

Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences

Supervision Guidelines

1. FASS Postgraduate Research Plan

Institutional support for PhD research is strong at the Open University. Next Generation, one of five activities of the OU's 2022-27 Research Plan, is specifically directed to supporting doctoral and early career research. Its aim is to *build the next generation of diverse research leaders who will bring a range of perspectives and experiences into our research culture and environment*. The Open University is also a signatory of the [Researcher Development Framework](#) which provides a set of practices and responsibilities for supporting the development of researchers, including PhD researchers.

The Faculty of Arts & Social Sciences (FASS) implements these principles through the FASS Research Plan 2024-27. The FASS Next Generation research plan has the objectives to:

- Enhance the quality of our postgraduate provision throughout the process from recruitment to examination
- Enhance research environment to maximise opportunities for on campus engagement through events, networking and developing a faculty, school and discipline community
- Provide opportunities for Early Career Researchers to develop skills and academic practice (*incl. PhD supervision*) to facilitate quality outputs, impactful research, and successful bidding.

The FASS planned actions to achieve these objectives are to:

1. Encourage and provide opportunities for ECRs to be part of PhD supervisory teams to develop experience and build capacity
2. Pursue studentship funding opportunities (e.g. UKRI, philanthropic)
3. Embed postgraduates in research centre planning and activities
4. Encourage inclusion of studentships in grant bidding
5. Facilitate and support professional development and mentoring for post-doctoral researchers
6. Support and track OU processes that support ECRs (e.g. Fellowship Academy, Future Leaders Funding, training, etc.)
7. Use the Researcher Concordat to align skills development

The FASS PhD supervision guidelines are based on these objectives, and they are particularly aligned with actions 1, 3 and 5 above.

2. Who is who in the Research Degrees Programme

OU Graduate School and Research Degrees Office

The Graduate School (GS) is the OU's central hub for postgraduate research degrees. It is responsible for:

- managing the PGR student registry
- developing new and managing existing partnerships
- developing new PGR programmes
- coordinating PGR training
- promoting PGR student opportunities
- building PGR student community through face to face and online networks
- promoting the OU as a research degree destination

The Research Degrees Office (RDO) is incorporated within the Graduate School. It fulfils the registry function, providing quality assurance, managing student records and ensuring that student registration and progression is managed in accordance with the University's regulations, policies, and legislation.

FASS Associate Dean of Research (ADR)

Paul Lawrence

FASS Director of Research Degrees (DRD)

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AHRC Doctoral Programmes Lead

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Grand Union Doctoral Training Partnership (DTP) Lead

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Lynne Fahey, Co-ordinator (Research) FASS

Sara La Rocca, Co-ordinator (Research) FASS

Louise Topley, Co-ordinator (Research) FASS

Postgraduate Convenors (PGCs)	
A&H PGC Representative	Anna Plassart
Art History	Margit Thofner
Classical Studies	Marchella Ward
English & Creative Writing	Samuel Sargeant & Edmund King
History	Anna Plassart
Music	Helen Barlow
SSGS PGC Representative	Kim Kullman
Economics	Cristina Santos
Geography & Environmental Studies	Kim Kullman
Politics and International Studies	Dan Taylor
Sociology	Marie Gillespie
Social Policy and Criminology	Rossana Perez-del-Aguila
Philosophy	Alex Barber
Development	Mark Lamont & Frangton Chiyemura
Religious Studies	David Robertson
P&C PGC Representatives	Ailsa Strathie & Zoe Boden-Stuart

Table 1. Postgraduate Convenors in FASS.

3. PhD programme information

Modes of study

Research students may be registered for an MPhil or a PhD. Students may study part-time or full-time and face-to-face or by distance learning (different requirements are in place for different modes of study).

Type of Degree	Minimum	Maximum
MPhil Full-time	15 months	36 months
MPhil Part-time	30 months	72 months
PhD Full-time	24 months	48 months
PhD Part-time	48 months	96 months

Table 2. Minimum and maximum periods of registration.

Recruitment procedure

Applicants should normally hold a Bachelor's degree with at least first or upper-second class honours, or an equivalent qualification from a recognised higher education institution (or other degree-awarding body). Applicants are also normally expected to have a Master's degree relevant to the proposed area of study, though this is not a requirement.

