



GRADUATE UNION

AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

Graduate Rights

GRADUATE RIGHTS

www.gradunion.cam.ac.uk/graduaterights

A significant proportion of PhD students struggle while undertaking their degree because the structures in departments do not support the implementation of their rights. According to a study published in Nature in March 2018, postgraduate students are more than six times as likely to experience anxiety and depression as the general population. The Graduate Union's Postgraduate Mental Health Report 2018 shows that students at University of Cambridge have similar experiences. Students reported that the 'Cambridge Culture', exemplified by a rigid commitment to excellence makes them feel that they could never fail or be vulnerable. Many felt unable to take holidays, work reasonable hours, report serious problems to their supervisors, or ask for help. Anxiety, depression, isolation, difficult supervisor relationships, and housing problems specific to students with families was reported by over 40% of responding students.

The Graduate Union believes the university, its schools, faculties, departments and colleges need to put in place urgent measures to address PhD student welfare. We believe one of the first steps is to raise widespread awareness about the fundamental rights conferred on PhD students by the Code of Practice for Research Students (<https://www.cambridgestudents.cam.ac.uk/new-students/manage-your-student-information/graduate-students/code>).

Rights of PhD students

- Right to clear expectations on the frequency of supervision
- Right to four – eight weeks of leave each year
- Right to receive formal feedback from your supervisor
- Right to an advisor as a second separate academic point of contact
- Right to receive support and help for personal difficulties, mental health concerns and financial difficulties
- Right to file a formal complaint with the university or your college if informal attempts at resolution fail
- Right to object to the appointment of specific examiner(s) for the formal examination of your thesis
- Right to take full advantage of the training, teaching and supervision offered to you and to make independent use of facilities available
- Right to have clarity about intellectual property for your research work

Remedies for these rights

As supervisors are the primary point of support for students during the PhD, students are firstly encouraged to discuss strategies to implement their rights with their supervisors. For example, it may be necessary to inform your supervisor that you are entitled to 4-8 weeks of holiday each year, or discuss a regular meeting schedule with them.

However, most difficulties for PhD students emerge due to strained relationships with their supervisors. The Student Union Advice Services (SUAS) data show that out of 174 postgraduates availing our services, 100 were Ph.D. students with academic related difficulties involving difficult relationships with supervisors. In order to address issues that either cannot be discussed with the supervisor or where additional support to the supervisor may be needed, students can seek help from the following places:

- The department: your co-supervisor, your advisor, head of department
- College: Your tutor, senior tutor, college nurse, college counsellor, MCR (and its equivalent) committees
- BGS (<https://www.student-registry.admin.cam.ac.uk/about-us/board-graduate-studies>) - Board of Graduate Studies
- OSCCA (<https://www.academic.admin.cam.ac.uk/education/student-operations/office-student-conduct-complaints-and-appeals-oscca>) - Officer of Student Conduct, Complaints and Appeals – In addition to formal complaints student can also file anonymous informal complaints.
- UCS (<https://www.counselling.cam.ac.uk/>) - University Counselling Service
- DRC (<https://www.disability.admin.cam.ac.uk/>) - Disability Resource Centre
- SAHA (<https://www.counselling.cam.ac.uk/sexual-assault-and-harassment-advisor>) - Sexual Assault and Harassment Advisor
- International Student Office (<https://www.iso.admin.cam.ac.uk/contact>)
- Careers Service (<https://www.careers.cam.ac.uk>)
- Child Care Office (<https://www.childcare.admin.cam.ac.uk>)
- Accommodation Service (<https://www.accommodation.cam.ac.uk>)
- SUAS (<https://www.studentadvice.cam.ac.uk/>) - Students' Unions' Advice Service

Postgraduate students are often more closely associated with their departments than their colleges. The lack of welfare provisions and support in departments is a matter of grave concern. To address this gap, The Graduate Union Council has passed a policy on 6 June 2019 to make welfare and wellbeing support systems in departments a priority.

