

Assistant Supervisor: Guidelines for Supervisors, Postdoctoral Researchers and Postgraduate Research Students

Approved by the Research and Post-Graduate Committee in May 2020

1. Introduction

These guidelines set out recommendations for involvement of postdocs in the supervision of Postgraduate Research students (e. g. Mphil and PhD students; here referred to as “research students” or “students”). This is of particular relevance to the MHLS Faculty, where a majority of postdocs are involved in the training and supervision of PhD students in their group, alongside their PI.

During the 2019-20 academic year, a pilot was undertaken in the Faculty of MHLS to formalise the role of some postdoc researchers as Assistant Supervisor. The initiative was successful and feedback from all groups of stakeholders highlighted its benefits as well as support for its retention beyond the pilot.

The intention in formalising this role is to provide a framework both to recognise the contribution of postdocs to the supervision of PhD students, and to ensure that postdocs involved in those activities are appropriately trained and supported.

2. General Principles

- a) The creation of an Assistant Supervisor role is not aimed at creating new responsibilities or workload for postdocs but to recognise activities that postdocs are already carrying out. Appointment as an Assistant Supervisor would not result in any change in the contract, job title or remuneration of the postdoc.
- b) To qualify as an Assistant Supervisor, the postdoc would be expected to make a significant contribution to the training and development of the postgraduate student. Such a contribution must be clearly beyond the provision of technical support and training, encompassing intellectual insight and guidance consistent with postgraduate training. It is expected that postdocs will most likely also be involved in training and helping students for whom they are not Assistant Supervisor as part of their general supervisory duties.
- c) The appointment of an Assistant Supervisor would be at the discretion of the student’s main supervisory team (comprising Principal Supervisor/Secondary Supervisor/Co-Supervisors as appropriate) and with agreement from the entire supervisory team and research student.
- d) The Assistant Supervisor would not substitute for any of the main member of the supervisory team (Principal, Secondary or Co-Supervisor) and the overall responsibility for the student and project would still be with the Principal Supervisor. The roles and responsibilities of the Principal, Secondary and Co-Supervisors remain unchanged. The Assistant Supervisor would not be held responsible for potential issues arising with the project or the student’s performance.
- e) An Assistant Supervisor is not a required part of a supervisory team, and postgraduate research students should not have the expectation that they will have an Assistant

Supervisor or that their Assistant Supervisor will remain in place for the entire length of their degree. All responsibilities of the supervisory relationship should be met from the Principal and Co- or Second Supervisors. It is not possible to guarantee that a Postdoc researcher will have an opportunity to be Assistant Supervisor, as this depends on the number of PhD students on a research project close to their area of expertise.

- f) Being appointed as an Assistant Supervisor is an opportunity for a postdoc researcher to gain experience and insight into the overall supervision process, and to provide near-peer support to a research student. The tasks carried out by Assistant Supervisors fall into general staff/student training and supervision as listed on postdoc's job descriptions. In the rare case when such activities are not listed on their job description, postdocs who accept an Assistant Supervisor appointment understand that they do it on a voluntary basis for the benefit of their career.
- g) It is important for a research student to be clear about the different roles undertaken by members of the supervisory team, and to understand their own role and responsibilities. They also have the ability to request changes to their supervisory team. The research student should be involved in decisions relating to the involvement of the Assistant Supervisor.
- h) A research student would not have more than one Assistant Supervisor at a time. It is possible that a student would have a different Assistant Supervisor during the course of their training, e.g. where the previous Assistant Supervisor left or where the work required different input / expertise). It cannot be guaranteed that a research student will have an Assistant Supervisor, nor that an Assistant Supervisor will be replaced if they leave during a student's research degree.

3. Processes for appointing an Assistant Supervisor

It is proposed that the following process for appointing Assistant Supervisors be used:

- Postdoc to demonstrate that they meet eligibility criteria (Section 4) for becoming Assistant Supervisor (as defined by the Faculty / School) on application form.
- Discussion between Supervisory Team, proposed Assistant Supervisor and Research Student to agree roles and responsibilities of the Assistant Supervisor.
- "Request for Assistant Supervisor appointment form", signed by members of the main supervisory team, the postdoc's line manager (if not one of the supervisors), the research student and the postdoc.
- Approval by the Director of Graduate Studies / Chair of Postgraduate Research Committee or nominee. This person will also ensure eligibility of the proposed Assistant Supervisor.
- Addition of the Assistant Supervisor on QSL and request for them to be granted access by the School staff (could be done by the PDC if more straightforward)
- The School would forward the application to the Postdoctoral Development Centre (PDC), which would issue an official letter to the Assistant Supervisor (also informing the rest of the supervisory team and research student)

4. Eligibility for Assistant Supervisor role

In order to be considered as an Assistant Supervisor, the candidate must:

- Be a postdoc, defined here as a member of staff engaged in research and employed on a fixed-term contract requiring a PhD (e.g. Research Fellows, Clinical Academic Lecturers)
- Normally having >12 months post-PhD relevant experience. Exceptions could be made when the postdoc's skills and experience are judged to be sufficient by the student's Supervisors and the Director of Graduate Studies / Chair of Postgraduate Research Committee, for example when the candidate acquired management experience during their PhD or previous employment (e.g. clinical environment)
- Be working in an area relevant to the PhD project and normally in the group of one of the supervisors
- Be agreeable to being involved in the activities described under 'roles and responsibilities' below
- Be appointed by the student's Supervisors, with final approval by the Director of Graduate Studies / Chair of Postgraduate Research Committee. Where the postdoc has a PI, the PI must agree to the appointment (normally the postdoc's PI is one of the Supervisors)
- A postdoc would normally be the Assistant Supervisor for one student at a time, but could be for two if agreed by the supervisors and the Director of Graduate Studies / Chair of Postgraduate Research Committee
- Be willing to engage in development and training to support the role.
- Appointment as Assistant Supervisors would normally be for a minimum of 12 months (exceptions at the discretion of the Supervisor and with agreement of the research student). Maximum overlap between the postdoc's contract and the student's registration duration is recommended but not required. Any changes to the Assistant Supervisor status must be communicated by the Supervisor to the Research Student.