Individual FASS disciplines may also have more specific requirements. Please contact the Postgraduate Convenor in your School or Discipline for more information. Entry requirements also vary for prospective students seeking to apply for a studentship (see PGR Funding below). Please contact the Academic Leads of the relevant studentship scheme for information.

To apply for an MPhil/PhD in the Faculty of Arts of Social Sciences, prospective students need to submit a 1,500-word research proposal, a completed application form and the details of two referees (see [this link](#) for details about the application process). Prospective students are encouraged to relate their project ideas to one or more of the Faculty's areas of research expertise. They are also strongly encouraged to contact potential supervisors in the Faculty prior to submitting an application.

Application deadlines in the Faculty vary by discipline and by studentship (if applicable). For October start, deadlines fall between January-March each year, with the latest possible deadline for self-funded students being 31 March. In some circumstances, where an October start has been delayed by unforeseen circumstances and when deferring to the following year is inappropriate, students may begin their doctoral studies on 1st February. For a February start, applications should be submitted by 31 July.

MPhil/PhD applications are reviewed by a panel of assessors in the relevant School or Discipline of the Faculty. Each application will be assessed against the entry requirements) and any additional criteria set by specific discipline areas in the Faculty.

Shortlisted applicants are invited to an interview. A selection panel will include a minimum of two members (commonly three), one of whom is normally the Postgraduate Convenor, and one who is a potential member of the supervisory team or who provides subject expertise. ESRC and AHRC studentship applications are processed separately.

PhD milestones

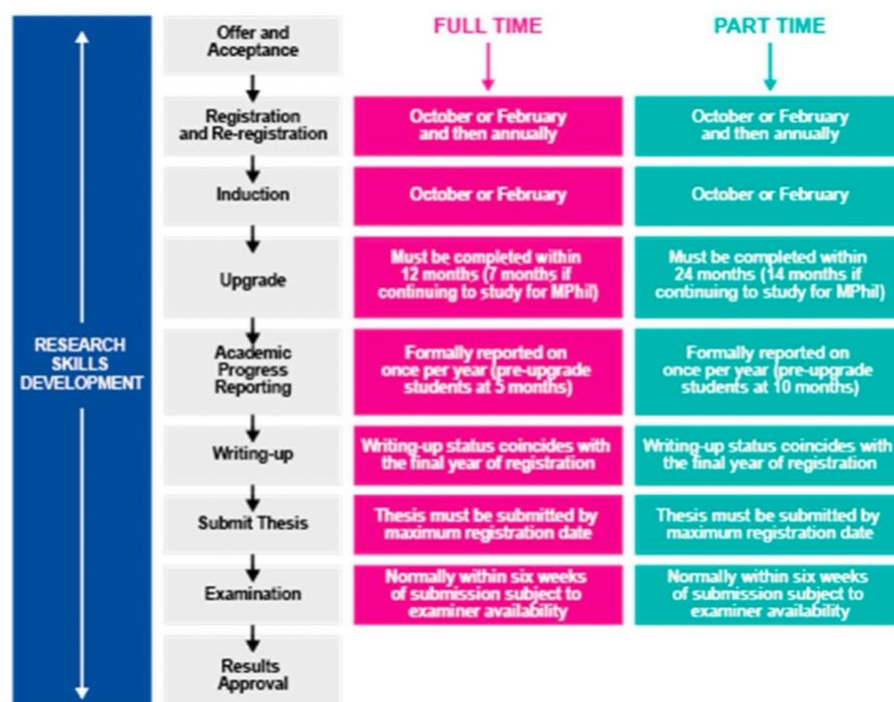


Table 3. PhD milestones

PGR Funding

FASS does not offer any Faculty-funded PhD studentships. It is however a partner in two Doctoral Training Partnerships (DTPs): the ESRC funded Grand Union DTP with the University of Oxford and Brunel University, and the AHRC funded Open-Oxford-Cambridge (OOC) DTP, with the University of Oxford and the University of Cambridge (no longer recruiting).

The OU and FASS is also part of two AHRC Focal Awards Consortia (“Lles: a Welsh Hub for Doctoral Focal Awards in the Arts and Humanities”, with Welsh HEI partners, and “A Golden Thread: Crafting the Creative Economy from Scotland’s Highlands, Lowlands and Islands”, with Scottish HEI partners) and one AHRC Landscape award, all of which will have their first cohort of students starting in October 2026.

