Students and supervisors

Doctoral students and their supervisors work together to produce ground-breaking and quality research

Codes of practice for research students and supervisors

Doctoral students and their supervisors are jointly responsible for working together to adhere to the College time-frame of 4 years between registration and submission of the PhD thesis.

Although the relationship is one of cooperation and working together, both student and supervisors have individual responsibilities and expectations of each other, as detailed below.

Collapse all

For prospective students: Useful information to ask your proposed supervisor

Choosing a research project and supervisor that best fits your scientific interests is fundamental when thinking about where to apply to study for a research degree. Once you have discussed the research project with your supervisor, you may which to discuss other aspects of Imperial and supervision which will contribute to your overall experience.

The document in the following link is intended to help you explore what it is like to carry out research at Imperial College London in your chosen research field and suggests topics you may wish to discuss with your proposed supervisor when you visit the College - Guidance for Postgraduate Research Applicants

Supervisors expect you to:

1. Take responsibility for your thesis - in the end it is your work and your supervisors are here to help you accomplish your research objectives, but not to do the thinking for you!
2. Work hard - a research degree cannot be accomplished with only a 9-5 effort. Imperial is a top ranking University and we expect that students will strive to accomplish good work.

3. Display initiative - ultimately, the person who drives the process and strives to understand the research area is you. We expect you to be curious about your work and to think about how other ideas/work have an impact on the research you are doing. In light of this, it is a requirement for you to attend all lab meetings, work in progress etc plus other seminars. TO BE A SCIENTIST - YOU SHOULD BE CURIOUS ABOUT SCIENCE!
4. Write papers (this is dependent on field of study) before you have submitted your thesis. The process of writing enables you to develop skills which are useful when writing up your thesis, and the fact that you have had papers refereed/accepted by International journals satisfies the external examiner that you have what it takes!
5. Be self-critical of your own work and results, and use these skills in being sceptical of results in the literature.
6. Help colleagues (especially less experienced ones) in the laboratory to learn through discussions and demonstrations.
7. Keep up with the literature in your field.
8. Provide regular reports detailing your results - you should be conscientious about keeping a laboratory notebook and regularly entering all your data into tables and Excel spreadsheets.
9. Be aware of safety at all times and follow safety procedures, especially if you are working in a laboratory.
10. Develop your skills and learn new ones by attending the transferable skills courses and lectures provided by the Graduate School, your own and other College departments/divisions/faculties and by any other external providers.

Students can expect supervisors to:

1. Be supportive of you both intellectually and personally;
2. Set up a viable project and ensure that you have a clear idea of aims and objectives and an initial work-plan;
3. Provide an adequate work space for you;
4. Be available (or provide an identified substitute) to talk about research problems at relatively short notice although, at certain times of the year, you may need to give a few days notice;
5. Help and guide you extensively in your first year; help you in your second year; and be a sounding board in your third year. The help is tapered as you develop confidence in your own abilities and research skills, to enable you to learn to work more on your own and to make more of your own decisions;
6. Help develop your skills in technical writing, oral presentations, problem definition, statistical data analysis and critical literature reviews;
7. Help enable you to attend at least one conference to present a paper;
8. Provide adequate funds and/or facilities for your research project;
9. Read your thesis thoroughly and make constructive comments on both style and intellectual content.

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Code of Practice for Research Students

1. Students are required to comply with Imperial College London degree regulations and other College procedures and regulations, including being familiar with College safety requirements and procedures. This includes ensuring that all projects that use human subjects or human tissue have been approved by the appropriate ethical committee.

2. Students should recognise that their supervisor's role is not to dictate in detail but rather to advise, guide and oversee the research. Even if students are self-sufficient in everyday work, they will need to consult their supervisor about major matters: the back ground, methods, experimental set up of the research project, elucidation and critical examination of results, relation to wider concerns, side effects, safety and, eventually, the preparation of the thesis.

