responsibility of the supervision team

It is the responsibility of the candidate to maintain and initiate contact with their supervisor(s) and register with the College on an annual basis, at the start of the new academic year.

In order to develop good working relationships, it is important that both supervisors and students are fully aware of the extent of one another's responsibilities. This ensures that both understand:

- (i) the supervisor's contribution to supporting the student,
- (ii) where the supervisor's responsibilities end.

Candidates are advised to agree an agenda with their supervisor(s) ahead of supervisions to ensure the time is well used, submitted work can be discussed on focused objectives and expectations can be well managed.

Supervisors will not necessarily be able to read full drafts of the thesis multiple times; candidates should indicate which areas or revisions are of particular importance.

Supervisors should respond to candidates in a timely fashion, which would usually be within one week for email communication and two weeks for written assignments (unless longer has been agreed in advance). When sending work to a supervisor for review, a timeframe for this should be agreed in advance to ensure expectations are clear and fair to both parties. At certain times of the year (e.g., Christmas, summer, exam periods), there may well be delays in responding to emails. Good communication between candidates and supervisors can help to manage expectations, but all parties should respect each other's need for annual leave, research time and time away from College commitments.

Recordings of supervisions can be a useful tool for remembering the content of the discussions. However, the permission of all participants should be agreed in advance and all recordings should be used only for personal use and not disseminated in any way.

Supervisors and candidates should respect refusal for a recording to be made, although this should be supported with a reasonable rationale. Candidates are expected to attend all scheduled College and School research events, seminars, workshops, conferences and exhibitions; PT candidates should attend on a pro-rata basis.

6. Key doctoral supervisors responsibilities

- provision of guidance and advice on the conduct of the student's research programme; regular monitoring of the progress of the student's research programme;
- maintaining regular contact (normally within office working hours) with the student and ensuring accessibility to the student when they need advice. This will normally involve face-to-face contact at least monthly, but may also involve telephone or university email contact depending on the student's location and mode of study;
- maintaining appropriate records of supervisory meetings and interim correspondence
- input into the assessment of a student's development needs;

- provision of timely, constructive and effective feedback on the student's work, including their overall progress;
- provision of advice and guidance to enable the student to conduct their research with probity and according to ethical principles, and advice on the implications of research misconduct;
- ensuring that the student is aware of institutional-level sources of advice, including careers guidance, health and safety legislation and equal opportunities policy;
- provision of effective pastoral guidance, referring the student where appropriate to other sources of such support, including the Research Office, Registry staff, Finance and others within the College;
- Staff are urged to inform themselves of resources or support mechanisms available within the College to support students who may need assistance with health or wellbeing matters (Email: student-support@rca.ac.uk; [Student Support Moodle Page](#)) and with resources provided by the research office training for example the Viva inclusion plan.
- help for the student to interact with others working in the field of research, for example, encouraging the student to attend relevant conferences and supporting them in seeking funding for such events;
- where appropriate, to provide encouragement and advice to submit conference papers and articles to refereed journals;
- identification of suitable examiners and their nomination.
- maintenance of supervisory expertise, including the appropriate skills to perform the role satisfactorily, supported by any relevant continuing professional development opportunities.
- assist the student to apply for their ethics application, mode change, LoA, EC in a timely way and in accordance with RKE Office processes, and maintain an awareness of the implication of these changes to the registration period and the submission dates.

As a supervisor, your role sometimes extends beyond the purely academic and should be sensitive to the diverse needs of individual students, including international students, and the associated support that may be required in different circumstances. An awareness of the range of advice and support available to students, and knowledge of how students can access it, is an important part of the supervision process.

7. Supervision meetings

A programme of supervisory meetings will be agreed between the supervisor(s) and candidate. The supervisors should meet the candidate for research degree discussion, at which formal feedback will be given to the candidate, **no less than six times a year for full-time candidates or no less than three times a year for part-time candidates**. The length of supervisions will vary according to the stage of the project and the specific area of focus (we recommend around 1.5 hours per supervision).