All FASS PGR students also have access to a Research Training Support Grant (RTSG) of up to £1000 p.a. (FTE), however, externally funded students are expected to use their external funding in the first instance. RTSG is mainly used for research-related travel, conferences and fieldwork expenses.

PGR Training and activities

The PGR training programme is organised by the Graduate School training team, and it is facilitated by OU staff and academics from across the University. Postgraduate training includes core training, which deals with research skills, covering topics such as topics like academic writing, research design, approaches to data collection and analysis, research communication, and career development. The Graduate School also offers

Professional Academic Communication in English (PACE) sessions including includes academic writing consultations.

Training sessions offered by the Graduate School may be booked by students on PGR Manager and they are normally delivered weekly and they are hybrid and recorded, to enable the participation of both full and part-time students, and those working at a distance.

FASS also holds its own PGR training and activities, in topics such as open research and data management, upgrade preparation and others. FASS Research Centres and Disciplines also run more tailored PhD activities. These vary year on year according to needs and availability. FASS also runs a PhD teaching scheme whereby students gain experience of OU teaching by being part of a module team, and a public lecture scheme (Next Generation Public Lectures) where students are trained in and deliver an online public lecture on their research.

Additional sources of PGR support

PGR students at the Open University also have access to the following sources of support:

- Mental Health Casework and Advice Team (MHCAT)
- Disability Support
- Carers' fund (application form in [GSN Research Forms and Guidance](#))
- Employee assistance programme (EAP)
- Third party monitors provide an impartial source of advice and support (all PGR students should be allocated a third-party monitor by their PGC within a month of registration)

Useful links:

Wellbeing <https://openuniv.sharepoint.com/sites/intranet-people-services/pages/wellbeing.aspx>, including the Employee assistance programme (EAP)

Students can also be directed to the Mental Health, Wellbeing and Welfare pages on the StudentHome Help Centre

See also [Wellbeing@FASS](#) which contains information on both University-wide and Faculty-specific wellbeing initiatives, including a list of FASS Mental Health First Aiders

4. Appointment of supervisors¹

Upon admission to the FASS doctoral programme, students will be allocated a supervisory team. The team will be nominated by the Associate Dean Research in

¹ Extracted from Research Degree regulations 2025.

consultation with relevant stakeholders (Director of Research Degrees and Deputy, Postgraduate Convenors). The OU Progress Board considers and approves the appointment of supervisors upon admission and when any further changes are required. Students are not permitted to select their own supervisory team.

Supervisory teams comprise a minimum of two internal supervisors who are members of the University's academic staff, or a member of academic staff from a Doctoral Training Partner. Additional external supervisors may be appointed where appropriate.

Where the supervisory team includes an external supervisor, it is the responsibility of the internal supervisor(s) to:

- a) Ensure that the external supervisor is carrying out their responsibilities to the student and to the University, this includes contributing to progress monitoring reports and ensuring that they are submitted at the required time.
- b) Meet the student with the external supervisor face to face to discuss the research project for part-time students at least once a year or at least three times in the case of full-time students.

Supervisors must meet all of the following criteria:

- a) Hold an appointment as a member of academic staff at The Open University, or other university, or member of a research group of appropriate academic standing.
- b) Possess academic expertise in the chosen discipline.
- c) Hold a doctoral award.
The expectation is that supervisors will have a research degree (usually a PhD or Professional Doctorate) or for some disciplines, supervisors may have demonstrated significant engagement within their research or practice field in the absence of a research degree, as evidenced by their CV. Such variances require approval in advance by the Progress Board. It is expected that, within the supervisory team, at least one supervisor will have a doctorate.
- d) Have sufficient time to carry out their responsibilities in the provision of quality supervision and support for students.
- e) Are willing to commit to providing supervision for the duration of the student's studies
- f) Have read and confirmed their understanding of these regulations and of any updates.

The supervisory team collectively must have experience of supervising at least one UK PhD to successful completion and at least one member of the team must be an active researcher involved in research within their chosen discipline as evidenced through peer reviewed outputs.

One of the supervisors internal to the University will be the lead supervisor and will take day to day responsibility for the administrative issues and processes required for

student registration, progression, submission and completion within the time frames outlined within these regulations. Where the lead supervisor does not have experience of supervising a UK PhD student to successful completion, the supervisor on the team with the requisite UK PhD experience must act as a mentor to the lead supervisor. Regardless of experience or role, it is the responsibility of all supervisors to ensure to the best of their ability that they work with the student to ensure that all elements of a student's registration, including submission and completion are understood and undertaken within the regulatory timescales.