3. Students should discuss with their supervisor the type of guidance and criticism that they find of most assistance.

4. Attendance at taught courses is strongly encouraged at Imperial and all students are urged to take the opportunity to follow appropriate courses, on the advice of their supervisor, so as to consolidate and/or broaden background knowledge. Where appropriate the student is advised to take any examination associated with the courses, even though the results of the examination may not be relevant.

5. All research students are expected to complete a minimum number of Graduate School Professional Skills courses as part of their registration, together with formal training courses run by the student's host department. (Please refer to the Graduate School's website for more details). Students are responsible for choosing the dates of the courses they wish to attend and completing the required booking process in consultation with their supervisor. All students are responsible for informing their supervisors which courses they will be attending and the dates.

6. Students should always report their holiday arrangements to their supervisor in advance. In accordance with the rules laid down by the Research Councils, no more than eight weeks, including public holidays, may be taken in each year. However, working without a break for seven days a week is likely to be less effective than hard work interspersed with some periods for rest and recreation. Research students are members of the Imperial College Union and are encouraged to participate in its activities. The Graduate Students' Union is a branch of the Union and specifically represents postgraduate students.

7. Where students are unable to attend College because of illness or urgent personal circumstances they shall inform their supervisor or the department as soon as practicable. College regulations require that postgraduate students inform their Postgraduate Tutor if they are absent from College for

more than three days during term. If the absence is due to illness a medical certificate must be produced after seven days. If an examination is missed on account of illness a medical certificate must be produced immediately. If the absence is prolonged, normally four weeks or longer, it will be necessary to request an interruption of studies.

8. Students should maintain the progress of the work in accordance with any deadlines agreed with the supervisor; written material should be presented as required in sufficient time to allow for comments and discussion before proceeding to the next stage. Departments may require students to submit regular reports on the progress of their work to the departmental Postgraduate Officer. Where students are advised that their progress has been inadequate, they shall take steps to improve their work to their supervisor's satisfaction, otherwise they may be required to terminate their registration and withdraw from College.

9. It is not always possible to predict an individual's capacity for research on the evidence of previous academic performance. A PhD programme at the College will include an assessment of research ability based on performance in the initial 9 months of the course.

10. Assessment of a student's research ability to determine whether registration for the PhD degree can continue will be determined by an Early Stage Assessment, held 9 months (18 months for part-time students) after the date of initial registration. If the College determines that the student‘s progress is such that they cannot continue, the student may be required to withdraw from College at this stage. All students are then required to undergo a Late Stage Review between 18-24 months (30-36 months for part-time students).

11. Material included in the Late Stage Review may be used in the final thesis if still applicable.

12. Most students establish good relationships with their supervisors and serious disagreements occur very rarely. However if this does happen, a student should initially raise the matter with the department's Postgraduate Tutor or Director of Postgraduate Studies. Often this leads to resolution of the problem. Each research student is also assigned an academic mentor whose help may also be sought if problems arise. In a few cases, a student may wish to refer matters to the Head of Department, or to the College Tutor or to the President of the Graduate Students' Union. Where appropriate it may be possible for the student to continue the research under a different supervisor.

13. Students should have some appreciation of the financial constraints under which the College has to operate and the wider obligations the College has to train research scientists and engineers. An important part of that research training is the ability to complete work within certain deadlines. The normal period for completing a PhD at Imperial is three years, with it being possible for the examination to take place during the fourth year; ultimately however it is the student's own responsibility to determine when to submit the thesis, though the supervisor's opinion should always be sought. It is College policy that no full-time student, registered for a research degree will be permitted to

enter for the examination later than 44 months after initial registration; to submit the thesis for examination later than 48 months after initial registration will require a special case to be made to their Graduate School.

14. Students are reminded that their thesis must be their own work and all quotations from other sources, whether published or unpublished, must be properly acknowledged. Plagiarism is a very serious offence and, where proven against a student, may result in disqualification from the examination for the PhD and exclusion from all future examinations of the College. Some joint work is permitted, provided it is properly and carefully acknowledged as such. The College regulations in respect of plagiarism can be found in the Examination Regulations.

