

# Guidance for Research Students and Supervisors in Respect of Resolving Difficulties Informally

## 1. Introduction

The DCU community is committed to ensuring that every student has the opportunity to have an excellent university experience. A key element of a positive research student experience is a professional and collaborative working relationship with the Supervisor, where each party understands the other's role and responsibilities and expectations are clear. DCU's *Academic Regulations for Postgraduate Degrees by Research and Thesis* details the various academic responsibilities with regard to graduate research. Similarly, DCU's Student Charter (see Appendix 1) helps students understand the relationship that exists between the Student and the University, through a set of clearly defined expectations.

Occasionally, however, difficulties other than academic performance can arise for the student or within the Student-Supervisor relationship, which may require additional supports. In such cases, research students, supervisors or other panel members are advised to seek a resolution to the issues at school level in the first instance.<sup>1</sup> Regulation 7.16 states that:

This process will normally involve the student, supervisors(s), panel members and Head of School. The Head of School may wish to seek advice on policy or procedure (without prejudicing any possible subsequent formal procedures) and/or consult with other colleagues on context and background. The resolution to the issues will be captured in writing and circulated to the student and panel members by the Head of School, to ensure clarity for both student and supervisor(s).

This document aims to provide guidance on how to resolve issues informally by early intervention within school structures. It is in the student's interest that difficulties are promptly addressed with a course of action agreed to facilitate a successful and sustainable working relationship between the student and his/her supervisor(s).

## 2. Scope

This policy applies to postgraduate research students in all DCU faculties and to DCU staff involved in research student supervision (including external supervisors etc.).

## 3. Dedicated DCU processes for addressing specific issues

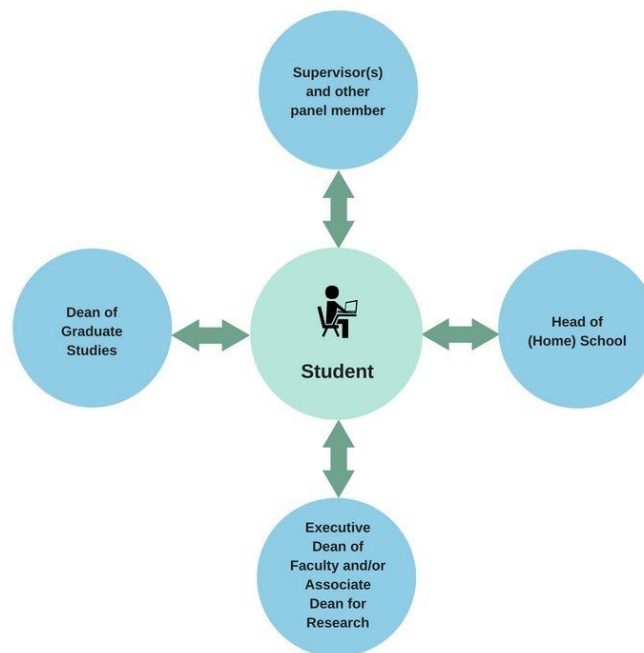
A number of serious or very specific issues may fall under an existing specific DCU policy and/or processes, many of which include an informal stage for resolving the issue. Supervisors and students should ensure that they are aware of this context and seek advice if necessary. If the research student's issue falls within one of the specific categories listed in Appendix 2, expertise and support is provided by the dedicated unit indicated.

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<sup>1</sup> DCU's [Academic Regulations for Postgraduate Degrees by Research and Thesis 2016/17, 7.16, pp. 14-15](#).

#### 4. Academic responsibilities in graduate research

Graduate research offers students the opportunity to work with a high degree of autonomy under the guidance and expertise of a principal supervisor. This arrangement forms the basis of the professional student-supervisor relationship. However, it is important to bear in mind that the research student-supervisor relationship does not exist in isolation within University structures. The supervision of each research student is the 'collective responsibility'<sup>2</sup> of the Supervisor, the other panel members, the School and the University. By agreeing to accept the research student at admission stage, or by agreeing to act as a member of the Supervisory Panel at any stage, each stakeholder makes a firm commitment to the student and each is expected to play a role in safeguarding individual student interests and endeavouring to make the relationship work. The student has an equal responsibility 'to engage fully with research projects and with supervisors'<sup>3</sup>.



#### Academic supports for research students<sup>4</sup>

While the Principal Supervisor has 'full responsibility for the overall management and supervision of the student's work and progress,'<sup>5</sup> other stakeholders have a number of specific and complementary responsibilities with regard to the Student's progression and the successful completion of the research project. These include: supporting students academically and administratively, providing advice, additional support and pastoral care, throughout their time with the University.