Supervisors should not be registered for a research degree themselves other than a Higher Doctorate, nor should they be in a close personal relationship with the student they are supervising. Supervisors should not normally be in a close personal relationship with any other member of the supervision team, nor should there be any other significant conflict of interest. Where a potential conflict of interest exists or develops during the course of the student's research degree registration, the supervisor(s) must declare this, for consideration by the Progress Board.

Research fellows (including post-doctoral researchers/PDRAs), emeritus professors and honorary associates of the Open University may be appointed as internal supervisors (not as external supervisors), provided that they and the other members of the supervisory team meet the requirements above. Associate Lecturers may be appointed as supervisors on a separate contract provided that they evidence that they are research active in the relevant field (normally by holding a substantive academic or research position at another HEI or research institute).

With the exception of academic staff who can through their associate status demonstrate that they are contributing to research activities in the University or Affiliated Research Centre, retired members of staff are not eligible to join supervisory teams at the start of a new studentship, but may continue to supervise to completion.

Diversity in supervisory teams

Supervisors and Postgraduate Convenors in FASS are encouraged to set up and work in diverse supervisory teams. Disciplinary diversity can benefit students and support more creative and open thinking. Supervisors for the same PhD student may be based in different disciplines, Schools, or Faculties of the Open University. Supervisory teams may also consist of an external supervisor (based in the UK) who can provide specialised expertise. Disciplinary diversity will be particularly useful for doctoral projects that span more than one discipline and/or utilise diverse methodological approaches.

Supervisory teams would also benefit from being inclusive of other kinds of diversity such as sex, gender, ethnicity. The Faculty also encourages supervisory teams made up of less experienced (including early career and postdoctoral researchers) and more experienced supervisors. In addition to the benefits for the student, this can be a development opportunity for both less experienced supervisors (who would acquire supervisory experience) and for more experienced supervisors (who would develop leadership and mentoring skills).

Where a supervisor is absent for a period of three months or more alternative supervisory arrangements must be put in place and approved by the University's Progress Board.

All changes to any supervisory team must be approved by the Progress Board. Whilst students may request a change to their supervisory team, this is not guaranteed, and appointment of new supervisors cannot be initiated by the student.

Supervision workload policy

The FASS Supervision workload policy assumes:

15 days p.a. for FT students per supervisory team

8 days p.a. for PT students per supervisory team

The OU Research Degrees Supervision Policy states that, the number of PGRS that any one supervisor is supervising at any one time would normally be limited to ensure that the quality of the PGRS journey is not compromised. In practice, and for ease of implementation, each appointment as a supervisor will be considered as a supervision unit, where a full-time supervision would count as 1 and a part time supervision would count as 0.5. It is not expected that the total number of supervision units would normally exceed 5. (p. 6)

The maximum number of students allocated to any one supervisor would normally be five FT students (or the PT equivalent) on the assumption of a two-member supervisory team. For larger supervisory teams and for PT students, supervisors would be allocated a lower workload for that student. However, the amount of workload dedicated to PhD supervision is subject to line manager discretion, dependent on the requirements of workload planning in the unit more broadly.

5. Supervisor training and support

Supervisor training at the OU is provided by the Research Career Development (RCD). RCD runs a series of Research Supervisor Workshops and Forums (for supervisors at all stages to share best practice) as part of the Research Career Development Programme.

See RCD Supervisor resources and links, including training [here](#).

All OU supervisors are required to undertake initial training within the first 12 months of beginning the role within the University or within the Affiliated Research Centre, and then after every four years. This includes experienced supervisors who are new to the

University or Affiliated Research Centre as well as supervisors who are new to the supervisor role. Supervisors who have not attended an IRDS session since 2018 are also required to participate. Supervisors who have completed IRDS do not need to retake it; however, they are required to attend refresher training every four years. **Applications for admission which propose supervisory teams in which no one has met the minimum training requirements will not be approved.**

The mandatory training session is called “Induction to Research Degrees Supervision” (IRDS). The training covers not only how to support students throughout their research degree journeys but also how the University supports supervisors. Content includes the processes involved in effective supervision, best practices in research supervision, research student project management, common challenges in supervision, and interactive sessions on supervisory best practices, managing obstacles, and the University's support for supervisors in achieving these goals. In addition to the IRDS workshop, a series of optional Research Supervisor Forums (RSF) is offered annually.

