

An explanation of the Cambridge undergraduate supervision system

The purpose of this internal document is primarily to ensure that non-student members within the collegiate University understand the undergraduate supervision system. [An external guide aimed at current students is available here.](#)

The supervision

1. University of Cambridge students receive teaching organised and paid for by Faculties and Departments (such as lectures, seminars, and practical work) and teaching, in the form of supervisions, which is typically organised and paid for by Colleges. A supervision consists of small group teaching led by a supervisor, someone learned in the subject being studied, to explore the curriculum in greater depth and/or breadth. Supervisions are typically organised by Directors of Studies, appointed by Colleges, who are responsible for the oversight of students' academic work in a particular subject. In some cases, especially in more specialised courses later in Tripos, they are organised centrally by a Department. Directors of Studies in a subject are coordinated through a Committee which liaises with the Faculty or Department.
2. The number of supervisions that a student is recommended to receive for a particular course, [supervision norms](#), are agreed by Faculties and Departments in consultation with Directors of Studies groups. The number of supervisions, and therefore supervisors, that a Director of Studies needs to organise varies each year due to (a) the fluctuation in the number of admitted students for each course (b) the particular paper choices of each student and their individual academic needs, and (c) the availability of senior members of their College to provide supervisions. The flexibility in allowing students to change their paper choices after the academic year has begun, and with students transferring between courses or intermitting at late or short notice, means that the size and number of supervision groups, the actual students within those groups (and whether they will be from more than one College), and the type and number of supervisors therefore required is generally difficult to predict with any accuracy ahead of time.
3. Centrally-provided (University) teaching follows published curricula. Apart from the published (quantitative) supervision norms (which are a guide and not a requirement for Directors of Studies to follow), supervisions typically need not follow any pre-determined structure and their content is rarely defined in any detail by anyone other than the contracted supervisor: they are led by the specific needs of the individual students. Termly supervision reports give feedback to students on their understanding of the topics taught, and confirm for Directors of Studies that supervisors have delivered the quantity of work asked of them: the delivery and quality of that work has no distinct standards by which it can be judged, especially given the extent to which supervisors should respond to the individual academic needs of students, and their own choice of teaching methods for the material being covered. Consequently, in most cases, there is a wide variety in the ways supervisions are provided across and within courses. Supervisors can set questions or essay titles for students to answer, or for discussion during the supervision. Not all supervisions are dependent upon work which is set and marked outside of them, instead students can be engaged with exercises set during the supervisions.

The supervisor

4. The best interest of the students, whether taught or as teachers, is paramount when arranging supervisions: supervisors are appointed with the relevant subject expertise, though some

disciplines may recommend supervisors attend relevant lectures, or read particular books, to prepare for their supervisions. College Fellows, sometimes as College Teaching Officers, typically cover more predictable supervision needs, such as for compulsory papers of subjects with a large number of students. Final year papers typically have lower student numbers, and require a greater depth of knowledge; in some cases the papers' convenors organise the supervisions themselves.

5. Directors of Studies will often make arrangements with other Colleges to pool together their supervision needs and available supervisors, so that an academic with the necessary subject knowledge to teach a paper is paired up with students from multiple Colleges who have chosen to study that paper. Some supervisions are also organised centrally by the Department or Faculty, recruiting supervisors that may not be affiliated with any College and sometimes external even to the University to teach students paying little or no heed to their College membership. This helps explain why, on average, only a third of supervisors teach students from solely one College in a year¹.
6. On average:
 - there are nearly 250,000 supervisions each academic year, delivered by 4,800 supervisors.
 - approximately 30% of all **supervisions** are provided by postgraduate students and early career unestablished researchers, 25% are University Teaching Officers, and 30% are College Fellows (15% are 'Other').
 - approximately 50% of all **supervisors** are provided by postgraduate students and early career unestablished researchers, 20% are University Teaching Officers, and 15% are College Fellows (15% are 'Other').
 - 68% of all supervisors teach 50 supervisions or fewer in an academic year, of which 60% are postgraduate students and unestablished researchers.
 - Much higher volumes of work are by a large majority provided by College Teaching Officers (Fellows recruited specifically to Colleges who are not University employees). Providing greater than 400 supervisions a year would approximately generate enough income to start paying Income Tax, and there are only 17 supervisors a year who reach that quantity of work.
7. Colleges employ College Teaching Officers and /or Teaching Associates and other posts to provide specific teaching for the College. Some Colleges expect Fellows who are also University employees ("UTO Fellows") to supervise undergraduate students as part of the requirements of the office of Fellow in the College (they may or may not also be employed formally for that purpose). The majority of other supervisors are treated as self-employed: for 'casual' and peripatetic supervisors, this approach has been tested with the HMRC (through the use of its employment self-assessment tool and the audit of one College).²
8. Postgraduate students are typically encouraged to supervise, as one aspect of their professional learning and development. They are only permitted to undertake paid work up to a maximum of ten hours per week, with the approval of both their postgraduate supervisor and College Tutor. Greater restrictions may apply under the grant conditions for UKRI-sponsored students. This is to