Details of each stakeholder's role and responsibilities are clearly outlined in the University's guide to 'Academic Roles and Responsibilities in Graduate Research' and it is important that each student takes the time to familiarise themselves with the details of this document. By understanding each other's role and responsibilities, it is hoped that expectations are reasonable and matched throughout the period of registration.

<sup>2</sup> IUQB [Good Practice in the Organisation of PhD Programmes in Irish Higher Education \(2009\), p. 25.](#)

<sup>3</sup> [Ibid, p.29.](#)

<sup>4</sup> DCU's [Graduate Research Guide 2016-17](#), p. 12.

<sup>5</sup> [DCU's Academic Regulations for Postgraduate Degrees by Research and Thesis 2016/17, 7.2, p. 11.](#)

Equally as important is the Student's responsibility to understand the relationship that exists between the Student and the University.

- For further information on what the University expects of students, see Appendix 1.
- For information on the Head of School's role with regard to research student supervision, see Appendix 3.

## 5. Common causes of difficulties for a student or within the student-supervisor relationship

Academic matters are discussed at meetings of the Supervisory Panel (which meet with the student formally at least one a year) and reflected in the annual review recommendations, for which there is an established appeals process (see Appendix 2). The appropriate way to deal with inadequacies of progress or standards relative to the standard expected, is through careful planning, setting a review of milestones etc.

5.1: Difficulties (either personally experienced by the student, noticed by the supervisor, or in the student-supervisor relationship) can include (but are not limited to):

- Disengagement:
  - not responding to email or failing to attend meetings
  - poor interaction with peers and members of the School/Faculty
- Poor attendance record on campus (if a necessary component of the research requires this)
- Failure to make decisions on research progress and/or difficulties completing tasks or meeting previously agreed deadlines and objectives
- Noticeable decline in the quality of his/her work
- Concerns raised by the student's peers, or by other members of the School/Faculty
- Changes in the Student's mood or behaviour
- Misunderstandings or communication difficulties
- A difference of opinion/approach
- Unmatched and/or unreasonable expectations
- Lack of clarity regarding roles and responsibilities (see Appendix 1)
- Contractual issues, lack of an agreed contract of terms and conditions (funded research students)
- Personal problems or health issues:

If personal problems or health issues are involved, the student may try to let the supervisor know directly or indirectly, that s/he is experiencing personal difficulties. If this is the case, it is in the student's best interest for the Supervisor to put them in touch with experienced advisers in Student Support & Development (see Appendix 4). Furthermore, the supervisor is advised to follow-up with the student to establish whether s/he has accessed the service.

## 6. Resolving difficulties informally at school level

Difficulties should be raised at an early stage, as soon as they become a concern or start to negatively impact on the programme of research. The following options are available to research students or supervisors who may wish to raise difficulties informally within school structures. They may be raised in the following order or one may feel they wish to discuss the issue at the next level (i.e. begin at 6.2 rather than 6.1, but not initially at 6.3) depending on the difficulty being raised:

### 6.1: Informal discussion between the Student and the Supervisor(s)

If difficulties arise, research students are encouraged to raise their concerns with the Supervisor(s) in the first instance if applicable. The Student should make an appointment to meet with the Supervisor(s) because communication difficulties are more likely to be resolved by means of a face-to-face meeting, where both parties can engage in open discussion with the expectation that the issue can be resolved. Students are advised to prepare by considering what outcome(s) they hope to achieve as a consequence of the meeting, with possible solutions in mind. The Student should aim to present his/her case in a calm, rational and objective way and concentrate on factual issues of direct relevance to the issue at hand. Both the Student and the Supervisor will agree a list of actions from the meeting. Any agreed resolution to the issue should be captured in writing and circulated to the Student by the Supervisor, to ensure clarity for both parties.

