ESS Benchmarking Day – Supporting Postgraduate Research Students

1. The Supervisory Relationship

For any number of reasons, some PhD students experience difficulties in their relationship with their supervisors, and sometimes wish to make changes to their supervision.

a) What basic expectations should a PhD student have of their (principal) supervisor? And the supervisor of their supervisee?
b) What should happen when a PhD student is having problems with their supervision? Whom should they speak to?
c) Where the supervisory relationship seems to have broken down, is it (or would it be) beneficial to provide some form of mediated contact between parties?
d) How far do you feel students should be able to change supervisors, if an alternative is available? What if the potential alternative supervisor is less expert in the topic than the current principal supervisor?
e) How do potential supervisors respond to requests to take on these students?

2. Health and Welfare

It is common for PhD students experiencing prolonged health or personal issues to need to ‘stop the clock’ for a period by taking an interruption of studies.

a) Are there any circumstances in which you feel interruption of studies may not be in a student’s best interest?
b) In these cases, are there alternatives to interruption of studies which may be more appropriate?
c) What do you feel the issues are for students returning from periods of interruption? How can these be addressed?

3. Funding and other Support

a) Do you feel that sufficient information and guidance is available to PGR students in relation to funding (research councils, scholarships, additional sources of funding)?
b) Do you feel that enough support is available to students struggling with their English language? What do you feel are the barriers to the uptake of this kind of support?
c) Is sufficient consideration given at the beginning of PhD programmes to whether additional training may be appropriate for students, based on their career history (qualifications/training/professional)? Are staff encouraged to gain an understanding of what the Institute for Academic Development offers in this area?

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4. The ‘Writing Up’ Year, and Beyond

Although students entering a fourth year of study are encouraged to submit their theses as soon as possible, increasing numbers find themselves needing to use most or all of the ‘writing up’ year, and in some cases requesting an extension. This raises a number of issues, both for students and for the University.

a) Does the relationship between supervisor and student change in the ‘writing up’ year? Should it?

b) For most funded students, their maintenance does not extend to a fourth year. Do the Graduate Schools offer any other financial support for these students? How do the Graduate Schools allocate tutoring hours?

c) When students fail to submit by the end of their maximum period of study, what penalties does this carry for them, and for the University?

d) When students submit theses which are not considered ready for viva, what penalties does this carry for them, and for the University?

5. Annual Review

Students approach the first year of PhD study in very different ways, which can have a major impact on the nature and volume of the work they produce by the time they reach their first annual review.

a) How far do you feel the annual review system allows for this? Is the system sufficiently flexible for part-time students?

b) Where a student’s capability to continue on the PhD is in doubt after their first annual review, what options are available to address this? What are the potential pitfalls of these options?

6. Enhancing Student Support for Postgraduate Research Students

Amongst the many changes being made to benefit all students as part of the Enhancing Student Support and Student Experience projects, much thought has been given to the specific needs of undergraduate students, and more recently postgraduate taught students. How best can this work be extended to postgraduate research students?

a) How (and how far) do the needs of postgraduate research students differ from those of undergraduate and postgraduate taught students?

b) What are the barriers to providing support (academic and pastoral) to postgraduate research students (relative to UG/PGT students)?

c) Are the needs of part-time students different, or any more difficult to meet?

d) Does, or should the principal supervisor fulfil all the functions carried out by Personal Tutors for undergraduate students? Should pastoral support be provided by someone else?

e) Would postgraduate research students benefit from having an electronic notes system, similar to the one for undergraduates and their Personal Tutors?