

**QUEEN'S UNIVERSITY BELFAST**

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Education Committee (Student Experience)  
16 March 2023

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**Supervision of Undergraduate and Postgraduate Taught Research Projects by  
Postdoctoral Research Staff**

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| <b>Author</b>                       | Alice Dubois, Postdoctoral Development Centre Manager (R&E), Education and Student Services  |
| <b>Presenter(s)</b>                 | As above   |
| <b>Paper Category</b>               | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Approval – paper contains recommendations that require approval by Education Committee (Student Experience) for implementation.  |
| <b>Stakeholder Engagement</b>       | <p>Consultation has been undertaken with academic staff with responsibilities for UG/PGT supervision in Schools, with Postdoctoral Research Staff, the Postdoctoral and Research staff Oversight Group (PROG), with colleagues within Education and Student Services and the Student Officers (Education and Postgraduate).</p> <p>The paper was also discussed at the Deans and Directors of Education Forum on 17 February 2023.</p>   |
| <b>Communication post Committee</b> | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> For distribution to relevant areas only, including FEBs etc.   |
| <b>Executive Summary</b>            | <p>Learning how to supervise Undergraduate (UG) and Postgraduate Taught (PGT) students and gaining supervision and management experience is often part of the personal development goals of postdoctoral research staff ('postdocs'). This experience enables them to increase their competitiveness for a range of positions, including lectureships, and become better supervisors later in their career.</p> <p>This paper presents three recommendations in relation to the postdoc supervision of students and highlights the alignment of the proposals with several initiatives and commitments of Strategy 2030. The author sets out a rationale for the promotion of a more consistent approach to supervision by postdocs across the University which would enable and officially recognise supervision contributions by postdocs and mitigate potential negative effects that undertaking too much supervision can have on students and the postdocs themselves.</p> <p>A number of considerations are noted including; the benefit to the student experience, the personal and career development opportunities for the postdocs, expectations relating to opportunities to access supervisory</p> |

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|  | <p>opportunities, academic responsibility, recognition of postdoc supervision and potential opportunities to propose student projects.</p> <p>The Committee is asked to discuss and approve the following recommendations.</p> <p><b>Recommendation A</b>      <i>That postdocs are allowed to be involved in the supervision of students, proposing projects when appropriate.</i></p> <p><b>Recommendation B</b>      <i>That the student projects involving postdocs always involve an established academic and remain part of the academic's workload, with no 'transfer' of responsibility to the postdoc.</i></p> <p><b>Recommendation C</b>      <i>That postdocs' contributions are captured on relevant forms and systems, notably by enabling the listing of two supervisors per project.</i></p> |
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## 1. Introduction

Learning how to supervise Undergraduate (UG) and Postgraduate Taught (PGT) students and gaining supervision and management experience is often part of the personal development goals of postdoctoral research staff ('postdocs'). This experience enables them to increase their competitiveness for a range of positions, including lectureships, and become better supervisors later in their career.

Such contributions to supervision are routine in some disciplines (e.g. laboratory-based) and rare in others (e.g. arts and humanities). When it takes place, it is not always formally recognised, and may in some cases be imposed on the postdocs, becoming a threat to the delivery of their funded research and/or to their work-life balance.

While not essential, the involvement of postdoctoral researchers in the supervision of research projects can enhance the experience of the students, provided it is appropriately recognised and regulated by Schools.

This paper sets out proposals to:

- (i) Promote a reasonable and more consistent approach to supervision by postdocs across the University;
- (ii) Enable and officially recognise supervision contributions by postdocs;
- (iii) Mitigate potential negative effects that too much supervision by postdocs can have on students and postdocs themselves.

