

Policy on the Approval of Doctoral Degree Supervisors

Summary

Following consultation and discussion at both the City Graduate School Committee and Senate, a revised policy on the Approval of Doctoral Degree Supervisors was implemented with immediate effect from May 2015. It was agreed that a one-year-on review would take place to enable Schools to provide feedback on the operation of the new policy.

One action required.

Recommended Action

Senate is asked to **receive** an update on the Approval of Doctoral Degree Supervisors.

Publication: Open

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Introduction

The broad aims of the policy changes were to support ongoing enhancements to the doctoral student experience, including better consistency of treatment for doctoral students who are/are not in receipt of a University studentship, with the ultimate aim of improving completion rates. The significant change in the policy required that Category A supervisors should have an ARQM GPA score equal to or greater than 3* (determined at/since the last HEFCE research excellence exercise).

It was agreed that the policy would be implemented in a staged way in order to avoid unsettling existing supervisory arrangements, which it was agreed would be to the detriment of those students. Consequently, it is not yet possible to assess the impact of the policy change in its totality as this will take several years to be realised. Consequently, a further review will be needed to examine whether enhanced supervision arrangements do result in better completion rates and higher levels of student satisfaction. Arrangements for this review will be scoped and presented to the City Graduate School Committee for discussion in due course.

For this one-year-on review, Schools were invited to provide comments in four broad areas:

- The appropriateness of the supervision categories
- The clarity of the appointment criteria under each supervision category
- The effectiveness of the monitoring and evaluation mechanisms
- Any further comments

Responses were received from SASS, Cass, CLS and SHS. Further feedback is anticipated from SMCSE; the School intends to submit a detailed response to the City Graduate School Committee in due course.

There is broad consent about (i) the importance of effective supervisory arrangements that work for doctoral students and (ii) a desire to support initiatives to improve completion rates. Within this context, the majority of the comments provided focussed on the appropriateness of the revised supervision categories and criteria for appointment as a Category A supervisor. Key issues are summarised below.

- Some of the responses detailed concern the reliability of ARQM GPA scores/data, which can change annually (and within the period of the doctoral student's registration). Some staff are not yet convinced that the metric is a reliable indicator of the quality of supervision. SHS propose that the wording of the criteria in the policy be adjusted to:

Category A supervisors have an ARQM GPA score equal to or greater than 3 (determined at any previous ARQM or any HEFCE research excellence exercise) at the time of being appointed as a supervisor.*

- Schools have reported concerns about the possible exclusion of successful supervisors on the basis of their current ARQM GPA score. While it is possible for Schools to apply for an exemption with firm rationale, the significant number of exceptions required have raised questions of whether some further flexibility in implementing the policy might be possible.

- One School highlights the recent Stern Review of the REF (July 2016) and proposed changes to increase flexibility the way that research active staff are returned in the REF. In this context it is suggested that the current City criteria could then be too stringent? ¹
- A further consequence of the revised criteria is the belief that the workload of a reduced pool of Cat A supervisors could become increasingly unmanageable, impacting negatively on the doctoral student experience. This issue is compounded in small departments with limited staff numbers. It has been proposed that in the absence of an agreed model setting out the expected minimum/maximum hours required for supervision responsibilities the workload allocation could remain problematic.
- Some Schools have experienced specific difficulty in implementing the policy for certain professional programmes. For example, SHS have outlined within their feedback several positive steps that they have taken to ensure the quality of current and future supervision of the DPsych students. SHS propose the following adjustment to the wording of the policy:

For research degrees that lead to professional registration and are thus subject to conditions of external regulatory bodies, every effort will be made to ensure that students are supervised by research-active and research-excellent staff.

- It is clear from the responses provided that there is a desire for the University to explore the benefit of more innovative and flexible for provision supervisory support the students. Several Russell Group universities (Nottingham, Birmingham, LSE and Exeter are notable examples) have adopted team and joint supervision approaches that provide a greater degree of flexibility whilst ensuring that the quality of supervision remains high (at City it should be noted that 2 supervisors are required for every student). Such models require a clear statement of roles and responsibilities, otherwise a student can be confused about where day-to-day support can be accessed, and this may need to be done on a student-by-student basis. Cass would like to work within a model whereby students are initially provisionally assigned to a faculty mentor, but choose their supervisor only at the end the first year. This is consistent with the structure of their PhD.
- Currently, the policy states that the President or a nominee can exceptionally approve Category A supervisors who do not meet all of the criteria (or specifically where they do not have an ARQM GPA of 3* or above) but where there is a strong rationale for the appointment. A number of Schools suggests that Senate considers whether this authority should be delegated elsewhere, suggesting the Associate Dean for Research (or equivalent).

The other significant area of the feedback received from School have related to how the implementation of the policy is being monitored by Boards of Studies. Specific arrangements are not stipulated within the policy but it should be noted that the Board of Studies currently has responsibility for monitoring supervision arrangements and student progress. Senate may wish to consider if the development of associated guidance would ensure a consistency in approach.

¹ https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/541338/ind-16-9-ref-stern-review.pdf (p.19)

A final point made in some responses was that it would be useful if the University was more proactive in planning for and support the development of new supervisors. However this should both form part of mentoring arrangements for new academic staff and be supported within the Cat A/Cat B supervising arrangements which enable less experienced academic staff to gain the experience to advance to Cat A.

Recommended Actions

Senate is asked to consider:

1. Feedback provided as part of the one year review of the Approval of Doctoral Degree Supervisors Policy.
2. Whether it is supportive of the changes in the wording proposed by SHS, viz:

Category A supervisors have an ARQM GPA score equal to or greater than 3 (determined at any previous ARQM or any HEFCE research excellence exercise) at the time of being appointed as a supervisor.*

For research degrees that lead to professional registration and are thus subject to conditions of external regulatory bodies, every effort will be made to ensure that students are supervised by research-active and research-excellent staff.

3. The request for the authority to exceptionally approve category A supervisors who do not have and ARQM GPA of at least 3* to be delegated to Associate Deans for Research (or equivalent).

It is proposed that the City Graduate School Committee then:

1. Discuss steps to enhance arrangements for the development of supervisors in light of the comments and recommendations of Senate on the one-year-on review.

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