



Education Briefing: Supervisor Training and Feedback

This document aims to outline positions relating to supervisor training and feedback with the aim of promoting thought and discussion amongst Faculty Reps and College Academic Officers leading to considering improvements in individual Faculties/Colleges.

What is the University's policy?

Supervisions are the responsibility of Colleges. The Senior Tutors' Committee (the central gathering of Senior Tutors from all Colleges) has produced 'Guidance for Supervisors' which primarily pertains to the practical arrangements for supervisions with some points on reasonable expectations for both supervisor and student.

The full text of the guidance can be found at:

→ <http://www.admin.cam.ac.uk/committee/seniortutors/guidance/supervisor.html>

There is external pressure on the University to increase training for graduate students who supervise. This was highlighted in paragraph 36 of the Quality Assurance Agency's Institutional Audit which reported in February 2008.

*"36. The audit found that between them the University and the colleges provide a high level of staff support and appropriate development opportunities for academic staff. Nevertheless, the training and support provided for research students with teaching duties in the form of the Graduate Development Programme are not mandatory. In view of the significance of postgraduate students, particularly but not exclusively in the college supervisory system, **the University is advised to ensure that all postgraduate students with supervisory or teaching responsibilities are appropriately trained.**"*

In response, the University said that it "will require training of all postgraduates who teach" (Appendix to QAA report).

The full text of the QAA's Audit report can be found at:

→ <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews/reports/institutional/CambridgeUni08/summary.asp>

What is CUSU's policy?

CUSU has incorporated calls for mandatory supervisor training in its Learning and Teaching Strategy:

→ <http://www.cusu.cam.ac.uk/academic/cusults/online/aimtwo/>

The Union also has the following policy, passed by CUSU Council in Easter Term 2009:

Guidelines and Training for Supervisors

CUSU notes:

1. Lapsing policy: 'Guidelines and Training for Supervisors';
2. That the quality of students' supervisions varies widely, particularly with regard to supervisors':
 - a. Level of understanding of what exactly is required of students taking Tripos and sitting examinations in Cambridge;
 - b. Level of practical commitment to the supervision of students;
 - c. Commitment to keeping up to date with the material and subjects on which they supervise students;
3. That there is currently no adequate system in place to ensure that supervisors are aware of the precise requirements of the Cambridge Tripos and examination system;
4. That there is, currently, no adequate system in place for monitoring the performance of supervisors.

CUSU believes that:

1. The supervision system is one of the great strengths of the Cambridge education, but that the full potential of the system is undermined by the lack of a consistent process of training, supporting and monitoring of supervisors;
2. This results in an unnecessarily wide variation in the quality of teaching available to students which impacts upon their ability both to develop their skills within their subject and their ability to deploy these skills successfully during the examination process.

CUSU resolves to:

1. Allow 'Guidelines and Training for Supervisors' to lapse and to adopt this policy with the following objectives mandating the CUSU Education Team to:
 - a. **Campaign for a consistent and rigorous programme of training, support and monitoring of supervisors.**

Where can student reps take the campaign?

In order to be effective, supervisor training needs to cover both generic communication skills as well as subject-specific (including course-specific) content. As such, there is a role for both central and local programmes of training.

- Does your College/Faculty have a policy on how it trains supervisors and monitors their performance?
- If there is a feedback mechanism, is it effective? Are students providing suitable comments (and, if not, could they be supported in doing so)? If there is no mechanism, why not!?
- Do students feel that their comments are listened to? Could the College/Faculty regularly report on actions taken on feedback received?
- For a campaign – could both supervisors who would like training and students combine forces to push for change?

Ant Bagshaw, Education Officer, Easter 2009
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