



Code of Practice for Conflict Resolution for Supervisors and Graduate Research Students

Approved by Academic Council Executive, 6 June 2007

1. Introduction & Context

The relationship between Student and Supervisor is of vital importance to the success of the Research Masters or Doctoral experience. As part of the doctoral support framework, a conflict resolution strategy is a necessary step towards ensuring the quality of education and training at UCD. It is imperative for the minimisation of conflict and for good practice in supervision generally, that the roles and responsibilities of the student and supervisor are clearly understood as detailed in *The Code of Practice for Supervisors and Research Students*. It is important to recognize in addition that however friendly and supportive this relationship may become, it is fundamentally recognised as academic and professional.

It is the intention of this document to discuss conflict resolution specifically within the context of the student - supervisor relationship with the aim of developing a cohesive doctoral experience across the University. It is expected that both students and supervisors contribute responsibly to the establishment and maintenance of a healthy working relationship.

2. Scope

This document deals specifically with any issue that arises within the relationship of the graduate research student and the supervisor. The document will suggest the appropriate steps to take toward conflict resolution in the context of university regulations, guidelines and support services.

Exclusions

While this document is designed to facilitate the successful working relationship between student and his/her supervisor, there are a number of circumstances that are already provided for within existing University Policy and as such are excluded from this document. These include:

- Appeals on Assessment which are dealt with by the Assessment Appeals Office
- Complaints about harassment including sexual, racial harassment or bullying by either student or staff member is dealt with in the UCD Policy on Dignity and Respect
- Issues and disputes surrounding intellectual property, dealt with under the UCD Intellectual Property Policy and Procedures
- Student complaints with lecturers or academics that are not the Principal supervisor, dealt with under the Student Complaints Policy
- Issues of plagiarism should be dealt with by the existing Policy on Plagiarism
- Supervisor grievances regarding work load or working conditions, dealt with under the Grievance Procedure as laid out in the staff manual
- A graduate student holding an academic appointment is subject to normal Human Resources dispute resolution mechanisms and practices as outlined in UCD HR publications.

3. The Graduate Research Support Network

It is the responsibility of both student and supervisor to familiarise themselves with their individual roles and responsibilities as outlined in the Code of Practice for Supervisors and Doctoral Students. They should also make themselves aware of the support network available to them and be prepared to use them as necessary. These supports include: the Doctoral Studies Panel, secondary or co-supervisors, the Access Office, the Chaplaincy, the Student Advisors, the Centre for Teaching and Learning, the Careers Office, the Graduate School Office, the Office of the Vice-President for Staff, the Office of the Vice-President for Students and the Office of the Dean of Graduate Studies and Postdoctoral Training.

These support systems, with special reference to the Doctoral Studies Panel and Research Masters Panel, may aid reasonable resolutions should conflict arise as well as supporting the relationship as a whole.

Graduate students are encouraged to contact their Student Union for advice and support.

It is important that both supervisor and student will familiarise themselves with the following documents:

- Regulations for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
- Policy on Plagiarism and Academic Integrity
- The University's Academic Governance Structures
- Assessment Appeals Office Website
- UCD Policy on Dignity and Respect
- Student Complaint Policy and Procedures
- The Student Code
- UCD Staff Manual
- The UCD staff grievance Procedure
- The UCD Intellectual Property Policy and Procedures

4. Conflict in the Supervisory Relationship

A breakdown within the student-supervisor relationship may have many causes. These can include but are not limited to:

- Differing role expectations
- Lack of openness
- Differing academic values
- Cultural differences
- Differing understanding of conversations
- Communication difficulties
- Stylistic discrepancies
- Personality clashes

While it is impossible to safeguard against all of these eventualities it is important to highlight sources of support and advice, both formal and informal. The goal of an effective conflict resolution procedure is to ensure that the rights and responsibilities of all parties are respected and that resolutions reflect best professional practice.

One particular area of potential conflict relates to the turnaround of written material and/or drafts. It is important that graduate research students and supervisors have a clear understanding and agreement as to what they expect of one another in meeting submission deadlines for written work and in the return – with appropriate comments – of such work. Just as it is unreasonable to submit piece of written work the night before a scheduled meeting and then to expect detailed written comments, so too is it unreasonable to hold onto such written work without providing a clear indication of when the student might reasonably expect that work to be returned with appropriate comments. Open and clear communication on both sides is needed.

5. Conflict Resolution

This procedure is aligned, and to be read in conjunction with, the existing *Code of Practice for Supervisors and Doctoral Students*, the *Student Complaints Policy and Procedures* and the *Staff Grievances Policy*.

