

# RESEARCH POLICY POCKET BOOK POSTGRADUATE SUPERVISION



POSTGRADUATE

SUPERVISION

A complete and handy pocket book to answer  
all your postgraduate supervision-related questions



UNIVERSITEIT VAN PRETORIA  
UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA  
YUNIBESITHI YA PRETORIA

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# INTRODUCTION

## Research and Innovation Support at UP

The Department of Research and Innovation Support (DRIS) at the University of Pretoria (UP) aims to create an enabling environment for students and staff members to conduct research, while positively working to obtain funds from third parties. The Department provides informational and operational support to the University's Research Programme and provides the University with strategic and operational links to external organisations with regard to research publication and utilisation. The Department provides support for both emerging and established researchers by assisting them in their research, compiling contracts and supporting innovation.

## Keeping things shipshape

In order to reach its goals of support for research and innovation, DRIS has to ensure that the organisational procedures put in place are strictly followed. For this reason, it is important for researchers and administrative personnel, whether they are students or members of UP staff, to familiarise themselves with the policies put in place to protect both the University and its researchers. This series of policy documents presents the University's Intellectual Property Policy, its Policy on Contract Research and Consulting, and its Guidelines for Postgraduate Supervision.

## Ins and outs

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INTELLECTUAL  
PROPERTY



POSTGRADUATE  
SUPERVISION



CONTRACT  
RESEARCH  
and CONSULTING

# Guidelines for postgraduate supervision



SUPERVISION

POSTGRADUATE

Postgraduate study is central to the vision of the University of Pretoria to be a leading research-intensive university in Africa, recognised internationally for its quality, relevance and impact. Postgraduate studies are fuelled by a desire to develop people, create knowledge and make a difference locally and globally.

## What is the aim of these guidelines?

The University's Academic Plan highlights the role of supervisors in postgraduate education. It also highlights the capacity that must be developed within the university system i to fully harness the potential of postgraduate students so that they can contribute to the academic enterprise as junior staff and potential future researchers and academics.

The aim of this pocket book is to provide broad guidelines to clarify the roles and responsibilities of postgraduate supervisors at UP. The guidelines are structured to provide an overview of postgraduate education at UP, to sketch elements in the postgraduate lifecycle, to frame the pivotal importance of the student-supervisor relationship, and to elaborate on the roles and responsibilities of supervisors and postgraduate students.



# The Postgraduate Education Programme at UP

The aim of the postgraduate programme is to provide high-level education at an appropriate intellectual level and with the necessary relevance for a range of contexts and stakeholders, including those stakeholders who will later employ postgraduates. Research higher degrees constitute the essential training ground for future generations of academics and researchers.

UP offers doctoral degrees and a wide range of professional, coursework and research master's degrees. At this level, individual attention can be given to students as "research apprentices", who are learning to apply – in a very direct sense – the problem-based approaches required for higher degree research.

## Postgraduate degrees at UP

### The master's degree

Master's programmes may incorporate a combination of coursework and research, or may be research-only programmes. The awarding of a research master's degree requires a student to demonstrate that he or she has mastered a specific academic or professional field. Students awarded a master's degree should have acquired the intellectual skills required to pursue further study or research in a largely self-directed, independent manner.

### The doctoral degree

A Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) degree is a research-based qualification. The awarding of this degree requires the creation and interpretation of new knowledge, making a significant and original contribution at the forefront of an academic discipline or area of professional practice, manifesting the ability to conceptualise, interrogate and answer high-level research questions, and understanding relevant research techniques.

### This is very important

**A GRADUATE SHOULD THEN BE COMPETENT TO SUPERVISE AND EVALUATE THE RESEARCH OF OTHERS IN THE AREA OF SPECIALISATION.**

## The postgraduate student life cycle

Each step in the postgraduate student life cycle requires certain processes to be in place, and that someone should be responsible for the provision of support and services, and the creation of an enabling environment. In broad terms, the postgraduate student life cycle is divided into three phases: the Foundation Phase, the Momentum Phase and the Final Stages. Each phase requires a number of activities to be completed and effective supervisors have a role to play in each phase.

