

Postgraduate Co-ordinators Guide

Postgraduate Office

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The role of Department/School Postgraduate Coordinator is an important one in assisting students to successfully complete their qualifications. As PG Coordinator you are an important source of information for students and staff, an administrative hub for postgraduate students, a “go-to person” for students and staff in your department and a contact person for the Faculty Deans and Dean of Postgraduate Research.

The exact nature of the PG Coordinator role differs between departments, as determined by the Head of Department/School. In this guide we focus on core aspects of the role related to the management of thesis students (doctoral and masters). It is a guide only, not a comprehensive road map. We hope it is of assistance to PG Coordinators.

Any questions related to the management of doctoral students and the examination of PhD and Masters theses should be directed to the Dean of Postgraduate Research – Lucy Johnston (lucy.johnston@canterbury.ac.nz), one of the Associate Deans – Jon Harding and Bryce Williamson (jon.harding@canterbury.ac.nz; bryce.williamson@canterbury.ac.nz) or the Postgraduate Office – Maria Arrillaga, Anna Robinson and Stacy Roberston (postgraduate-office@canterbury.ac.nz). Enquires about any other postgraduate matters should be directed to the relevant Faculty Dean.

Each College has a representative on the University Postgraduate Committee who can advise on matters and also raise issues at PG Committee on your behalf (current PG contacts can be found at <http://www.canterbury.ac.nz/postgrad/contacts.shtml>).

Key aspects of the Postgraduate Co-ordinator role

- **You are an essential link between students and supervisors and the Postgraduate Office and the Deans of Postgraduate Research and your College.**
- One of the most important roles is to ensure that students and supervisors in your department understand and follow the relevant regulations so that students are able to successfully complete their degree on time with minimum administrative distraction.
- You should expect to be the first port of call for all questions related to the PG rules and regulations for postgraduate students and supervisors in your department. Accordingly, you need to be familiar with all relevant UC rules and regulations relating to Postgraduate study. Current regulations, policies and forms and be accessed via the PG Office webpages (http://www.canterbury.ac.nz/postgrad/ma_students/policies.shtml)
- You should facilitate the administration and good supervision of students in your department. You should get to know students in your department, track when their progress reports are due and monitor progress within department so that issues don't escalate unforeseen.
- You may need to advise and mentor new/early career supervisors.
- You may need to counsel and adjudicate between postgraduate students and supervisors.
- You should keep the Dean of Postgraduate Research informed of significant postgraduate issues or potential issues that may arise in your department
- Oversee the organization of PG events within the department/school (e.g., Thesis in 3, research showcase events)
- Encourage and facilitate PG collegiality and integration into the department and college research culture.
- You are a conduit of information between your department and the University Postgraduate Committee through your College representative.

Being the link between your department and the PG Office and your College

There is an important difference in roles between the Postgraduate Office and the Colleges. The Postgraduate Office and the Dean of Postgraduate Research deal with all administration for Doctoral (PhD, EdD, DMA) students (approves international PhD applications, monitors and approves Supervisory Certificates, Progress reports, PhD Confirmation, PhD examinations) and also with Masters thesis examinations. Administration of all other aspects of master's thesis students (e.g., progress report forms) and administration of all other Postgraduate students (e.g., Honours, PGDip, taught Masters, Masters Part I) happens through the Faculty Deans.

Some Specific Tasks

1. Processing and signing a number of forms including;

- Postgraduate enrolment applications – it's really useful if the PG co-ordinator can be explicit in these forms about any potential issues and provide as much detail as possible to guide the Deans in approving them. Consider closely the student's background preparation (including evidence of research experience) and be cautious over recommending waivers to English language requirements unless there is clear evidence of adequate language skills to complete a thesis and live in NZ. Ensure adequate supervision and funding are available.
- Progress Reports – it is up to the student to complete these in a timely fashion. Some PG co-ordinators in larger Departments have arranged to have all of their student's Progress Reports due at a particular date (e.g. 1st May & 1st Oct), regardless of when the students enrol. This arrangement results in all of your students and supervisors knowing when reports are due. If you can do this then you could also have a generic email sent to all of your students and supervisors reminding them when Progress Reports are due. For Doctoral students, please ensure that the PG Office is told of any such decisions within departments. Check Progress reports for inconsistencies between the student's

responses and the supervisor. If a problem has been identified, are adequate responses in place? Has a timeframe for actions been included and agreed? Include any details in your comments on the form.