### 6.2 Raising the issue with the Independent Panel Member and/or Full Panel (Supervisor(s) and Independent Panel Member<sup>6</sup>)

If the Student does not feel comfortable raising an issue with the Supervisor(s), s/he can bring the matter to either the Independent Panel Member and/or to the full Supervisory Panel. Similarly, the Supervisor may also choose to discuss the matter with other panel members. The principal aim of the Supervisory Panel is to participate in formal decision-making with respect to the Student's progress, and provide advice, additional support and pastoral care, and escalate, as appropriate, should problems arise.<sup>7</sup>

#### **Independent Panel Member:**

The Independent Panel Member may refer to the Head of School, as appropriate, should problems arise.<sup>8</sup>

#### **The Supervisory Panel (Supervisor and Independent Panel Member):**

One of the responsibilities of the Supervisory Panel is to 'meet with the candidate and other panel members at least twice a year to discuss progress'. While this meeting is intended mainly to discuss the Student's academic progress, it can also be used as a forum to raise issues concerning, any student difficulties, the professional student-supervisor relationship, while all parties are present.

Any agreed resolution to the issue should be captured in writing by either the key stakeholder present and circulated to the student in order to ensure clarity for all parties.

### 6.3: Facilitated discussion chaired by the Head of School

It may not always be possible for student to raise issues with supervisors, or the Supervisory Panel directly, and in these circumstances it is advisable to seek other supports. For example, a funded student may feel particularly vulnerable when raising issues with the Supervisor who may also be the Principal Investigator. Alternatively, a student may have already met with the Supervisor(s) and failed to reach an agreed solution. In cases such as these, the research student is encouraged to contact the Head of School to request a facilitated discussion between the parties.<sup>9</sup> Equally a supervisor may wish to raise an issue with the Head of School and seek his/her advice.

It is important to bear in mind that a facilitated discussion with the Head of School is not intended to allocate blame to either party. Rather, it allows for the Head of School to assist both parties in teasing out a difficult issue, with the aim of resolving the problem informally, in a non-judgemental way, particularly in instances where a breakdown in communication has occurred and additional support is

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<sup>6</sup> [DCU's Guidance on the Appointment and Remit of an Independent Panel Member](#) <sup>[Link Required]</sup>

<sup>7</sup> [DCU's Academic Regulations for Postgraduate Degrees by Research and Thesis 2016/17, 7.1, p. 11.](#)

<sup>8</sup> [DCU's Academic Roles and Responsibilities in Graduate Research, table 3b, p. 4.](#)

<sup>9</sup> In instances where the Head of School is also the Principal Supervisor, the Student is advised to make contact with the Executive Dean of the Faculty, or his/her nominee.

required in order to minimise further impact on the relationship.<sup>10</sup> In this role, the Head of School facilitates communication between both parties by addressing difficulties fairly and objectively, in an effort to resume the student-supervisor relationship on a new footing, having learned from the experience.

If the meeting is successful, the resolution to the issue will be captured in writing and circulated to the Student and Supervisor by the Head of School, to ensure clarity for all parties.

For further information on the Head of School's role in facilitated discussion, see Appendix 3.

## 7. External of the School Structure

If it is the case that the student would prefer to discuss his/her concerns informally outside of school structures, possibly in advance of a meeting with the Supervisor(s) or Head of School, s/he may choose to speak to a Student Support & Development advisor with expertise in dealing with difficult issues and providing impartial advice. They may also wish to speak with a member of the Graduate Studies Office in seeking clarification on specific aspects of the University's academic regulations or policies.

Following discussion with a Student Adviser in the Student Advice Centre, a student can be further referred to an individual staff member or another service unit for further advice, where necessary. All students are welcome to use the service which offers advice and guidance on all matters academic, personal and financial. The Unit also offers one-to-one life coaching and 'Academic Life Coaching' workshops to help students identify goals and increase confidence and resilience that will help them reach their full potential. The Learning Support Unit may be a further source of assistance if students are experiencing difficulties with their writing and academic progress.

Supervisors and the Head of School can also make contact with the Unit for advice on dealing with difficult issues concerning students. See Appendix 4 for further information.

## 8. Possible outcomes of informal/facilitated discussion

A satisfactory resolution to an issue is in the best interests of all concerned and each stakeholder has a responsibility to resolve the issue promptly with the aim of returning the relationship to a firm footing. The possible outcomes of attempts to resolve the issue informally at school level are as follows:

1. The issue is **resolved** - the parties agree a solution that is equitable and satisfactory<sup>11</sup> and the student decides not to progress the issue further. This could be for one of the following reasons:
  - Clarification and/or an explanation.
  - An agreed change of practice with a course of action provided.

