

SUPERVISION ELIGIBILITY FOR POSTGRADUATE RESEARCH DEGREES

The following principles and guidance regarding eligibility criteria for research degree supervision were originally approved in 2018, and have been updated in 2025 to reflect amended guidance and terminology around supervisory roles. The principles and guidance supplement the *Code of Practice for Research Degree Programmes*, which states:

“All postgraduate research students will be allocated a core supervisory team of at least two members of academic staff who will support them through their academic and development programme.”

These criteria recognise that in the context of a research-intensive Russell Group University, it should be a reasonable expectation of our PGR students that they are supervised by staff who are recognised to be research-active. The University has designed its [Academic Career Pathways](#) to provide clarity about expectations for staff according to their pathway and seniority and we should not expect colleagues to undertake duties for which they cannot be recognised through our reward processes.

GENERAL PRINCIPLES REGARDING ELIGIBILITY FOR RESEARCH DEGREE SUPERVISION

- The primary supervisor will be an academic from the school in which the student is registered;
- There should be a reasonable expectation that, all things being equal, the appointed supervisors will be in post for the duration of the student's degree, i.e. not on short fixed-term contracts;
- Supervisors should be appointed who have the appropriate skills and subject expertise to effectively support the student's research project;
- In addition to the two named supervisors, all postgraduate research students will have access to a Personal Tutor, who is another academic member of staff based in their school who is unconnected to the research project, and who is available to signpost advice and support on pastoral matters where required;
- The Head of School is responsible for assigning academic staff workload, including deciding the maximum number of PGR students that any one member of staff can supervise. It is acceptable for some supervisors to exceptionally take on more than six FTE students, provided this is taken into account in their overall workload allocation and approved by the Head of School.

ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA FOR DIFFERENT CATEGORIES OF STAFF

1. Academic member of staff on a substantive contract

Academic staff who are on either a substantive Teaching and Research contract, or a Research Specialist contract may be appointed as primary supervisors. Academic staff who are on a Teaching Specialist contract should not normally be appointed as a primary supervisor, but may be appointed as a second supervisor, on a case-by-case basis, e.g. where the academic formerly held a research contract and has demonstrable experience of PhD supervision. For doctoral programmes with a substantial taught element (currently EdD, DEdCPsy, DClinPsy), an academic member of staff on a Teaching Specialist contract may be appointed as a primary supervisor, e.g. where the academic is: research active (with recent relevant publications in academic journals, books or other appropriate peer reviewed outlets), has specific methodological expertise relevant to the PhD project, has demonstrable experience of PhD supervision. In such cases, an academic member of staff on a Teaching & Research contract or a Research Specialist contract should be appointed as the second supervisor.

The case for a member of staff on a Teaching Specialist contract to be appointed as a primary supervisor must be signed off by the Faculty PGR Lead. This is in line with the QAA Framework for Higher Education Qualifications, which states that:

4.18.c) Doctoral programmes that may have a substantial taught element in addition to the research component (for example, professional doctorates), lead usually to awards which include the name of the discipline in their title (for example, EdD for Doctor of Education or DClinPsy for Doctor of Clinical Psychology). Professional doctorates aim to develop an individual's professional practice and to support them in producing a contribution to (professional) knowledge.

2. Academic member of staff on probation

Schools must decide if an academic member of staff on a probationary contract has sufficient experience to act as a primary supervisor. If this is not the case, an experienced member of academic staff must be appointed as primary supervisor and the probationary member of staff may be appointed as a second supervisor.

3. Fixed-term contract researchers (e.g. Independent Research Fellows, postdoctoral research associates, research assistants) and honorary staff

Independent Research Fellows may be appointed as primary supervisors, provided they have sufficient experience to act as a primary supervisor. If not, an experienced member of academic staff must be appointed as primary supervisor and they may be appointed as a second supervisor. In addition, there must also be a reasonable expectation that their contract will outlast the student's fee-paying period.

Postdoctoral research assistants and honorary staff **should not** be appointed as primary supervisors. Schools should give careful consideration to the following:

- They should not act as the training supervisor for DDP purposes unless they have suitable previous experience
- They can be appointed as a second supervisor if all of the following conditions are met:
 - They have sufficient postdoctoral or clinical research experience to supervise effectively
 - They are paired with an experienced primary supervisor who is a member of university staff
 - Their area of expertise is consistent with the research area of the student's project
 - Their contract outlasts the student's funding period (usually 3-4 years), or there is a high probability that the contract will be continued
- They can be appointed as a third supervisor (e.g. lab supervisor) because of specific skills

4. External supervisors

There are a number of scenarios where the appointment of an external supervisor may be deemed appropriate, at the University's discretion, for example:

- Where a supervisor leaves to take up an appointment elsewhere and agrees to continue an existing supervisory arrangement;
- Where there is a requirement for specific subject-specialist expertise which is no longer available within a school and expertise therefore needs to be bought in;
- Where the student is jointly supervised across more than one university or where there is an arrangement for jointly awarding a degree;
- Where an industrial supervisor is also required, e.g. for CASE award students, or for MD/clinical PhD students based away from the Sheffield Teaching Hospitals NHS Trust.

External supervisors **should not** be appointed as primary supervisors, but can act as second supervisors. A University of Sheffield member of academic staff must also be appointed who must be the primary supervisor.

The role and responsibilities of the external supervisor in relation to those of the primary supervisor should be clearly defined, in order that the student is aware of the boundaries of each role.

5. Retired staff/Emeritus Professors

Retired staff, including Emeritus Professors, are not permitted to act as primary supervisors, but may be appointed as second supervisors. A University of Sheffield member of academic staff must also be appointed and should be the primary supervisor.

6. Academic staff without a PhD

Academic staff who do not themselves have a doctorate may be considered as a primary supervisor on a case-by-case basis according to whether they have sufficient experience to undertake the role. If not, they may be appointed as a second supervisor.

Approved by the Doctoral Academy Committee, May 2018. Updated July 2025