5. Roles and Responsibilities

Specific roles and responsibilities will be discussed and agreed by the main supervisory team and the Assistant Supervisor; roles and responsibilities may vary depending on the field of research.

a) Responsibilities of the Postdoc Assistant Supervisor:

The Assistant Supervisor would be responsible for assisting the designated research student as appropriate to their training. What is appropriate should be agreed by the Supervisory Team. The Assistant Supervisor would not be responsible for carrying out the students' work (experiments, analysis, writing, general project planning etc.)

The roles will be agreed by the Assistant Supervisor, Supervisory team and the student at the time of appointment of the Assistant Supervisor.

Normally, Assistant Supervisors will be involved in:

- Acting as an additional point of contact for the student
- Assisting the student with relevant procedures (e.g. Health and Safety, procurement etc.)
- Providing technical and analytical training and/or advice to the student
- Liaising with the Supervisors to make sure the project is carried out according to plan
- Helping the student find solutions to issues, notably by providing advice at lab meetings and supervisory meetings

- Providing advice for experiments / trouble-shooting issues that do not require intervention by the Supervisors
- Attending supervisory meetings (at least 3 supervisory meetings annually; out of the 10 mandatory meetings described by the [Study Regulations for Research Degree Programmes](#) 6.4.1) and relevant supervisory discussions as agreed with Supervisors
- Providing informal mentoring to the student, notably relevant to career development
- Providing informal feedback on written works and presentations
- Be involved in APR and viva preparation (e.g. mock vivas)
- Being listed as author or acknowledged in the acknowledgement section of outputs generated from the work (in accordance with relevant authorship codes of practice)

Assistant Supervisors would have the opportunity to attend supervisory meetings and Supervisors would normally include Assistant Supervisors in discussions relevant to project development and student progression. Assistant Supervisors would not take substantive decisions relating to the student's research project.

Assistant Supervisors should ensure that they have appropriate training and knowledge to undertake roles. For example, if being involved in supporting proofreading of a student's writing, ensure that they are aware of good practice in proofreading and how to signpost a student for additional support outside of their range of knowledge. It is the Assistant Supervisor's responsibility to raise concerns with the Principal Supervisor / Secondary Supervisor / Co-Supervisor, for example where they feel a task extends beyond their current knowledge or skills, such that the appropriate support can be sought.

The Assistant Supervisor must abide by all Queen's University Belfast regulations, policies and procedures relating to postgraduate supervision, such as the [Study Regulations for Research Degree Programmes](#), and the [Code of Practice for Research Degree Programmes](#).

b) Responsibilities of Supervisors / Principal Investigators:

Responsibilities include: supporting the Assistant Supervisor to ensure clarity of their role and limitations within that; ensuring that Assistant Supervisors have appropriate training and knowledge to undertake the role; providing mentorship to the Assistant Supervisor by sharing best practice, and; providing feedback on their performance. This may require the establishment of a Personal Development Plan to gain appropriate skills and knowledge.

The Supervisor is responsible for ensuring that there is a discussion about the role and responsibilities of the Assistant Supervisor, with both the Assistant Supervisor and Research Student. This should be documented and signed off by all parties, with final approval by the Director of Graduate Studies / Chair of the Postgraduate Research Committee.

c) Responsibilities of Research Students:

A postgraduate student may benefit from additional support from an Assistant Supervisor.

The research student can help the Assistant Supervisor in their development by providing feedback relating to the value of their support.

The research student must raise any concerns they have about the Assistant Supervisor with their Principal Supervisor, Secondary Supervisor or Co-Supervisors.

d) Responsibilities of Directors of Graduate Studies / Chairs of Postgraduate Research Committees

Final approval of all proposed Assistant Supervisor roles and responsibilities.

Monitoring supervisory / student relationships and taking action to address any issues identified by the main Supervisors, Assistant Supervisor or Research Student.

6. Raising Issues and Concerns

Issues regarding the ability of the Assistant Supervisor to provide appropriate supervision:

If a complaint is raised by a student, the School should consult with Academic Affairs, and may be referred to the Student Complaints Procedure or Bullying and Harassment Policy. This may include attempting to resolve the matter informally by the Supervisor.

If concern is raised by one of the supervisors, the issue should initially be addressed by the Supervisory team. If no suitable solution can be proposed, the issue would then be brought to the attention of the Director of Graduate Studies / Chairs of Postgraduate Research Committees.

The Director of Graduate Studies / Chairs of Postgraduate Research Committees would be responsible for the wellbeing and support relating to the research student and for working with Academic Affairs and People & Culture to establish the most appropriate process for considering the issue, which may be under the staff grievance procedure.