	Student	Supervisor
Foundation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Admission and registration</li> <li>• Supervision assignment</li> <li>• Establishment of support and resources</li> <li>• Approval of research topic</li> <li>• Completion and approval of proposal</li> <li>• Ethics approval</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensure the partnership is right for the project</li> <li>• Get to know students and carefully assess their needs</li> <li>• Establish reasonable and agreed upon expectations</li> <li>• Work with students to establish a strong conceptual structure and research plan</li> </ul>
Momentum	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Research workplan and timelines</li> <li>• Progress monitoring and reporting</li> <li>• Thesis preparation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encourage students to write early and often</li> <li>• Initiate regular contact and provide high-quality feedback</li> <li>• Get students involved in the life of the department</li> <li>• Inspire and motivate students</li> <li>• Help if academic and personal crises crop up</li> </ul>
Final stages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Thesis submission</li> <li>• Paper submission</li> <li>• Examination process</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Take an active interest in students' future careers</li> <li>• Carefully monitor the final production and presentation of the research</li> </ul>

## Co-supervision

Co-supervisors are particularly helpful as they may provide alternative or complementary viewpoints, increase the breadth of expertise available to the postgraduate student and provide supervision should the principal supervisor be absent due to illness, sabbatical activities or departure from the institution.

### Student-supervisor relationship

In the course of a postgraduate student's study, the supervisor serves as the primary source of guidance in all processes of proposal preparation, research design, ethics approval, research activities and access to resources. For the relationship to succeed, communication, negotiation and compromise are required, and for such interaction to be sustained over the study period, an appropriate degree of trust and mutual respect is essential.

## Important word

**Supervision:** This is characterised as an intensive form of teaching and learning, and an "apprenticeship" signalling the importance of sustaining a close relationship with the student, and creating the necessary opportunities and conditions for the student to become a skilled and knowledgeable researcher and academic, or high-level knowledge worker elsewhere.



**In broad overview**, the relationship the supervisor needs to forge with his or her postgraduate student involves three dimensions.

## **1 Supervisors provide academic guidance and mentorship to students.**

Supervisors serve as role-models and should maintain the highest standards in the performance of research. They should emulate and provoke in students ways in which to develop skills in critical and independent thinking, and to exchange ideas and information with other members of the academic community. They also need to ensure that the experience gained by the students will contribute in preparing them for their future as independent researchers in their professional working lives.

### **This is very important**

Supervisors need to create the opportunities for students to become part of the broader scholarly community in the Department, Faculty and University.

## **2 Supervisors are key role players in the administrative efficiency of postgraduate study.**

Supervisors are the key intermediaries between students and the Faculty Student Administration, the Postgraduate Committee, the Ethics Committee and the Head of Department. This means that supervisors must be familiar with (and ensure that students are familiar with) University policies in respect of postgraduate study, including aspects of research ethics, intellectual property rights and storage of research data. Supervisors also need to be sufficiently informed of applicable policies and regulations in order to ensure that they, and the postgraduates they supervise, comply with the regulations and that neither is compromised at any stage of the process.

## **3 The supervisor is often called upon to provide personal guidance when a student faces a crisis of confidence or problems of a personal nature.**

It is advisable in dealing with personal problems that the supervisor remains sympathetic, but detached enough to signal that repeated discussions of a personal nature are not invited. Students who experience serious personal problems should be referred to the appropriate student support service.



# Responsibilities

## The supervisor

The overarching responsibility of the supervisor is to prepare a postgraduate student for a research or academic career. This means assisting the student in building knowledge and research skills that make it possible for the student to start developing a publication record, and introducing the student to the relevant academic and professional networks through conferences, seminars and events. Supervisors must lead by example and must communicate – through both words and actions – that publication is the norm. Supervisors must also inform their students of opportunities for travel and study abroad, and of opportunities for postdoctoral fellowships at the University.

Supervisors must be fully informed, not only with respect to University and Faculty requirements and regulations, but also with respect to what is expected in terms of scholarly work and academic aspects of research for higher degrees. This may necessitate participation in research induction and supervision training sessions. A supervisor must exemplify the characteristics of a good teacher. This means concern for students and their progress, and providing well thought through and timely feedback. It also requires effective management by keeping all documentation and records regarding the supervision of each postgraduate student on file.