- 5.1 Disputes should be resolved informally, in a professional manner and at the lowest institutional level practicable. Informal meetings of the student and supervisor at either's request should take place. Everyone involved should keep their own written notes of meetings and discussion. Please see Appendix 1: *Step-by-Step Guide to Early and Informal Conflict Resolution*
- 5.2 Either when the matter is resolved or at the end of 30 days¹ from first formal notice of the dispute,² either the supervisor or the student may request a meeting of the Doctoral Studies Panel. This meeting should either note the resolution of the dispute and agree any necessary record in the Research Masters Panel or Doctoral Studies Panel (where relevant), or make further efforts towards resolution.
- 5.3 The other members of the Research Masters Panel or Doctoral Studies Panel may then take a period of 10 days, during which they may pursue an informal resolution to the conflict. Any successful resolution of the dispute should be noted and recorded.
- 5.4 At the end of that 10-day period, and in the absence of any resolution, the other members of the Research Masters Panel or Doctoral Studies Panel must then nominate a mediator. The mediator will assist in the resolution of the conflict and seek to reach an outcome that is mutually satisfactory. The mediator remains neutral and makes no assessment of the facts or rights and wrongs of a case. A list of trained staff willing to act as mediators will be identified by the Vice-President for students
- 5.5 If, following mediation, agreement is reached, the mediator will close the matter with a brief written report to the Research Masters Panel or Doctoral Studies Panel, which will be treated confidentially. The student and supervisor will be asked to sign this report to verify that the issue has been resolved.
- 5.6 Failing a satisfactory resolution within 30 days, the other members of the Research Masters Panel or Doctoral Studies Panel must refer the matter to the Head of School. Where the Head of School is also the Supervisor or a member of the Research Masters Panel or Doctoral Studies Panel, the matter will be addressed instead to the Director of the Graduate School. Both Supervisor and Student may at any stage request advice from UCD HR and/or student support professionals.
- 5.7 Upon being formally notified of the dispute, the Head of School or Director of the Graduate School – or their nominees – will, within 15 days, make a final recommendation on the matter(s) in dispute based upon any combination of requested and/or submitted written documents, interviews of the parties concerned and/or other appropriate records or reference material. S/he may also consult with any member of the Research Masters Panel or Doctoral Studies Panel and/or any mediators or facilitators previously involved in the dispute. The recommendation shall be made on a "preponderance of evidence" standard.
- 5.8 The recommendation of the Head of School or Director of the Graduate School shall be deemed binding unless either party in dispute issues a formal complaint in accordance with the *Student Complaint Policy and Procedure* (Item 5) or the *Staff Grievances Policy* respectively within 15 days. Any such formal procedures will be alerted to both the Graduate School Director and Dean of Graduate Studies and Postdoctoral Training.

¹ This refers to 'working days.' While reasonable efforts should be made to respect this and subsequently defined deadlines, these are not absolute. Reasonable flexibility should be allowed, taking account of holidays, whether in or out of term, personal leave, sick leave etc.

² That is to say the first time either party addresses the dispute, in writing, to the other.

6. Sensitive and Confidential Information

Information provided by complainants and respondents is usually of a personal and sensitive nature. All such information will be considered to have been given in confidence, and will be treated confidentially.

7. Conflict Resolution and Ongoing Supervision

In a minority of cases, where informal or formal procedures have resolved the proximate cause of dispute, it may not always be possible to maintain a positive supervisory relationship. In cases where that relationship has broken down, but where the student is continuing to meet all other programme requirements and is making satisfactory academic progress in the circumstances, it is the School's responsibility to make its best efforts to attempt to secure alternative supervision for the student, and to help the student complete in as timely a fashion as possible.

In any attempt to secure alternative supervision for a student, the School should also consider and resolve, to the satisfaction of all parties involved, a number of key issues, including

1. A clear specification of remaining programme and thesis requirements
2. A revised schedule for the timely completion of these requirements
3. New funding arrangements for the student where applicable
4. Outstanding intellectual property and publication/authorship issues
5. Continuity of the former supervisor's research programme.

Every effort should be made both during and following the conflict resolution process to ensure that a change of supervision has a minimal negative effect on the student's career and/or on the supervisor's reputation. Thus, any possible negative effects relating to a change in supervisors should not be reflected in subsequent evaluations of course work, student or staff evaluations for awards, letters of recommendation, etc., for potential employment opportunities or promotion, or in the assignment of demonstratorships, teaching assistantships etc.

Tracking Information

The following sections should be created at the first draft stage. The Version History, Consultation and Approvals Plan and Dissemination Plan will develop as the policy progress towards a final version. This template shows how the sections should look towards the middle of the consultation process.

Personnel

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Version History

Version	Date	Summary of Changes	Changed by
1.0	28 Feb 07	First draft , version 1.0	Elizabeth Condon
1.1	21 Mar 07	Revision of document based on first meeting of the working group	Ben Tonra/ Elizabeth Condon/ Emer Cunningham
1.2	4 April 07	Revisions arising from Working Group Discussion with minor copyediting revisions from EC and IM	Ben Tonra
1.3	27 April 07	Revisions arising from UGPB discussions	Ben Tonra

Consultation and Approvals Plan

Committee/Group	Date		Version	Action	Decision
	Meeting	Circulation			
Working Group meeting	9 Feb 07	8 Feb 07	1.0	Discussion	Changes recommended
Working group meeting	2 April 07	29 Mar 07	1.1	Discussion	Changes recommended
UGPB	26 April		1.2	Discussion	Changes recommended
Graduate School Boards		27 April 2007	1.3	Discussion	
Student Advisory Services (Chaplains, Student Advisors, Office of Vice President for Students)		27 April 2007	1.3	Discussion	
ACEC	6 Jun 07	1 Jun 07	1.3	For approval	Approved

Dissemination Plan

This plan should describe the dissemination of outputs other than the policy document (e.g., presentations for use by Heads of School, staff briefing notes, sections for Horizons updates or UCD Today).

