

Procedure for Change of Primary Supervisor

The University of Sheffield's Code of Practice for Research Degrees (UoS CoP) establishes that a [change of primary supervisor](#) is possible, e.g. where serious conflict arises between the student and supervisor, or upon the departure from UoS of the supervisor. Academic departments, via the HoD or nominated deputy, must manage any new appointment of supervisors, and arrange for cover of supervision should a supervisor leave before the end of the student's research programme.

A number of situations may lead to the replacement of a primary supervisor, which bring complexities in each case. It is therefore the aim of EGS to ensure students are duly cared for throughout the process of changing supervisors, so that quality is assured. To this end, the Departmental PGR Tutor, and EGS, should be notified each time this procedure is undertaken. EGS will then inform Research Services, as required by the UoS CoP. To enable this process, a statement must be given providing details regarding the case, as well as assessment of the progress of the student and the feasibility of completion by the time limit. The statement should also provide evidence that all parties (student and supervisors) agree with the changes and progress plan.

In the majority of cases, EGS will be supportive of the Department's proposed change to the supervisory team. However, in rare instances where we feel the change would be detrimental to the student and/or the supervisor, we reserve the right to decline the request. In such cases, EGS will coordinate a further process in consultation with the Head of Department to ensure the best possible outcome for all parties.

To complement the statements in the UoS CoP, the EGS proposes the following:

While it is not unusual that there may be changes of supervision during a research degree, the Department must ensure continuity in the supervision of each project.

- a) **Relationship has broken down** – Should significant problems emerge between the student and the supervisor, these should be flagged at the earliest opportunity to the Departmental PGR Tutor, and escalated to EGS consideration if necessary, so that the situation can be discussed and resolved if possible. If, regardless of resolution attempts, the relationship eventually does break down, the PGR tutor should discuss the circumstances with both student and supervisor, and make them aware of the UoS policies regarding [Appeals](#), [Complaints and Conduct](#). If necessary, the Head of Department should intervene to identify a new supervisor who can ensure continuity in the project, and is invited to request EGS support and input in this process if desired.

- b) **Supervisor moves to another institution, or retires** – the supervisor may continue to advise on the project, provided that a suitable local primary supervisor is appointed, and a contract of expectations¹ is signed by the departing supervisor and the student to establish responsibilities, including: how much time the supervisor will continue to dedicate to the project, and how often they will meet (in person or via teleconference) with the student. A new or amended confidentiality agreement may need to be signed, and the departing

¹ See template at from Research Services

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supervisor will need to be appointed as a Visiting Academic². The main supervisory responsibilities (including provision of feedback, nomination of examiners, and liaison with sponsors) will, however, reside with the new UoS primary supervisor. A role as secondary supervisor may be appropriate for a retiree, and academics should in general avoid taking on new students as primary supervisor if they anticipate that they will retire before project completion.

- c) **Supervisor is absent** (e.g. sabbatical or illness) – Where a supervisor is likely to be absent from UoS for an extended period of time (broadly, a semester or more), including where a serious illness occurs and may result in a disruption of unknown duration, it is recommended that another supervisor be appointed to guide the project during the period of absence. In many cases this will be the existing second supervisor. If circumstances allow it, plans for handover should be discussed with the PGR Tutor prior to the departure of the supervisor, and progression milestones for the duration of the project should be agreed. For sudden absences, an initial meeting with the new acting supervisor, PGR Tutor and the student is recommended to review progress to date and agree future milestones. Similarly, upon return of the supervisor, a handover meeting including the PGR Tutor and student is required. Note that during a period of study leave, as per Faculty policy, staff remain responsible for their research projects and PGR supervision throughout the leave period, although a second supervisor may take more day--to--day responsibility during this time.
- d) **Another expert is required to provide input on the research** – In exceptional circumstances, a change in primary supervision may be deemed necessary due to requiring different expertise to guide the project due to a major change in direction. In the event that such a change of direction is being considered, the issue of whether there is a willing and appropriate supervisor in this area should be addressed BEFORE the change of direction is agreed. In such cases, the HoD should assist in recruiting a new supervisor, including consultation between HoDs if multiple Departments are involved. This must also be discussed with the respective PGR Tutor(s) at the earliest possible stage.

In the unfortunate case of the death of the supervisor, the PGR Tutor, HoD and second supervisor must work together to recruit a new primary supervisor. The student may be signposted to SSID for [bereavement support](#) if necessary, and LOA could be discussed.

In all instances of a change in primary supervisor, it is recommended that the PGR Tutor attends an initial meeting with the student and new supervisor(s) to agree on a plan of supervision, review the project and agree on milestones and deadlines for progression. If a supervisor is leaving the project (or the University), they are requested to provide a statement of progress as input into this meeting, and to attend if possible/appropriate. It would be advisable to hold a follow up meeting 3-6 months later, to check on progress.

² <https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/hr/guidance/visitingtitles/visiting/summary>

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Additional notes:

- At all times, as per UoS regulations, students must have two supervisors.
- Students and supervisors can at any point contact the EGS for guidance or input.
- Changes of supervision requested after 24 months would only be considered on the most exceptional circumstances. Such requests must include a detailed justification for the proposed change and a Gantt Chart to map out progress milestones until planned thesis submission, signed by all new supervisors and the student.
- Where the original supervisor remains a UoS member of staff, a statement from them to declare agreement to the change of supervision will be required.
- There may be instances where a change of supervisor is not possible under the same project, e.g. where the funding for the project has been allocated to the supervisor. In such instances, the student should be given the option to transfer to another project (which may require self-funding), or other exit options should be discussed (e.g. MPhil or termination of registration). *N.B. for Tier 4 sponsored students, this may have major visa and ATAS implications, so the International Office should be consulted before any changes are agreed, to verify compliance with UKVI rules.*
- Where appropriate, consult the terms and conditions established by the sponsor of the student/project to ensure any proposed changes of supervisor are compliant with these.
- The Departmental PGR administrator should be kept informed and involved to ensure records are kept up to date.