## The University

The University and departmental structures need to create an enabling environment for both the supervisor and the postgraduate student. The necessary time and resources for supervision must be supplied. The Head of Department needs to provide the necessary space in the work schedule of the supervisor and, with the Dean, the facilities needed for the postgraduate student's work. Ensuring the supervisor's fulfilment of his or her supervision responsibilities is part of the management task of the Head of Department.

## The student

The relationship cannot be built on one-way communication and will require the student to accept full responsibility for his or her own learning and development, and the successful and timely completion of his or her qualification. To do this, the student needs to remain available for discussion and open to the guidance available.



Get organised in the Foundation Phase. The strength of the foundations established becomes a cornerstone in getting a head-start in progressing with postgraduate studies.



Do research and maintain momentum in the difficult Momentum Phase. The intellectual interests and abilities of students need to be stretched. Postgraduate students must attend regular appointments with the supervisor and communicate regularly with respect to results achieved and general progress with the research project. Students who pay attention to the guidance of supervisors will benefit in terms of time efficiency and personal fulfilment.



When difficulties arise, inform the supervisor immediately. The supervisor can then advise in respect of timely corrective action and provide moral and practical advice.



Get the work done in the Final Stages. The quality of the thesis depends to a large extent on the acquired skill development in writing and editing as part of the student's research training. Where students experience writing problems, these should be detected early on in the process, and appropriate action should be taken to develop these skills.

## Start writing early and write often!

# Postgraduate study: a process

## 1 Admission and registration of the postgraduate student, the assignment of a supervisor and agreement on the topic of the research to be undertaken.

The registration of postgraduates at UP is completed in the faculties, with approval being required from the Dean and the Faculty Postgraduate Committee. Prospective postgraduate students need to be put into contact with a potential supervisor, either through direct approach by the student to the supervisor or through advisors, before applying for admission. The UP Admissions Policies and General Regulations, as well as information regarding the formal application and admission process, are available through the UP website and the Client Service Centre. The acceptance of a student should not be completed unless the Department has the capacity in terms of human resources and otherwise to supervise a student.

## 2 Supervision assignment

A key catalyst in the progress of research is the appropriate matching of student and supervisor(s). There needs to be a relationship of trust between student and supervisor in order for the student to tap into the expertise of the supervisor. Heads of departments are responsible for managing the assignment of supervisors to postgraduate students and the assignment is subject to approval by the Faculty Postgraduate Committee and noting by the Faculty Board. Assignment can occur as a result of a previously discussed and agreed upon plan for a research project of mutual interest between student and supervisor, or an identified match between the student's interests and the supervisor's capacity and expertise. In cases where a research topic cuts across disciplines, joint supervision may be desirable.

## 3 Support and resources

Adequate access to support and resources is central to students' progress and retention. Supervisors must ensure that the proposed project is feasible and of an appropriate level for the degree under consideration, and that the necessary resources and facilities will be available to enable the student to complete the research. Supervisors must have the capacity to provide adequate supervisory support in terms of having expertise and academic status in the discipline, the time available, and providing access to research facilities.

## 4 Approval of topic

The prospective supervisor should, in consultation with the Head of Department, discuss with the prospective student his or her proposed field of study and potential research opportunities in the field. Together, the student and supervisor must identify and agree on a topic for research that is of mutual interest and relevance, within the supervisor's field of research interest and expertise, and aligned with the research programme in which the supervisor is already engaged.

## 5 Completion and approval of research proposal

The development of the research proposal is a period of exploratory reading and writing. The purpose of the proposal is to demonstrate that the student has a grasp of the field relevant to the chosen research topic, has read and developed an understanding of the current literature in the field, and has developed a preliminary work plan. The proposal will be submitted via the Head of Department to the Faculty Postgraduate Committee for approval.

## 6 Ethics approval

Supervisors should serve as role-models for students in the manner in which they conduct their research, encourage them to identify and deal with the ethical issues in the professional research environment, and ensure that all students involved in academic and research activities do so with responsibility and with respect for the highest professional standard. Supervisors share the responsibility for providing an open and equal research environment, which protects the interests of all parties involved. Students and supervisors are required to comply with the University Code of Ethics for Research, the Policy and Procedures for Responsible Research, the Plagiarism Prevention Policy, the Intellectual Property Policy, and the Occupational Health and Safety Policy.