Output	Deadline	Dissemination	Responsible
Policy document		Distributed to Vice-Principals, posted to website	
Short summary and 2 PowerPoint slides		Distributed to Vice-Principals, Chairs of Programme Boards, Programme Offices Heads of School and School Offices	
200 words for Horizons update		To UCD Communications Office	
Section for Teaching and Learning Guide		Drafted in consultation with Centre for Teaching and Learning	

Step-by-Step Guide to Early and Informal Conflict Resolution³

Given the close and sometimes intense nature of the supervisory relationship, problems are likely to arise from time to time. Ideally, attempts to resolve problems or concerns happen as early and informally as possible. With that guiding principle in mind don't wait for things to get out of hand. Failing to address problems in their early stages will often lead to increased feelings of frustration which will make the problem more difficult to resolve. It is often useful to think of conflict resolution as a step-by-step process and to begin by **discussing your concerns with your supervisor**

Before the Meeting:

- Make an in person appointment with your supervisor to discuss your concerns. Avoid the temptation to try to deal with issues over email. Face to face meetings usually generate better resolutions and miscommunications are less likely to occur.
- Allow sufficient time for your meeting. Effective problem solving takes time so make sure you block off enough time to have a good discussion. If your supervisor says he/she is only available for a short time, re-schedule your meeting for another mutually convenient time.
- Prepare for the meeting by making notes before hand. Ask yourself the following questions: What are the specific obstacles in the way of my progress? What steps have I taken to overcome these obstacles? What do I need from my supervisor to enable me to move forward with my work? If your list of issues is very long prioritize your concerns - what issues do you need to resolve right away?

During the Meeting:

- Be prepared to state your needs. Remember, your supervisor isn't a mind reader. It is your responsibility to clearly (and politely!) tell your supervisor what you need from him/her to be able to move forward.
- Listen to the other person's side carefully and respectfully. Don't argue your position without knowing "why" your advisor is asking/telling you to do certain things that you think are unfair. Asking "why" and "why not" will help you to understand where he/she is coming from and can help develop a common incentive for resolution based on having both sets of interests satisfied.
- Learn something. If miscommunication is a problem between you and your supervisor try to find out why this is happening. Are you unknowingly contributing to the problem through words or gestures? Remember: you cannot control other people's behaviour but you can control your own. Consider also if there are cultural, gender or other issues that are leading to miscommunication - and, politely, make your supervisor aware of these issues.
- Identify solutions. Once you and your supervisor have articulated the problem(s), try to come up with some problem-solving strategies that work

³ <http://www.uwo.ca/ombuds/student/relations-supervisor.html>

for both of you. For example, if receiving timely feedback is an issue in your relationship, what are some of the options for addressing this: Can the supervisor provide more frequent but less detailed feedback? Can you revise your schedule for submitting work? Finding an appropriate solution may require some negotiation, but both you and your supervisor will be more committed to the resolution if each of you has had a hand in creating it.

After the Meeting:

- Summarize the key points made during the meeting. It's important to make sure that nothing's gotten lost in the discussion and that both you and your supervisor have reached some kind of agreement about how the two of you will try to resolve the issues you have identified. Some people find it helpful to put in writing a plan of action based on the conversation. This may be integrated to your Research and Professional Development Programme. Ask your supervisor if he or she would mind if you did this to again clarify the options/steps towards resolution that you have identified. If you and your supervisor have made some progress on the issue, but you still have more to discuss, determine a date for a follow up meeting.

If that meeting or subsequent meetings fail to resolve the issues then **seek other sources of support** for resolving the problem. Sometimes, despite everyone's best efforts problems remain unresolved. If your conversation with your supervisor didn't go very well, or you are afraid to approach your supervisor for whatever reason, it is a good idea to seek help in addressing your concerns. Depending on your situation (where you are in your research, etc.) you may want to consider the following options:

- Discuss your concerns with peers who have worked or who are working with the person you are having problems with. They may have some insight in the problem you are experiencing and be able to suggest solutions. Peers are also a good resource for learning about the norms in your School regarding frequency of meetings, turn-around time for feedback, and general availability of academic staff.
- Consider approaching another member of your Doctoral Studies Panel or another trusted academic staff member with whom you have a good relationship. He or she may or may not know the person with whom you are having difficulties, but they will likely be able to provide you with a fresh perspective and suggest different ways for you to approach the situation.
- If you are experiencing a lot of stress in dealing with the situation (conflict can be very stressful!) make sure you seek out sources of support. Talking to a friend or colleague may be helpful, or you may wish to consider making an appointment to see a Counsellor.

Appendix 2:

UCD GRADUATE CONFLICT RESOLUTION PROCESS

INFORMAL DISCUSSIONS
Between Student and Supervisor
Normally less than 30 working Days

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RESOLUTION RECORDED BY DSP