Approved by Graduate School
Revised June 2016

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Imperial College
London

Code of Practice for Research Supervisors

1. A decision to admit a student to a research programme should not be made unless a department is confident that:

    a. The student is appropriately qualified;

    b. A research topic suitable for that student's abilities and background is available;

    c. The necessary facilities (e.g. computing, laboratory) can be provided;

    d. Proper supervision can be given for the expected duration of the programme.

2. To ensure that these requirements are met the Head of Department* confirms on the appropriate form that the proposed supervision arrangements conform to the College criteria for the supervision of research students. For part-time students the supervisor will include on the form whether the student will be working virtually full-time on his or her research, and thus required to meet the milestones for full-time students, or if the student will not be able to devote more than two days per week to the research and thus governed by the milestones for part-time students.

3. In many cases it is possible, when making offers of admission, to indicate the likely research area and/or supervisor, and if so, it is preferable to provide this information.

4. In some cases, supervisors may make contact with their students before enrolment at College to advise on general background reading and to encourage an initial literature survey on the research topic.

5. At the beginning of the student's research the supervisor will give details of the facilities available in the department and any regulations or constraints governing their use.

6. In the initial period, supervisors will give appropriate guidance about the nature of research and the standard expected, and about how to plan the programme so as to ensure that the normal expectation of submission of the thesis within three years may be met (and that in any event the thesis will be submitted no later than four years after commencement of study).

7. Supervisors may recommend where appropriate, especially in the first year, attendance at taught classes, which may be undergraduate lectures, part of an MSc or MBA programme or a special course for research students. They

* Any reference to "department" or "departmental" may include Imperial College schools, institutions, centres or divisions, as appropriate

will also ensure that instruction in requisite techniques, e.g. equipment design, is arranged if necessary. They will also approve and monitor attendance of the Graduate School's Professional Skills Development Programme.

8. Supervisors will ensure that students receive all necessary safety instructions.

9. Supervisors will give guidance on the systematic recording of data or theoretical calculations and the importance of keeping and maintaining a clear record of all that has been undertaken.

10. Where overseas students are experiencing difficulty with their English, supervisors will require them to attend English classes. Supervisors will also ensure that non-native English speakers, including Research Assistants and Clinical Research Fellows, are aware that continuation of PhD registration is dependent upon their English language proficiency being of an acceptable standard, as attested by the College English Language Support Programme.

11. Supervisors will maintain regular contact with their students through tutorials, group meetings or at the bench. They should set aside normally a minimum of one hour per week (on average) for consultation with them.

12. Supervisors will guide students on the relevant use of library facilities, including approaching original literature and sources with a critical attitude and will give guidance on avoiding plagiarism.

13. Supervisors will arrange, as appropriate, for their students to talk about their work to staff and/or group seminars and to have practice in oral presentations.

14. Supervisors will ensure that students are made aware when progress is inadequate or when standards of work fall below those generally expected and, in appropriate cases, will report such occurrences to the department's Postgraduate Tutor or Director of Postgraduate Studies.

15. In accordance with procedures agreed by the Graduate School, supervisors will ensure that reports are made on all students during their period of registration with the College and will also prepare any additional reports required by funding bodies.

16. Where appropriate supervisors will encourage students to produce written work, which may often provide a basis for the preparation of the final thesis; they should return such work with constructive criticism and in reasonable time. The supervisor will impress upon students the need to complete and submit work by agreed deadlines. By twenty-four months they will draw up with each research student a plan for completing the research and submitting the thesis by the end of the third year.

17. Normally, supervisors will encourage their students to publish, singly or jointly, the results of the research as they emerge and are suitable for

publication. Individual departments may have local guidelines for publications in specific areas.

18. In those cases where students are encouraged to undertake further research as research assistants, supervisors will make every effort to ensure that such employment does not jeopardise the ability of the students to complete their research, and to submit their theses, within the normal College timescale.

19. Supervisors will ensure that students are aware of the College Guidelines for Proper Scientific Conduct in Research, and the Policy and Procedures for Investigation of Allegations of Scientific Misconduct.

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