

Birkbeck, University of London

Policy on Supervision of Dissertations by Taught Students

Introduction

1. Many of the College's taught programmes, at both undergraduate and postgraduate level, include a dissertation component. This will often be in the final year for undergraduate students or at the end of the programme for postgraduate students, and will often comprise 60 or more credits.
2. The purpose of a dissertation is normally to enable students to undertake some independent research on an agreed topic related to their programme of study. Typically, an academic member of staff will be assigned to each student undertaking a dissertation to agree the topic with the student and to supervise the student while they are working on their dissertation.
3. This Policy outlines the role of the dissertation supervisor, and defines the rights and responsibilities of both the supervisor and the student.
4. This Policy does not apply to supervisors for research students, whose role is defined in the College's Code of Practice for the Degrees of MPhil and PhD.

Role of the Supervisor

5. The role of the supervisor is to assist the student by providing advice and guidance on how to prepare, produce and improve their dissertation. It may include giving advice on choosing a suitable topic; drawing up a suitable preliminary bibliography; planning the primary and secondary research the student will need to do for the dissertation; using suitable research methods, including obtaining any necessary research ethics approval; methods of improving the presentation of the dissertation; sources of information, advice and guidance in undertaking the dissertation and other general academic advice. The supervisor should be available to advise the student on approach, coverage, questions to be asked and the outline structure and research design.
6. More specifically, the supervisor is expected to:
 - assist the student in the definition and organisation of the project in the early stages of preparation
 - advise the student on the feasibility of what (s)he plans to do
 - approve the dissertation proposalThe supervisor is under no obligation to:
 - find the student a suitable topic for the dissertation
 - read preliminary drafts of the student's work
 - proof read the final draft
7. It is not the role of the supervisor to direct the research or ensure that a dissertation is of sufficient quality to pass; this is the responsibility of the student. Any opinion expressed by the supervisor relating to the quality of the work should not be taken to represent the opinion of the relevant sub-board of examiners.

Responsibilities of the Student

8. It is the responsibility of the student to initiate contact with their dissertation supervisor once the supervisor has been allocated. Students should contact their supervisors within 10 working days of the supervisor being nominated, to agree a date for an initial meeting or other working methods.
9. The student and supervisor should agree a timetable at the outset for completion, which should normally include provision for at least two meetings in advance of submission.
10. Students are responsible for providing their supervisor with drafts of work to be discussed, as agreed with the supervisor, and no later than five working days before any meeting.
11. Students are responsible for ensuring that approval from any appropriate body is obtained in relation to research ethics.

Responsibilities of the Supervisor

12. Once a timetable for submission of drafts and for supervision meetings is agreed, supervisors should ensure that appropriate feedback is provided on submitted draft work at supervision meetings. Where written feedback is agreed this should normally be provided within a reasonable time from the agreed date for submission of draft work.¹
13. The student should normally have at least three meetings with their supervisor. These could be, for example:
 - an initial discussion identifying the topic, questions and methodology, identifying any research ethics approval that will need to be obtained and sketching out an initial action plan and bibliography
 - an intermediate meeting to assess progress on the dissertation and discuss the likely structure of the first draft
 - a final 'trouble-shooting' meeting.
14. Many dissertations are carried out when staff may be on leave or otherwise unable to meet with the student. Where a supervisor will be out of contact for a period of longer than four weeks then they, or their department should ensure that an alternative supervisor is available to cover during this period.
15. As stated in paragraph 7, it is not the role of the Supervisor to ensure that a dissertation is of sufficient quality to pass. Supervisors should refrain from commenting on the likely outcome of assessment, and focus solely on advice on how to improve the dissertation.

Complaints

16. Where a student considers that their supervision is not adequate then they may request a change of supervisor by writing to their Programme Director or Assistant Dean of the relevant Department. Any change will be at the discretion of the relevant Assistant Dean.

¹ Please see also the College Policy on Feedback on Assessment

17. Formal complaints about supervision should be submitted in accordance with the College's Student Dispute Resolution Policy.

Academic Board
November 2011