Supervisors of international students on a visa must also attend mandatory ‘Student Route’ visa training and renew that training every two years. This ensures that supervisors are aware of any changes in UKVI policy. Training is provided within the university to support supervisors in the development of their role.

The Graduate School can also fund the registration fee for OU supervisors who are interested in acquiring a formal recognition through the UK Council for Graduate Education (UKCGE). UKCGE offers a Research Supervision Recognition programme that formally recognises good supervisory practice against key criteria detailed in the [Good Supervisory Practice Framework](#)).

6. Good practice guide for FASS supervisors

The Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences consistently performs very well in student satisfaction surveys. In the 2025 [Postgraduate Research Experience Survey \(PRES\)](#) student satisfaction overall in FASS was 91.5% (with OU average being 80.5%). Satisfaction with supervision has been particularly strong in FASS consistently over the years. Still there appears to be room for improvement in our doctoral provision, especially with regards to research culture where FASS received its lowest score.

Embedding postgraduate students in the Faculty's research centres planning and activities is now part of the FASS research plan. Postgraduate students are part of the FASS research community, and it is the role of supervisors² to support the integration of PhD students into this community.

² Along with Postgraduate Convenors and other research leaders in the Faculty (Directors of Research, Research Centre Directors).

- Supervisors should take an active role in informing students about and encouraging them to participate in research activities, groups and centres that are relevant to their research.
- PhD supervisors in FASS should encourage their PhD students to be part of one (or more) of the Faculty's research centres:
 - [OpenARC](#) in the School of Arts & Humanities
 - [Open Psychology Research Centre \(OPRC\)](#), in the School of Psychology & Counselling
 - [Centre for Global Challenges and Social Justice \(GCSJ\)](#), in the School of Social Sciences & Global Studies
- Supervisors are expected to be engaged in the wider FASS PGR community by supporting PGR training and related activities – e.g. helping organise and taking part in PGR events, viva chairing and thirty party monitoring.
- FASS supervisors are expected to contribute to the Faculty's PhD supervisor community by:
 - Acting as mentors for less experienced supervisors in supervisory teams
 - Taking part in Faculty-wide supervision forums where they can exchange knowledge and good practice
 - Chairing exam panels
- For distance learning PhD students particularly, supervisors should take extra care in ensuring that students are able (and safe) to carry out their doctoral research and that they will also be able to participate in their discipline's research community. Supervisors of distance learning students are encouraged to consult with the FASS research degrees team, the Director of Research Degrees, and the Postgraduate convenor should they have any concerns or queries about a distance learning student or project.

Supervision meetings and monitoring

Non-distance learning full-time PhD students are required to have a minimum of 12 on-campus engagements per year, including supervision, training and other activities (see [PGR Academic Engagement and Attendance Policy](#)). These full-time students should have a formal meeting with their internal supervisor(s) a minimum of ten times per year. This should normally be face to face (in person).

Distance learning students may reside anywhere in the world. Students who are resident in the UK must be available to attend any required courses in the UK and must attend campus to undertake registration and induction.

Part-time students should have a formal meeting with their internal supervisor(s) a minimum of five times per year. This may be remote, but efforts should be made to ensure that some of the meetings are face to face (in person).

There should not be a gap of more than 60 days between these supervision meetings to ensure continuous academic support and progress.

It is essential that notes of all supervision meetings are kept on PGR Manager (see instructions on how to use PGR Manager [here](#))

Monthly Monitoring of international students: Supervisors of international students are required to submit [monthly monitoring forms](#) confirming their students' campus engagement, in order to guarantee compliance with UK Government's visa and immigration requirements.

It is useful to keep a copy of the OU Research Degrees regulations for reference. They can be found, along with other useful information, forms and guidance, at the [Graduate School Forms and Guidance intranet site](#).

7. Supervisor Expectations and Duties at the OU³

Supervisors are responsible for the academic progress and pastoral or personal support of their students, and for dealing with administrative matters. They should provide the guidance and support necessary for successful completion of the research project. Supervisors are expected to have undertaken supervisory training and be committed to ongoing development of supervision skills.

