UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

Postgraduate School of Life Sciences

Best Practice for PhD Student Monitoring, Assessment and Mentoring

1. Introduction

The aim of this guidance is to rationalise the student experience and ensure that similar student monitoring, assessment and mentoring processes are carried out in all departments of the Schools of Biological Sciences and Clinical Medicine. A rationalised approach is not only good practice but enhances the student experience and avoids confusion and concern, particularly with regard to the first-year assessment or registration exercise.

This document sets out the minimum activities for student assessment and monitoring prescribed by the Postgraduate School of Life Sciences. It is acknowledged that some Departments will do more and this is to be encouraged, but close adherence to these guidelines is essential for maintaining a consistent approach across the GSLS.

At the beginning of their course, students should be properly informed of all assessment requirements at their induction event and via the relevant student handbook or documentation on Moodle.

2. Terminology[1]

a) Academic Support

(i) Principal Supervisor

This is the main supervisor; each student should have only one active Principal Supervisor at any given time. S/he is able to write and edit reports on the Postgraduate Feedback and Reporting System' (PFRS). The Principal Supervisor must not act as an assessor for the First Year Registration assessment.

[Only Principal Supervisors are able to submit reports, or to comment on a self-evaluation report submitted by the student.]

(ii) Second Supervisor

If a project is interdisciplinary, the DC may appoint a Second Supervisor. On CamSIS this is referred to as the *Other Supervisor*. Where two supervisors are working jointly, the Principal Supervisor consults with the Second (other) Supervisor concerning progress and is the contact point for the University. If a

[1]The Supervisor terminology (a-d) in this document is taken from the University's Code of Practice for Research Students at: https://www.cambridgestudents.cam.ac.uk/files/cop_research_20_to_21.pdf

Second Supervisor is appointed they must not act as an Assessor for the First Year Registration assessment.

(iii) Cambridge Supervisor (formerly 'Ref-Eligible Supervisor')

This role is only required if the Principal Supervisor is not employed by an English HEI or Cambridge College and generally applies to the University Partner Institutes.

In UPIs the Advisor and Cambridge Supervisor may be the same person, but both roles need to be recorded on CamSIS.

(iv) Advisor

All postgraduate students should have a postgraduate Advisor recorded on CamSIS. The Advisor is a second point of contact re academic advice (after the Principal Supervisor).

In UPIs the postgraduate Advisor and Cambridge Supervisor may be the same person, but both roles need to be recorded on CamSIS.

b) Non-Academic/Pastoral Support

a) Mentor

This is a more informal Department role, and is not formally allocated to a student or recorded on CamSIS but is a named point of contact for staff and students who may be approached for confidential advice and support for issues other than academic progress.

b) Postgraduate/College Tutor

All students should have a named Tutor, recorded on CamSIS, to provide general advice and guidance, and is typically the first point of contact for pastoral support.

3. Supervision Reporting (PFRS)

The University Statutes and Ordinances stipulate that supervisors submit termly CamSIS Supervision reports. This is essential to ensure good progress and identify any potential problems early.

Departmental postgraduate teams should review all reports and flag any issues with the departmental Director of Postgraduate Education.

See page 14, paras 60 to 63 of the Code of Practice for Research Students.

4. Progress Logs

It is recommended that all students complete a training and progress log to record attendance at supervisions, skills training and personal development planning. This should be reviewed at the beginning and end of each year with the Supervisor.

Students should regularly discuss courses attended, talks given or conferences attended etc. with their Supervisor so that additional skills training can be identified and suitable course(s) recommended.

5. Postgraduate Advisor and Mentoring

a) Postgraduate Advisor

All students will be assigned a postgraduate Advisor within the first 2 months of their PhD. It is recommended that the student meets with their Advisor once per term. Ideally this should be driven by the student but, in the first year, the Advisor may need to be more pro-active.