## 2. Strategic Alignment

This paper aligns with several initiatives and commitments of Strategy 2030, including:

- (i) Promoting mentoring across the different career stages of research: “Enhance tailored mentoring and coaching support for all stages of the research career continuum” (Research and Innovation Strategy).
- (ii) Providing opportunities for postdocs to develop skills and experience: “Support and empower postdoctoral researchers and Fellows to reach their greatest potential and career ambitions through enhanced professional and career development opportunities, in line with our commitments as a signatory to the UK Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers.” (Research and Innovation Strategy); “Investigate the potential for postdoctoral researchers to propose/supervise research projects for UG/PGT students” (Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers Action Plan).
- (iii) Recognising the contributions of all those involved in research: “Reward and recognise the entire range of contributors and contributions that are made towards research outcomes, regardless of seniority, profile or function” (Research Culture Action Plan).

The ‘Assistant Supervisor role’ is a similar initiative introduced in 2021 across Faculties, which recognises and regulates the contributions of postdocs to the supervision of PhD candidates. More than 40 postdocs have been appointed as Assistant Supervisors in 2021-22 and feedback on the scheme from students, supervisors and Assistant Supervisors has been positive. The recommendations of this paper follow a similar goal of enabling, recognising, and regulating such activities, but at UG and PGT level.

## 3. Definitions

### 3.1 Supervision

Here, supervision goes beyond some of the support a research team **member would routinely provide to other teammates and students (such as** punctual technical/analytical training or suggestions and feedback provided at group meetings). Supervision would usually incorporate activities beyond technical training, such as review of written works, help with presentations, regular meetings, oversight of project progress etc.

### 3.2 Postdoctoral Researcher

This paper relates to 'postdoctoral researchers' i.e. staff employed on roles within the 'Research' category and AC2 grade, usually hired on a fixed-term contract to deliver a specific research project funded by a grant. Schools may decide to apply similar practices to other research staff, notably at AC1 or AC3 grades, when it appears relevant to the individual's role and experience.

## 4 Considerations

### 4.1 Student Experience

UG and PGT research projects are often the first exposure of students to research, enabling them to learn specific methodologies, experience the world of research, and inform career choices and enrolment in a research degree. The quality of the supervision and involvement of knowledgeable, supportive, and enthusiastic supervisors are important parameters to ensure the students have a positive experience and make the best of this opportunity. The recommendations from this paper are directly linked to delivering this quality supervision and experience.

Within research teams, postdocs are often ideally placed to train students in research methods, latest technologies and good practice. They can also provide valuable insights on the earliest stages of a research career to students.

Feedback from the Assistant Supervisor scheme showed that formally recognising the involvement of postdocs made them pay closer attention to the quality of supervision they provided to the students.

It is important to ensure that all the supervisors involved with students have sufficient time to dedicate to them. The Student Officers highlighted the importance of maintaining an academic supervisor, from which they expect a strong commitment and availability, complementing potential postdoctoral contributions. Ensuring constant academic involvement and limiting the number of students a postdoc supervises are important factors contributing to students feeling well-supported.

Enabling postdocs to develop supervisory skills, while being fully mentored by an experienced academic, will make them better prepared to be principal supervisors if they later become academics, contributing to the experience of future students.

## 4.2 Eligibility of Postdocs to Supervise and Time to Dedicate to Supervision

While postdocs and research staff are mainly employed to deliver research (and not to teach), they are entitled to spend at least 10 days per year on activities benefiting their personal and career development. This is a University policy aligned to our commitment to the Researcher Development Concordat, also adopted by main research funders.

Apart from supervision activities listed in the job description and reasonable ad hoc support provided to team members, student supervision should be voluntary for the postdoc, not imposed by their line manager. Whether mentioned in the job description or not, the amount of supervision for postdocs employed by a research grant should remain low and be strategically planned by the postdoc and their line manager so that it doesn't prevent them from delivering their funded research or achieving a healthy work-life balance.

## 4.3 Expectations of Postdocs and Students

Access to supervision opportunities cannot be guaranteed to all postdocs; they notably depend on existing opportunities in their department and the relevance of their expertise.

Contrary to an academic supervisor, postdoctoral supervisors are not a requirement to a project; it is expected that most students won't have an additional postdoctoral supervisor and that postdocs leaving before the end of a project won't be replaced.