¹ All statistics given in this document come from an analysis of CamCORS data, of supervision reports submitted between 2016/17 and 2020/21. Supervision hours are calculated as the number of hours given to a student, divided by the group size the supervisions were given in, to remove duplication. Supervisor type is self-reported on CamCORS, chosen from a narrow range of options, so caution should be given to the accuracy of that data.

² A specific exception to this relates to international students in the UK on a student visa: they are not permitted under their visa conditions to work unless it is under a formal inflexible contract as an employee or a worker.

ensure that a postgraduate student does not disrupt the progress of their research with other commitments, and is one reason why postgraduate students are expected to have their finances in place before they start their course, to ensure that they do not rely on supervising to financially support their studies.

Quality of provision

9. Directors of Studies monitor the standard of both College-organised supervisions and those which are arranged on their behalf by the University. This includes: outlining to new supervisors what is required of them (largely through [guidance agreed by the Senior Tutors' Committee](#)); ensuring that supervisors have suitable expertise to give supervisions, via appropriate training or appropriate prior experience and knowledge; ensuring that supervisors know to raise concerns about individual students with them; and acting on student feedback on supervisions.
10. Senior Tutors take note of any areas where difficulty has been reported in securing suitable supervision, and pursue these cases with the relevant Faculty or Department. The Standing Committee on Education receives and considers the annual supervision figures produced via CamCORS (the Cambridge Colleges' system for the Online Reporting of Supervisions), and takes steps to ensure that supervision norms are specified by Faculties and Departments in their advice to Directors of Studies and students.
11. Training for new supervisors is provided by [the Cambridge Centre for Teaching and Learning](#), which for postgraduate students is mandatory before teaching can be given. This currently entails approximately one hour of online preparatory reading, attending a 3-hour workshop, and then approximately one hour of recommended online reading. Several Departments and Faculties provide their own supplementary or alternative training for new supervisors (which may or may not be deemed by those Faculties or Departments to be mandatory), and/or have guides on how to supervise for specific courses. On average there are 1,150 new supervisors each year, of which 79% are postgraduate students or early career, unestablished researchers. For postgraduate students this training doubles as a substantial contribution to their necessary development of generic/transferrable skills, and for postdocs their continual professional development.

Payment rates

12. The Bursars' Committee annually sets [intercollegiate re-charge rates for supervisions](#), used to transfer funds between Colleges when College staff or Fellows offer their supervision services for other Colleges. Colleges are otherwise free to set payment rates for supervisions independently. The re-charge rate has historically been indexed to the previous year's agreed UCEA-UCU negotiated national spine increase for academic staff pay. Whilst an intercollegiate rate can be agreed, the University and Colleges are discrete legal entities and therefore discrete employers or contractors for supervision work, so cannot enforce payment rates for all supervisors without contravening UK competition law.
13. Supervision payments are meant to cover the work done in preparing and delivering a supervision. Part of that is directly for the supervision and part is proportional to the number of supervisees. Hence, the payment might be expected to rise linearly with the number of supervisees. The intercollegiate re-charge supervision rate does rise linearly for 1 to 3 supervisees, and there is a separate rate for supervisions of 4 or more. The payment itself is for all the work involved in the supervision. How much time is devoted to preparation, marking and other matters will vary between supervisions and there is no attempt to specify an hourly rate.

14. The source of funding for supervision payment rates is tuition fees. Since 2012 the tuition fees for Home students (the significant majority), and the proportion of those fees received by Colleges, has not increased. Colleges essentially have had a zero increase in rate of income against successive annual increases in the intercollegiate re-charge rates made for the delivery of supervisions.

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