See page 10, paras 38 to 40 of the Code of Practice for Research Students.

b) Thesis Committee

A preferred option in some departments is a thesis committee. In this case, it is recommended that the student meets with their thesis committee once per term. The advantage of a thesis committee is the provision of ongoing support and advice rather than just evaluation of progress. Thesis committee meetings should continue after the 1st year registration although could meet less frequently. It's recommended that any thesis committee is comprised of two to three members, one of whom should be the Advisor.

c) Mentors

In addition to the formal Supervisor/Advisors, it is recommended that each department has four appointed mentors -– two male and two female -– who can be approached for confidential advice and support for issues other than academic progress. These may be members of the departmental postgraduate education committee. This provision is in addition to college postgraduate tutors.

The PSLS acknowledge that in smaller Departments it may be too burdensome to appoint 4 mentors, in which case a minimum of 2 Mentors (one male and one female) should be appointed.

As noted above, the mentor is not formally appointed to a student, nor recorded on CamSIS, but is a named point of contact for staff and students. The mentors need not be in the same Department as the student, provided that it is made clear to students who the mentors are.

6. Assessments

In order to harmonise the student experience it's recommended that Departments adhere to the recommended assessment wherever possible but it is acknowledged that some Departments may run different timescales or equivalent assessments.

a) 1-2 months into PhD

One to two months into the PhD, students should be invited to submit their PhD project proposal outline, experimental plan, timeline, key questions and expected challenges (800 – 1000 words).

This should be assessed by the Advisor and Supervisor or Thesis Committee, or equivalent advisory team. This allows assessment of the feasibility of the proposed project, appropriate access to facilities and resources and confirmation of a good supervisor/student relationship. An assessment of training needs in statistics, as well as general training needs, should be carried out at this stage.

This assessment provides a useful framework for the student and advisory team, ensuring that the student is starting off on the right track and providing a general overview of the project.

The main focus of this assessment is to give students an opportunity to meet with their advisory team, which may be a thesis committee, and to confirm the supervisory arrangements are in place and working well.

It is acknowledged that some students submit a detailed project plan as part of the application which covers the above, and in these cases this document can be the focus of discussion though the student should be given the opportunity to update their proposal/plan if necessary.

b) First-year Assessment or Registration Exercise – PSLS Recommended Practice

See Page 13, paras 54 to 59 of the Code of Practice for Research Students.

Students write a report that is essentially a mini-thesis; this should be a minimum of 4,000 and a maximum of 10,000 words to be assessed by a viva of up to 1 hour. It is expected that the viva will be held within 4-6 weeks of report submission. The Viva Panel should be made up of two or preferably three assessors, to include the Advisor and ideally a member of the Postgraduate Education Committee (or Department equivalent).

The viva may include a short (10-15 mins) PowerPoint presentation. This has the advantage of assessing the student’s ability to explain their work and respond to questions, and also to update the assessors with new data obtained since the report submission. Following the viva, the assessors write a report for the departmental Postgraduate Education Committee providing an assessment of the student’s progress, highlighting any issues that have arisen or changes required to the project, and making a recommendation to the Degree Committee on registration for the PhD.

It is strongly recommended that the assessment takes place by the end of the 10th month in order to allow two further months for the student to revise and resubmit if necessary as a registration decision must be made before the end of the 12th month.

Exceptionally, where problems have been identified during the viva a student may be given time to address these issues before a re-assessment and a registration decision by the end of the 4th term. In cases, where a registration decision will not be possible before the end of the 4th term, departments should contact the Degree Committee Office and provide a case for a late assessment.

It is important that students who are unlikely to meet the standard for a PhD are properly supported and guided to an MPhil or CPGS/MRes if appropriate.

To ensure vivas happen promptly following the submission of the first year report it is recommended that they are scheduled well in advance.

Principal Supervisors must not attend the first-year assessment.

Please note that part-time students will have a different timetable and that the BBSRC DTP and the Sanger Wellcome Trust PhD Programmes have agreed exemptions and a different timetable.

c) 2nd year assessment

During their second year, students should present a poster at a departmental or cohort building event. Students should also be required to give a short talk at an internal event. This may also take place during other years of the PhD.