Supervisors are responsible for:

³ Extracted from OU Supervisor Guidelines Section 2

- a) Establishing a framework for supervision, at the beginning of the student's research, including arrangements for regular supervisory meetings and key milestones during registration.
- b) Defining the role of each supervisor.
- c) Meeting the student regularly and frequently, at the intervals agreed at the beginning of the research project and in line with the supervision policy.
- d) Being accessible to give advice by whatever means is most suitable, taking into account the location of both the supervisor and student, and the mode of study.
- e) Making sure the student has up-to-date supervisor contact details, including when away from the normal place of work.
- f) Giving assistance in defining the topic and objectives of research to be undertaken. It is important that this is agreed between the student and supervisors at an early stage.
- g) Making sure that the project:
 - i. falls within the supervisors' area of expertise;
 - ii. can be completed with the resources available;
 - iii. can be completed within the prescribed period of study;
 - iv. is suitable for the degree that the student intends to take;
 - v. for funded students can complete within the period of the studentship.
- h) Support the student in their professional development and specifically undertake a training needs analysis referenced to the Vitae Researcher Development Framework. In particular, making sure that students know about research training provided by the University and by the discipline, ensuring they are aware of attendance requirements and the means of planning and recording their development. The skills analysis should be reviewed on an annual basis.
- i) Seeing that the health and safety policies of the University and of the discipline are brought to students' attention and explained.
- j) Discussing ethics review, standards of academic conduct, plagiarism and any hazards or risks associated with the research work and how they can be dealt with and ensuring that safety and other relevant procedures are followed.
- k) Ensuring ethics review has been undertaken and approval in place, where applicable.
- l) In agreement with Faculty colleagues ensuring that suitable alternative support is arranged if the supervisors are going to absent for a period of three months, or longer.
- m) Responding promptly and constructively to written work, within the schedule agreed at the beginning of the project.
- n) Keeping to the monitoring and reporting timetable agreed at the beginning of the project. This will include the regular progress monitoring reports.
- o) Ensuring that examiners are nominated in good time, so that the examination can go ahead as soon as possible after submission of the thesis.
- p) Ensuring that the student has an opportunity to participate in a *mock viva voce*.
- q) Ensuring that at the beginning of their studies students understand the requirements for submitting non-book content as part of their thesis and guiding them through the process in line with relevant guidelines.

- r) Maintaining records of formal supervision meetings as agreed with students and in such a way they can be accessed and understood by anyone with a legitimate need to see them.
- s) For those students who enter the UK on a Tier 4 visa, ensuring any breaches to Tier 4 compliance are reported.

Students can also reasonably expect their supervisors to:

- a) Treat them professionally and see that they get proper credit for their work.
- b) Give advice about the proposed research project and the standard expected for the degree the student intends to take.
- c) Arrange a supervision meeting as soon as possible after registration. This would usually be within the first week for full-time students but may take longer to arrange for part-time students.
- d) Make sure that the first meeting covers the role of each supervisor; frequency of future meetings; timetable for early meetings; arrangements for seeing and commenting on written work; monitoring arrangements and timetable; safety; ethics and integrity; research facilities available; training programmes and attendance requirements; relevant protocols and codes of practice including ethics review, standards of academic conduct; general framework for the whole research project; detailed plan for the early stages of the research project.
- e) Suggest some directed reading before registration. This might be general background reading so that the student can discuss the topic with the supervisors soon after registration, or it might be the beginning of a literature review.
- f) Offer advice about literature sources and other research resources.
- g) Deal promptly with any research problems.
- h) Take an active role in introducing the student to meetings of learned societies, seminars and so on, and to other researchers in the field.
- i) Offer advice about the presentation and publication of research work, and make sure that attribution is discussed before presentation/publication.
- j) Put the student in touch with specialists inside or outside the University if part of the research falls outside the supervisors' expertise. If appropriate, the supervisors should recommend the appointment of specialists as internal or external supervisors.
- k) Provide support by encouragement and constructive criticism and advice.

8. Useful links

[FASS Research Degrees Hub](#), VLE guide with useful information and resources for FASS research students

[PGR Manager Guide for supervisors](#)

[Supervisor resources and links](#) (Research Career Development)

[Supervisor training guidelines](#)

[Graduate School Network – Forms and Guidance](#) (includes all relevant forms, regulations, training)

[Research Degree regulations](#)