- Examiner request forms – these are covered in more detail below, but they should be completed in timely fashion. Supervisors should be identifying and approaching potential examiners **prior** to the submission of the thesis for examination!
- Final grade recommendations – mainly for Masters. These only become an issue when the examiners suggest different grades. We have a procedure that you should follow (See Appendix 1). Please do not invent your own procedure as this can cause problems. Ensure you keep careful documentation of this process in case of possible disputes. Some examiners are still recommending a thesis grade based on the student making suitable amendments. This is not the procedure; theses should be graded on the document presented to the examiner. The regulations state that the only amendments that can be required by masters students are minor typos and grammatical errors.
- Supervisory Agreements – hopefully these are relatively straight forward. If your Department has a Postgraduate Committee it should provide feedback on proposals where appropriate. You should check Supervisors agreements for IP, health & safety, ethics, a supervisory team (rather than just a single supervisor), sufficient technical support, funding and EFTS split across departments – all these things can cause problems later.
- Doctoral confirmation – Doctoral students complete the confirmation process at 12 (or, in some departments, 18) months post-enrolment. It is up to the students to ensure that the process takes place but it is the department, rather than the student, that completes the forms.
- Doctoral applications for suspension and extensions – these are forms which also can be approved faster if you put some detail in here. Often the form arrives at the Postgraduate Office with no real explanation or justification. Just ticking “approved” is not really useful for the Dean.

- Permission for Postgraduate students to have extended time off campus (1 month or longer) – these are usually straightforward. Consideration must be given, however, to ensuring that the student receives adequate supervision whilst away from UC. One issue that does come up is students going to countries that are unstable or have security issues. A comment by you as to how this is being handled by the student is useful. International PhD students normally pay domestic fees, however if they spend more than 12 months overseas, they will be required to pay international fees.

2. Being a general advisor

To many students (and supervisors) the UC regulations can be confusing, usually through lack of familiarity. Some administrative processes appear to be cumbersome and illogical – but there is a purpose to them! Sometimes students get automated emails that they worry about. Part of your job is smoothing that process and allaying fears so that the students can get on and complete their theses.

3. Communication

An important task is keeping your Departments Supervisors, HOD and students informed about Postgraduate issues, events and changes in regulations. There are often changes in regulations and rules governing Postgraduate students and many academics don't know (or forget) about them. As a PG co-ordinator, you may need to remind staff about new rules. There are also a number of Postgraduate events during the year (e.g. Thesis-in-3 competition) that you might inform your Department about. The Dean of Postgraduate Research also sends out a monthly Memo which is sent to PhD students and PG co-ordinators. If your HoD does not send this on to supervisors, it might be useful for you to do so. Your other postgraduate students may also find this memo useful.

4. Dealing with supervisory grievances

Unfortunately, academic and personal grievances do occur. These come in all shapes and sizes but are frequently between the student and supervisor. Often they arise because one or both

parties have not made their expectations clear. Forms like the “Student-Supervisor Agreement” are designed to attempt to reduce the likelihood of a grievance arising. Similarly “Progress Reports” are an opportunity to identify and deal with problems before they become too serious. Encouraging students and supervisors to be honest in these forms can avoid a grievance process altogether.

As a PG co-ordinator you may be approached by a student or supervisor to adjudicate a disagreement. Your primary aim should be to get the parties talking to each other to see if they can resolve their differences. Unfortunately, sometimes this is not possible; sometimes during grievances people say things that should not be said – don’t be one of those people. You need to be the voice of reason and logic. Remember, too, that all emails can be retrieved and are accessible via the Official Information Act; at times a phone call or face-to-face meeting might be the best approach.

You should keep written records of conversations and agreements between disputed parties (e.g. send an email summary of points discussed in meeting to all parties – keep this email factual, don’t include opinions or potentially controversial comments).

If you can’t get a resolution then your next step will be to involve your HOD. Failing that you should consult the Dean of Postgraduate Research. Try not to escalate the problem. If the issue is still not resolved then the parties might then lodge a formal Academic grievance – these are invariably unpleasant and it’s much better if issues can be resolved before this step.

