Introduction

This document outlines the arrangements for research degree third party monitoring. Further advice is available from the Research Degrees Office on:

- +44 (0)1908 654882 or email research-degrees-office@open.ac.uk (directly-registered students)
- +44 (0)1908 653117 or email research-degrees-arc@open.ac.uk (ARC students)

What is third party monitoring?

Third party monitoring is a system of support for OU research students that is in place to:

(a) Provide pastoral support for students outside of the supervisory environment
(b) Identify and resolve potential problems, thus avoiding impeded progress
(c) Provide a dispassionate view if difficulties arise with a student’s progress
(d) Identify resource management problems (staff time, equipment etc).

It allows students to discuss their studies with a third party, who is not one of their supervisors or their head of discipline. The third party monitoring system allows students to discuss and seek advice about:

(a) Pastoral matters
(b) Areas of potential student/supervisor conflict
(c) Research process problems.

The Research Degrees Committee has agreed minimum requirements for third party monitoring (see below). However, it is the responsibility of the academic unit, discipline or ARC to decide in detail how third party monitoring operates for their research students.

The third party monitoring timetable

Academic units, disciplines, and ARCs are asked to appoint third party monitors for all new full-time and part-time students as early as possible in the student’s registration. Within the first month of registration every student should be sent a letter by their academic unit (or discipline).
which tells the new student who their third party monitor is and how they can be contacted.

New students should have had their first third party monitoring session by the fifth month of their registration:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Registration start date</th>
<th>Appoint TPM by:</th>
<th>1st monitoring session to be held by:</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Oct</td>
<td>31 Oct</td>
<td>31 Jan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Jan</td>
<td>31 Jan</td>
<td>30 April</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 April</td>
<td>30 April</td>
<td>31 July</td>
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<tr>
<td>1 July</td>
<td>31 July</td>
<td>31 Oct</td>
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Third party monitoring sessions should then take place annually for all research students in the first quarter of the calendar year (1 January to 31 March).

The third party monitor should be available for consultation by the student on an ongoing basis throughout the year. Where possible the same third party monitor should be retained throughout the student’s research degree studies.

**Third party monitoring minimum requirements**

The Research Degrees Committee has approved the following minimum third party monitoring requirements for all full-time and part-time research students:

(a) Third party monitors must be members of academic staff and have some research degree supervision experience.

(b) Third party monitors should not normally be senior officers of The Open University or the Affiliated Research Centre with responsibility for the research degree programme.

(c) Third party monitors must act in the best interests of the student, irrespective of any professional or social relationship with either the student or the supervisors.

(d) Third party monitoring must be offered to all new students by the fifth month of their registration and then annually in the first quarter of the calendar year (January - March).

(e) Third party monitors should be available for consultation by the student throughout the year.

(f) For full-time students, third party monitoring must involve a face to face meeting. Face to face meetings should be in person; however where this is impracticable other arrangements for synchronous meetings may be used such as video conference, Skype or telephone.

(g) Both the third party monitor and the student should have the right to request a changed allocation, and the arrangements put in place by academic units or Affiliated Research Centres should be designed to facilitate this with maximum ease.
(h) Third party monitoring should allow students to discuss issues in confidence, unless it is agreed that further action is needed or it is of a serious nature e.g. bullying and harassment.

(i) Academic units (or schools) must provide students with written information about the status and purpose of any third party monitoring records.

(j) Any records on file must be agreed by both the student and the third party monitor and kept in a secure location.

(k) Third party monitors should be responsible for monitoring any follow-up or should involve the Associate Dean Research (or delegate) if difficulties arise that cannot easily be resolved.

(l) Heads of School (or equivalent) or Affiliated Research Centre Research Degrees Coordinator are required to confirm on all progress reports the name of the third party monitor and the date on which the third party monitoring session took place or was offered to the student.

(m) Notwithstanding of (a) to (l) a third party monitor who has genuine concerns regarding the health and welfare of a student or other parties may in confidence raise the issues discussed with appropriate specialists within the University, Institute or Affiliated Research Centre.

### Third party monitor person specification

- Some research degree supervision experience.
- A commitment to the best interests of the student.
- An understanding of, and commitment to, professional independence from the supervisors.
- Effective listening, communication and interpersonal skills.
- An appreciation and understanding of confidentiality issues.
- Effective meeting skills.
- An understanding of and respect for diversity.
- Effective problem solving and negotiating skills.
- An awareness of institutional policy and procedures relating to research students, and knowledge of where to refer issues.

### Third party monitoring good practice

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Person Specification</th>
<th>Examples of Good Practice</th>
<th>Actions to be Avoided</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Understanding of, and</td>
<td>third party monitoring</td>
<td>communicating about the</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Effective listening, communication and interpersonal skills | • taking account of the fact that the student’s first language may not be English  
• asking open questions  
• allowing the student to finish what they were saying  
• listening and repeating your understanding of what has taken place during the meeting to check that both parties agree  
• keeping a formal record of the meeting  
• inviting fuller questions  
• asking relevant, reflective questions  
• summarizing or seeking clarification  
• focusing entirely on the student’s academic progress  
• giving the impression that the meeting is not a high priority  
• being too prescriptive too early in the meeting |  |
| Appreciation and understanding of confidentiality issues | • explaining the role of the monitor at the first meeting  
• agreeing ground rules e.g. no disclosure unless agreed  
• reassuring the student that information will not be shared without permission  
• storing records in a secure place  
• breaking confidences  
• exposing specific problems with other students and/or supervisors  
• discussing any aspect of the meeting outside the meeting |  |
| Effective meeting skills | • agreeing times in advance  
• cancelling at the last minute |  |

commitment to, the best interests of the student  
understanding of, and commitment to, professional independence from the supervisors

where there is no close personal relationship with student or supervisors  
• third party monitoring of a student in another research group  
• meeting with the student without the supervisors present  
• meeting the student on neutral ground  
• declaring any potential conflict of interest  
• agreeing on the format and content of any feedback to the supervisors from the monitoring process  
• sticking to the plans of action agreed between student and third party monitor  
• using formal channels of communication formally recording agreed actions  

student to the supervisors without student agreement  
• assuming a prejudicial position with student or supervisors  
• defending bad practice breaking confidences
| Understanding of and respect for diversity | • relating to the student as a person, not a member of a particular group  
• soliciting the student’s perspective  
• being open and flexible  
• being aware of your own assumptions  
• checking with student (eg time, venue, etc) before making arrangements for meeting | • assuming certain beliefs or views  
• arranging meetings at times / places that are inappropriate |
| Effective problem solving and negotiation skills | • ‘sleeping on it’  
• discussing a range of possible solutions  
• advising when necessary  
• talking to all parties concerned  
• getting advice  
• asking probing questions  
• being a good listener clarifying issues for and with each stakeholder | • assuming you know the answer already  
• being prescriptive avoiding possible solutions because they are ‘politically’ difficult |
| Awareness of institutional policy and procedures relating to research students, and knowledge of where to refer issues | • knowing where to get help  
• understanding of institutional research degree policy and procedures  
• making suggestions to student about where s/he can get info / help  
• saying ‘I don’t know’ if that’s the case. | • dismissing OU policy as irrelevant  
• being self-congratulatory  
• vague, unfocused advice  
• ignoring communications  
• passing the buck. |