In each scenario listed above, the resolution to the issue will be captured in writing and circulated to the Student by the individual indicated. If any party does not accept the resolution, or a resolution is not possible within a reasonable timeframe (3-6 weeks), consideration should be given by all parties as to how the issues fall under specific University Policies.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> DCU's [Student Grievance Procedure, p. 5.](#)

<sup>12</sup>DCU's [Academic Regulations for Postgraduate Degrees by Research and Thesis 2016/17, 7.16, p. 14-15.](#)

2. The issue remains **unresolved** and the student decides to escalate the matter to a process of formal resolution.

If this is the case, a report is drafted by the key stakeholder present at the meeting and a copy is sent to the Head of School (if the Head of School is not present at the meeting). If the issue is escalated to a formal process, the Head of School will be called upon to produce a report at a later stage. See section 9 for more information.

## 9. Escalation to formal resolution processes (see Appendix 2)

In the event that the informal resolution process is unsuccessful at school level, separate DCU procedures are in place for the student who chooses to refer the matter to a formal level. Similarly, in instances where there has been a breakdown in the student-supervisor relationships, the Head of School may also choose to 'escalate where appropriate in line with University policy'.<sup>13</sup> Further information on DCU procedures for raising a formal complaint are available from the DCU units and resources listed in Appendix 2.

**Note:** Issues raised under DCU's formal student grievance procedure will be processed in accordance with the principles of full consultation during the process and in accordance with the general principles of natural justice and fair procedures. Accordingly, where a staff or student member is named in a formal grievance procedure, it will be necessary to share with them, any comments or details relating to them.<sup>14</sup> Comments from the Head of School are also an essential input into the process, provided in writing through the 'Student Grievance Response Form'.

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<sup>13</sup> [DCU's Academic Roles and Responsibilities in Graduate Research](#), table 1, p. 1.

<sup>14</sup> DCU's [Student Grievance Procedure](#), p.3.

## Appendix 1: Student-Supervisor(s) Roles and Responsibilities

An important element of the student's relationship with stakeholders is an understanding of each other's roles and responsibilities and a clear sense of what is expected of each party. Occasionally, a lack of clarity in this area can lead to unmatched, or unreasonable expectations and allow difficulties to arise in the student-supervisor relationship.

The [DCU Student Charter](#) was created in close liaison with the Students' Union to help students understand the relationship that exists between the Student and the University. It is designed to provide students with a framework to steer them through their DCU journey and make the most of their university experience. The expectations outlined in the Student Charter apply equally to all DCU students, including postgraduate research students.

Given the unique and independent nature of postgraduate research, an additional number of expectations have been developed with research students in mind.

### **As a DCU research student, you are expected to<sup>15</sup>**

- Engage fully with a programme of independent research, which is of publishable quality and has the capacity to make an original contribution to knowledge, with the understanding that you are ultimately responsible for progressing your research, guided by, and under the advisement of your supervisor's expertise.
- Understand [your supervisor's and supporting stakeholders' roles and responsibilities](#) in relation to the research project.
- Maintain effective communication channels with your supervisor and promptly bring to his/her attention any circumstances or difficulties which have the potential to impact on the research project and its progress. Contribute to the resolution of such difficulties, where possible.<sup>16</sup>
- Contribute to the School's research environment. Engage with peers working in similar research areas, both nationally and internationally.
- Comply fully with the terms and conditions of your scholarship agreement, where relevant. Retain a signed copy of your agreed funding contract for future reference.

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<sup>15</sup> Developed in accordance with the principles of the [National Framework for Doctoral Education](#).

<sup>16</sup> [DCU's Guidance for students and supervisors in respect of withdrawing, or early exit from research programmes, p.2.](#)

## Appendix 2:

Existing DCU procedure	Further information
Academic decisions relating to the <b>progression and examination</b> of research students.	<a href="#">Appeals process for research students</a>
Grievances related to personal harassment or bullying.	<a href="#">Policy to promote respect and dignity by preventing harassment or bullying</a>  This policy provides a set of guidelines for <b>any member of the University community</b> who experiences incidents of harassment or bullying in the course of his/her work or study.
Grievances about the <b>Students' Union</b>	<a href="#">DCU Students Union</a>
Grievances related to <b>Campus Companies</b>	Grievances should be made directly to the campus company who will provide details of the local process in place.
<b>Disciplinary matters</b> (including plagiarism)	<a href="#">University Disciplinary Committee</a>
Allegations of <b>Research Misconduct</b>	<a href="#">Policy for responding to allegations of research misconduct</a> (ARMP)  <a href="#">Office of the Vice-President of Research &amp; Innovation</a>
Incidents related to the use of <b>Social Media</b>	DCU's <a href="#">Social Media Policy Office of the Chief Operations Officer</a>



## Appendix 3: Considerations for the Head of School

### Managing challenging situations

The Head of School has multiple roles and responsibilities within the School and University. While supervision remains the sole prerogative of the Supervisor(s),<sup>17</sup> each research student is registered in a school, and comes under the responsibility of the Head of School.<sup>18</sup> One of the Head of School's many responsibilities with regard to the research student, is his/her role in the resolution of difficulties which may arise during the course of the research student-supervisor professional relationship.