If in doubt about any issues call the Dean, or Associate Deans, of Postgraduate Research.

Getting assistance inside your School or Department

Prioritize your workload: Most Postgraduate Co-ordinators are busy teachers and researchers, with little administrative support. So you may need to prioritize the tasks you have in front of you. Even when you are busy there are still some Postgraduate tasks that need to be done as quickly as possible.

Appoint a Deputy PG Co-ordinator: Probably every Department would benefit from having a Deputy Postgraduate Co-ordinator. This deputy would be a secondary point of contact for Postgraduate issues and urgent administration. If there is a deputy it is useful to let the PG Office know so that they also have a back-up person to contact as needed.

Have a departmental postgraduate committee: A number of large departments have formed a Postgraduate Committee to co-ordinate tasks and distribute workloads. Even in small departments, having one or two others to share tasks and cover co-ordinators if they are away is useful. With the increased amount of administration associated with supporting students it can become an issue if important administrative paperwork is not done in a timely fashion. A Postgraduate Committee could also administer and participate in the 12/18 month PhD Progression review.

Use Departmental Administrators: In some departments administrators are used by PG co-ordinators for keeping records of all current postgrad students, who their supervisors are, when progress reports are due and other administrative tasks that can take up your time but don't really need an Academic.

Examiner Request Forms

1. Examiner request forms – A common problem is deciding on appropriate examiners. Each examiner must not have a conflict of interest, or even a “perceived” conflict of interest. Avoiding conflicts of interest is fundamental to our reputation as a Research Institution. Possible conflicts of interest might include; being on the Supervisory Committee, a history of working closely with the Supervisor (or student), being a recent UC staff member or student, being married to, a partner of, or related to a supervisor. A lot of our colleagues complain about the difficulty of finding appropriate examiners. This is a universal problem because most of us work in specialised fields. Although we have traditionally thought of needing an NZ examiner and an overseas examiner, with increased use of video conferencing for PhD Oral exams there is more opportunity to use two overseas examiners rather than one from NZ or Eastern Australia.

2. Choosing examiners – Although choosing examiners is primarily the Supervisor’s (and student’s) task it is often worth checking with the Supervisor before forwarding the forms to the Postgraduate Office. Common issues we have with examiners include; examiners with minimal or no experience at examining theses, or have different expectations about what an appropriate thesis may or may not look like. Other problems include examiners who expect a traditional thesis then get one written as “papers”, examiners going on extended leave, examiners retiring. Finally, examinations of interdisciplinary theses can be problematic when an examiner embedded in one discipline with little or no knowledge about the other discipline(s).

Appendix 1: Procedure for deciding on differing grades from Masters examiners

The final grade for a Masters thesis is determined as follows:

- Where there is a just a one-grade difference between the grades recommended by the two examiners, the higher grade shall be awarded (e.g., if examiner recommendations are a B+ and a B, the student will be awarded a B+). The relevant Department/School Postgraduate Coordinator can apply to the Dean of Postgraduate Research for this normal process not to be followed under exceptional circumstances.
- Where there is a discrepancy of two grades, the mid-point grade shall be awarded (e.g., if examiner recommendations are a B+ and a B-, the student will be awarded a B). The relevant Department/School Postgraduate Coordinator can apply to the Dean of Postgraduate Research for this normal process not to be followed under exceptional circumstances.
- If there is a discrepancy greater than two grades (e.g., a B and an A) the examiners will be contacted, usually by the Department/School Postgraduate Coordinator, to see if consensus can be reached. The Postgraduate Coordinator will (a) share each examiner's report with the other examiner to ensure each understands the views of the other and (b) investigate whether the examiners might move towards a consensus view; this may be done by round-table discussion, a conference call, or separate discussions with each examiner. If, after such discussions, the examiners still disagree, then an adjudicator will be appointed by the Dean of Postgraduate Research based on recommendation from the relevant Department/School. The Adjudicator will examine the thesis and consider the examiners' reports, and make a decision, which will be final.

The examiners' decisions are final. Appeals can only be made on procedural grounds – that the examination process did not follow the procedures outlined in relevant regulations and has been affected by procedural errors, bias or inappropriate practice. A student can make an informal appeal to the Dean of Postgraduate Research. If the student is not satisfied with the response from the Dean, he or she can formally appeal to the University Grievance Advisor.