As part of the GU Departmental Welfare campaign, we are lobbying for each faculty, department and school to appoint one academic as a point of contact for students who have welfare concerns. This individual will signpost relevant services to students. The former GU vice president Mritunjoy Guha Majundar was successful in working with the following departments to appoint a welfare point of contact for students: Cavendish Laboratory, Clinical Neurosciences (Addenbrookes), Mitochondrial Biological Unit of the MRC Laboratory of Molecular Biology. Moreover, the Institute of Astronomy, Department of Engineering and Department of Public Health and Primary Care that have expressed interest in appointing their own welfare contacts.

Changing the Culture of Ph.D. Supervisions

The GU has been lobbying to introduce a contract system for PhDs with the Pro Vice Chancellor, Board of Graduate Studies and Education Policy office. We have been successful in including a signature page in the Code of Practice 2018/2019. From October 2018, PhD students, their supervisor(s) and advisors are expected to read the Code of Practice (<https://www.cambridgestudents.cam.ac.uk/new-students/manage-your-student-information/graduate-students/code>) and sign their commitment to abide by it.

A Research and Resources Overview form is a tool to help set clear expectations about the PhD research between the supervisors and students. Supervisors are encouraged to fill this form together with their students. The form can be found [here](#).

An anonymous student feedback system on supervisors and supervisions has been developed. Students can provide anonymous reports to the Office of Student Conduct, Complaints and Appeals (OSCCA) (<http://www.studentcomplaints.admin.cam.ac.uk>). The collection of feedback will be shared periodically with relevant Departments or Faculties.

Rights of academics as members of staff

Many postgraduate students are also employed in various capacities by the University and College during their course of study. We have been working on the GU-UCU 'Raise the Bar' initiative on anti-casualisation.

We are lobbying University bodies on all fronts of postgraduate welfare such as, working hours, conflict resolution mechanisms, intermission and extension provisions, maternity and paternity leave, data ethics, fieldwork practices, vacation, and sick leave.

The Graduate Union's ongoing work

Supervisor Training

One of the biggest areas of concern for postgraduate students is their relationship with their supervisor. Breakdown of relationships with the supervisor can lead to mental health concerns, career hurdles and general obstacles to student well-being. We believe one of many methods to build good student-supervisor relationship is by better training supervisors. We believe the University must implement mandatory supervisor training to communicate a basic standard of conduct expected from all supervisors. We currently envision this training as an introductory online course developed by the Education Services, in collaboration with the Graduate Union, Departments, Faculties and Schools, and the Researcher Development Programme (RDP). We believe refresher training courses also need to be administered for more experienced supervisors. You can read our petition to the university's vice chancellor asking for mandatory supervisor training [here](#).

Petition for Mandatory Postgraduate Supervisor Training

Dear Vice Chancellor,

Bad supervision leads to mental health concerns, career hurdles and general obstacles to student well-being among members of the University, as has been seen from our Graduate Union Mental Health Report and other student consultations.

We believe that the problems faced by postgraduate students, when it comes to supervision, can be addressed by better training of supervisors. We believe that it is the responsibility of the University to facilitate the academic welfare of its research students, and it is the right of all those who come to the University of Cambridge to have a reasonable and positive experience with these supervisions, since this not only affects their current projects but also potentially their subsequent research careers. Bad supervision has been seen to affect the mental health of students across the board.

While the University of Cambridge has laid emphasis on good supervisions practices, it has shown reluctance to make training for supervisors mandatory, as is standard practice at a number of other Universities.

Training would not solve all the problems with student-supervisor relations. The power dynamic between research students and their supervisors remains troubling, and the channels for reporting and resolving unacceptable behaviour are still inadequate. But until there is a clear and communicated basic standard for good supervision, we will not fix those other problems.

To solve the issues in their supervision of postgraduate students, the University must implement

Departmental Welfare