When called upon to do so by either the Student or the Supervisor(s), the Head of School has a responsibility to 'mediate in cases where there is a breakdown in the relationship...and escalate where appropriate in line with University Policy'.<sup>19</sup> In such cases, the Head of School has a clear responsibility to both parties and he/she is in a position to provide support through informal facilitated discussion.

Acting as an objective facilitator to both parties can be challenging and present the Head of School with conflicting responsibilities. S/he has to be mindful of multiple interests, that is, the interests of the research student and the Supervisor(s), while simultaneously acting in the best interests of the School and meeting obligations with regard to the University and its academic regulations. Some potential considerations to bear in mind include:

- Balancing the Head of School's responsibility to the Supervisor/colleague and the Student.
- Being mindful of the sensitivities involved with the intention of improving the student-supervisor relationship going forward.
- The desire to help the Student so that s/he can return to focussing on his/her studies as soon as possible, without further distractions.
- Managing the expectations of both parties.
- Concerns regarding reputational damage.
- Acting with integrity and in a manner that is fair and consistent to both parties.

According to academic regulations, 'the Head of School may wish to seek advice on policy or procedure (without prejudicing any possible subsequent formal procedures) and or consult with other colleagues on context and background. The resolution to the issues will be captured in writing and circulated to the student and panel members by the Head of School, to ensure clarity for both student and supervisor'.<sup>20</sup>

Several supports are available to the Head of School providing facilitated discussion between the Student and the Supervisor. See Appendix 1 for further information.

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<sup>17</sup> DCU's [Academic Regulations for Postgraduate Degrees by Research and Thesis 2016/17](#), 7.2, p. 11.

<sup>18</sup> [DCU's Academic Roles and Responsibilities in Graduate Research](#), table 1, p. 1.


<sup>19</sup> [DCU's Academic Roles and Responsibilities in Graduate Research](#), table 1, p. 1.

<sup>20</sup> DCU's [Academic Regulations for Postgraduate Degrees by Research and Thesis 2016/17](#), 7.16, pp. 14-15.

## Appendix 4: Relevant DCU Supports

Student Support & Development Services	Contact details
<p><a href="#">Student Support &amp; Development</a> is an important point of contact for students seeking impartial advice and guidance. It offers many supports to research students, including one-to-one advisory sessions.</p> <p>Supervisors and Heads of School can also contact Student Support &amp; Development for general advice on dealing with difficult issues concerning their students.</p>	<p><b>Glasnevin Campus</b>            Student Advice Centre            Ground Floor Henry Grattan Building            (Opposite main student restaurant)            Phone: 00 353 1 700 7165            Email: <a href="mailto:student.support@dcu.ie">student.support@dcu.ie</a></p> <p><b>St Patrick's Campus</b>            Student Advice Centre            Room C101            Ground Floor Block C            (Opposite main reception)            Phone: 00 353 1 884 2004            Email: <a href="mailto:spdstudent.support@dcu.ie">spdstudent.support@dcu.ie</a></p>
Human Resources	
<p>HR's Learning &amp; Development unit provides training sessions for supervisors of research degrees, which include guidance on relationship management.</p> <p>The Unit has also developed an online <i>University Leadership and Management</i> programme which aims to support academic staff appointed to leadership positions, including Heads of School. The course is also directed at staff who have, or are considering taking up leadership and/or management roles. Of particular benefit is topic 3: module 4, which focuses on resolving difficulties between individuals.</p>	<p>Contact DCU Learning &amp; Development (Human Resources):  <a href="mailto:training.development@dcu.ie">training.development@dcu.ie</a></p>
The Graduate Studies Office	
<p>The Dean of Graduate Studies and the Graduate Studies Office provide advice on all matters concerning research students</p>	<p>Room AG40            Albert College Building            T: 01-700 5214/5136/7655/6285            E: <a href="mailto:graduatestudiesoffice@dcu.ie">graduatestudiesoffice@dcu.ie</a></p>

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Graduate Studies Office		
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