## 7 Expectations and a memorandum of understanding

The supervisor and student need to jointly agree what the reasonable expectations of each other are, including what the lines of communication should be. A formal memorandum of agreement, setting out the expectations of both parties, must be signed by both the student and the supervisor. In terms of this document, the student must also be provided with the University's Code of Ethics for Research and the Plagiarism Policy, and be referred to the General Regulations applicable to postgraduate study. The successful completion of this process is the responsibility of the supervisor.

## 8 Research workplan and timelines

It is very important to set realistic timeframes to guide and pace students through the different phases of research and writing. The research proposal forms the basis of the research workplan. This needs to include a time schedule and aspects such as how frequently the student will be required to submit written work, and how often meetings will take place. Supervisors need to keep in mind that they serve as a quality control mechanism. It is thus important for supervisors to ensure that each study is well-structured and planned according to a time schedule that will enable the candidate to complete a thesis within a reasonable time. Longer registration periods should be the exception rather than the norm.

## 9 Progress monitoring and reporting

The supervisor should assess the competencies of the student in respect of his or her knowledge of the theoretical base, research methodology and technical skills. Where necessary, the supervisor should guide the student in addressing identified knowledge or skills gaps through a number of programmes run by the Faculty or the University.

In providing feedback to students, supervisors should acknowledge strong points, clearly identified problem areas and make suggestions for improvement. It is in the interaction with supervisors that students learn. The monitoring of progress should be used as a tool to the benefit of the student.

The supervisor is required to report in writing to the Head of Department once a year on the progress of postgraduate students under his or her supervision. This is done in order to compile an annual report on the progress of all postgraduate students.

## 10 Thesis preparation and submission

The thesis or dissertation is the main outcome of a postgraduate research programme. It is the responsibility of the supervisor to see to it that the student has prepared the dissertation in accordance with all technical specifications and the requirements for obtaining the desired qualification. The supervisor must read drafts of the full thesis carefully, focusing on the detail of each paragraph, on the coherence of the academic argument and on internal consistency. The supervisor also has to be satisfied that all his or her suggestions have been attended to. Students need to inform the Head: Student Administration in writing of his or her intention to submit the dissertation or thesis at least three months prior to submission so that examiners can be notified.

## 11 Paper submission

Postgraduate students should actively be encouraged to present papers at seminars and conferences, and to get parts of their theses published in accredited journals before submitting their theses for examination. The University has specific regulations in this regard. A student must submit at least one draft article for publication in a recognised academic journal to the Head: Student Administration. In the case of a thesis, proof of submission of an article issued by an accredited journal also has to be submitted to the Head: Student Administration of the Faculty in which the student is registered. The article should be based on the research conducted by the student for the dissertation or thesis.

If the supervisor is not a co-author, the draft article has to be approved by the supervisor to ensure that all necessary processes for revision and resubmission have been followed.

## 12 Examination process

The supervisor, in consultation with the Head of Department, compiles a list of potential examiners from which the Postgraduate Committee appoints examiners. Examiners should be expert in the area of study, should be likely to be respectful of the study approach taken by the student, and should ideally be able to make a contribution to the career development of the student. The examiner's academic judgement is absolutely critical. The Faculty may set additional oral and/or written examinations as a requirement for the conferment of the degree. The requirements for admission to the examination are also set out by the Faculty. The examination process is the final stage in the student serving his or her apprenticeship.

## 13 Preservation and retention of research data

It is good practice to retain research data after publication of the results. In this regard, the Policy for the Preservation and Retention of Research Data and the Policy on University of Pretoria Electronic Theses and Dissertations applies to all academic staff and students. The adherence to these policies enables the retention of research data for the verification of the research. The policies are aimed at the protection of students, researchers, principal investigators and – ultimately – the University, against a variety of disputes concerning published or patented research, and the retention of detailed research records for later access.

# Supervisory tasks checklist

The checklist below identifies the steps in the process – from admission and registration, through to the final step of the University maintaining an electronic record of the data and thesis. It serves as a useful tool in tracking progress and ensuring that no one element delays or hampers progress.

- Admission and registration
- Supervision assignment
- Providing support and resources
- Approval of research topic
- Completion and approval of research proposal
- Ethics approval
- Research workplan and timelines
- Progress monitoring
- Thesis preparation
- Thesis submission
- Paper submission
- Examination process
- Preservation and retention of research data



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