## 4.4 Academic Responsibility

The academic supervisor has full responsibility for the project and student, and is the only one reliable in case of a student appeal on the grounds of inadequate supervision. They need to ensure that all involved are clear about the different roles undertaken by members of the supervisory team. Having a postdoctoral researcher involved doesn't reduce the workload allocation associated with the project for the academic, nor the time they are expected to dedicate to the supervision. When some aspects of supervision are being carried out by the postdoc, the academic is expected to guide and mentor them through it. As a result, the maximum number of students to be supervised by one academic (according to school practices and workload allocation models) are not changed by the involvement of postdocs.

#### 4.5 Recognising Postdocs' Contributions

The contributions of postdocs to the supervision of UG and PGT projects should be officially recognised and recorded on the same paperwork and systems than academic supervisors. For consistency with academic supervisors retaining full responsibility, postdocs should be listed as second supervisors.

#### 4.6 Notes Regarding Postdocs Proposing Projects

When appropriate, postdocs may design and propose student projects, either aligned to the research they are employed to deliver (optimising their time), or to their own research interests, for example to generate preliminary data for a fellowship application. Such projects should be reviewed by the academic supervisor.

It is not possible for postdocs to propose projects for degrees in which they are not traditionally proposed by academics, but are designed by the student as part of their learning objectives.

### 5. Consultation

These recommendations were developed by the Postdoctoral Development Centre (PDC) and its Representatives' Network (postdocs and academics from across the University), based on their experience, a scoping exercise of existing practices and potential concerns in Schools, and a survey of postdocs.

#### 5.1 Existing Practice – Consultation with Schools

Academic staff with responsibilities for UG/PGT supervision in Schools from the three Faculties (as identified by Deans of Education) were given an opportunity for input.

Most Schools already routinely have postdocs involved as supervisors alongside academic staff, with or without officially recording it. Often, there is only one supervisor listed, either only the academic or only the postdoc. For Schools in which the involvement of postdocs is not common practice, feedback to introduce it was mainly favourable. A few concerns were raised regarding the risk of increasing the workload of research staff to the detriment of their research, the risk of academics 'using' postdocs to carry out their workload, the difficulty of supervising early-career students and the necessity of keeping experienced people in charge and involved.

## 5.2 Existing Practice – Consultation with Postdoctoral Research Staff

A survey of postdocs was carried out with 75% of respondents involved in UG or PGT supervision. Eighty percent of those who weren't, mainly in non-lab-based disciplines, would like to have the opportunity. The main issues identified by research staff are; a lack of recognition of their contributions to supervision, being asked to supervise too many students, or a lack of opportunities to supervise.

While many supervising postdocs had a positive experience benefitting their career, multiple comments showed that postdocs in lab-based disciplines often suffer from the supervision of too many students being imposed, with deleterious consequences on their work-life balance and the time available to carry out the research they are employed to deliver (more than 50% struggle balancing their postdoc duties with supervision). They often felt they didn't have a say and that academic supervisors weren't involved enough.

## 5.3 Additional Consultation on the Draft Recommendations

The recommendations were endorsed by the PDC Representatives' Network (26/09/22), by the Postdoctoral and Research staff Oversight Group (PROG; 28/09/22) and received the support of the Deans and Directors of Education Forum (17/02/23). Feedback from staff within Education and Student Services and the Student Officers (Education and Postgraduate) was also included.

## 6. Recommendations

The Committee is asked to discuss and approve the following recommendations.

**Recommendation A** *That postdocs be allowed to be involved in the supervision of students, proposing projects when appropriate.*

**Recommendation B** *That the student projects involving postdocs also always involve an established academic and remain part of the academic's workload, with no 'transfer' of responsibility to the postdoc.*

**Recommendation C** *That postdocs' contributions are captured on relevant forms and systems, notably by enabling the listing of two supervisors per project.*

The Postdoctoral Development Centre (PDC) and members of the PDC Representatives' Network (School representatives) will work with Schools to implement these recommendations.