Supervisions should primarily take place in person on College premises or exceptionally online via RCA Zoom accounts. Sometimes it might be appropriate for a gallery or archive (or similar) venue. Supervisions should never take place in private homes or studios as these spaces are not covered by RCA public liability and insurance policies. As a formal teaching/learning occasion, it is good practice

to minimise distractions. Any observers should only be present with advance notice and by mutual consent and with good reason.

Full team supervisory in person meetings should be arranged regularly, but no less than once per term.

Supervisory tutorials should be orientated towards milestones of achievement, but will also incorporate critical comments, advice and guidance on the candidate's work, the standard that is required and relevant resources. Supervisor Reports form a formal documentation of the supervision for both candidate and supervisors, which can log concerns and successes for all parties. It is also used for visa compliance and quality assurance purposes. Following each formal supervisory session, the candidate and their supervisory team must complete a [Supervision Report Form \(SR1\)](#), agreeing a set of outcomes and action points, recording an assessment of achievements and agreed objectives relating to academic progress and skills development, to be completed prior to the next review.

The supervisors and candidate must each retain a copy and a copy must be uploaded by the candidate into their assessment folder as a record of attendance. As part of the assessment cycle, training needs should be reviewed, through the APR or Confirmation Form and reviewed through the year. One of the criteria for awarding a PhD or MPhil is demonstration of the ability to undertake independent research. This means that the conduct of the research project is primarily the candidate's responsibility, the role of the supervisor is to advise the candidate in planning, strategic thinking and generation of ideas. After the first year for full-time candidates (second year for part-time candidates), the candidate is expected to take the initiative and responsibility also for the planning and development of their project.

8. Change of supervisors

During the course of study, if a candidate's supervisor is unable to undertake supervisory duties for more than one month, it is the responsibility of the Dean of School supported by the PGR lead to ensure that there is a temporary supervisor nominated during this time.

This nomination must be approved by the Head of Doctoral Programmes as soon as possible and confirmed in writing to the candidate. The temporary supervisor is responsible for ensuring that the programme of supervision continues as scheduled.

Any changes of supervisors should be made in good time to ensure a careful handover of duties, ordinarily at the start of an academic year or term.

9. Supervision within LoA:

A candidate on leave of absence does not have the status or access of a registered candidate at the College and will not be eligible to participate in supervisions, research training and other College events. They will not have access to the College intranet, Moodle and other College resources during their period of leave, although their email address will remain active. We would advise candidates to download a copy of the current [Handbook](#) prior to taking LoA.

10. Training for supervisors

All newly-appointed members of staff with current or potential responsibility for supervision are required to attend a compulsory unit as part of the postgraduate certificate of research supervision delivered by the Research Office.

All supervisors are encouraged to attend the College's wider Supervisor Development Programme delivered by the Research Office, which consists of regular in-house training sessions/ forums to ensure that College protocols, ethos, regulations and updates are followed. All information about trainings for research supervisors and chair, questions and answers at the [PGR Supervisor and Chair Hub](#).

Resources for Research Supervision

- UKCGE [Supporting Research Supervision](#)
- The [Supervising PhDs blog](#)
- Eley, A., & Murray, R. (2009). *How to be an Effective Supervisor: Best Practice in Research Student Supervision*. (OU Study Skills). Open University Press.
- Guccione, K. and Stefanatos, R. (2023) A [beginner's guide to supervising a PhD researcher](#). *Biochemist*, 45(5), pp. 11-15. (doi: 10.1042/bio_2023_140)
- Maxwell, T. W., & Smyth, R. (2010). Research supervision: the research management matrix. *Higher Education*, 59(4), 407–422. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40602409>
- Lee, A. (2019). *Successful Research Supervision: Advising students doing research* (2nd ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351234986>
- Clegg, K., Houston, G., & Gower, O. (2024). *Doctoral Supervision and Research Culture: What We Know, What Works and Why* (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003248118>
- Toncich, D. (2016). *Key Factors in Postgraduate Research Supervision A Guide for Supervisors*. River Publishers. <https://doi.org/10.1201/9781003338741>
- [Hamilton, Jillian](#) & [Carson, Susan](#) (2015) [Speaking of Supervision: A dialogic approach to building higher degree research supervision capacity in the creative arts](#). *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 47(12), pp. 1348-1366.
- <https://srhe.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/S2Iss3-Supervising-Disabled-Students.pdf>