At the end of their second year students should be asked to write a short report or present a brief presentation summarising progress to date and plans for their third year, and should be invited to meet with their Advisor and a member of the Postgraduate Education Committee (or Department equivalent).

A list of PSLS and other courses attended should be provided in addition to any talks given or conferences attended[2]. Additional skills training should be identified and suitable course(s) recommended.

d) 3rd /final year assessment

During the 3rd year it's expected that students give a short seminar presentation in front of faculty. A formal day could be organised in each department/unit.

At the end of their 3rd year, students should submit or present a thesis outline including chapter plans and a Gantt chart outlining the timeline for writing up with a short description of work still to be completed for each chapter and any other key information. This should be assessed by the Advisor, Supervisor and Postgraduate Education Committee (or equivalent) and the student should be provided with feedback.

e) 4th year and beyond

Support for students in their 4th year will vary depending on the programme and the student's progress.

Assessment may include a final year assessment (see 3rd /final year assessment) if this hasn't already taken place.

7. Lent or Easter Term Starts

The majority of students start in Michaelmas term, but a number of students begin in the Lent or Easter Terms. Timing for these students should be equivalent, i.e. the first year registration should still take place after 10 months.

[2] This may take the form of the PSLS Progress Log or Department equivalent.

8. Part time students

This document applies primarily to full-time students. Part-time students should be assessed at the equivalent time. The first year registration assessment should take place in the 5th term and the student should be registered no later than the 6th term.

9. BBSRC DTP and Wellcome Trust Sanger Institute PhD Programme

Timing of assessment for the BBSRC DTP and Wellcome Trust Sanger Institute PhD Programme vary.

Students on the BBSRC DTP and Wellcome Trust Sanger Institute PhD programme undertake rotations in their first year which delays the timing of the first year assessment, and other assessments. The timetable for both Programmes is outlined below:

a) BBSRC DTP

Students are admitted on to the BBSRC DTP PhD Programme in Michaelmas Term (October). The Programme has been designed to be interdisciplinary in nature and, as such, students begin the course by completing two 10-week rotation projects during Michaelmas and Lent terms.

Students finalise their PhD choice (research project, supervisor and Department) in Lent Term (March) and, subject to completing the required application via the Student Registry, their CamSIS records are updated to allow students to formally begin their PhD in Easter Term (May).

As per the policy of the Postgraduate School of Life Sciences, BBSRC DTP students are expected to submit their registration assessment report before the end of the 10th month of their PhD. This typically means that a BBSRC DTP student would undertake their 'first-year' assessment in Lent Term (their 5th term at the University and 3rd term working on their project) and should be registered no later than the end of their 6th term.

Students may be granted permission to undertake their internship (a Programme requirement) before the First Year Assessment but would still be required to complete their registration assessment by the above timeframe.

This timetable is made clear to students at the point of admission and via student handbooks and Departments/Supervisors admitting BBSRC students are also made aware of the timetable.

b) Wellcome Trust Sanger Institute PhD Programme

Students are admitted on to the Wellcome Trust Sanger Institute 4-year PhD Programme in Michaelmas Term (October). The Programme has been designed to be interdisciplinary in nature and, as such, students begin the course by completing three rotations during the first 8 months and start their PhD project in Easter Term (June).

As per the policy of the Postgraduate School of Life Sciences, Wellcome Trust Sanger Institute 4-year PhD students are expected to submit their registration assessment report before the end of the 10th month of their PhD. This typically means that a student would undertake their ‘first-year’ assessment in Lent Term (their 5th term at the University and 3rd term working on their project) and should be registered no later than the end of their 6th term.

This timetable is made clear to students at the point of admission and via student handbooks and Supervisors are also made aware of the timetable.

Any students not carrying out rotations, such as 3-year PhD students including WT/WTSI clinical PhD students and NIH OxCam students, are expected to follow the standard processes outlined in this document.

NB: For Sanger or BBSRC students where an assessment would be delayed beyond the 6th term, approval must be sought from the Degree Committee.

All other programmes should adhere to the above timetable.

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