

# School of Biological Sciences: Taught Student Project Supervision Guidance

Version 4

## Background

Each year the School of Biological Sciences (SBS) hosts short research projects for various cohorts of students, including

- Summer interns (usually penultimate year UG students) (June-July)
- Honours project students (Jan-April)
- Taught MSc project students (May-July for SBS students)
- MSc students from other Schools (variable timeframe)
- Gujarat Biotechnology University (GBU) MSc project students (Feb-May)

Students are drawn to study in SBS's taught programmes in part due to the high prestige of the research carried out here. The research project (normally between 9- and 15-weeks duration) is the capstone to all SBS taught programmes and is often a highlight of students' experiences at our university. It provides practical experience of the research process and develops students' transferable skills (e.g. communication, cooperation and collaboration) as they learn to work effectively as part of a research team. Project students also diversify and enrich the research environment in SBS.

## Benefits and recognition

Beyond the possible benefits of generating additional data, experience of training and supporting taught students also directly benefits existing research group members;

- by developing transferable skills (e.g. in communication, people management, leadership and training, multitasking and time-management) that are essential for any future career, within or outside academia. Developing these skills provides a narrative for competency-based questions in interviews.
- to evidence professional practice in learning and teaching as part of accreditation schemes for teaching in higher education (e.g. Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice or an Edinburgh Teaching Award). Gaining accreditation of teaching and learning is increasingly important for academic careers.
- for PhD students to evidence Continuous Professional Development as part of the annual PhD review process.

Training and support of short student projects will also be acknowledged by the BTO in a Certificate of Participation, which can be used to support job applications.

## Responsibilities and guidelines

### Principal Investigators

**Principal Investigators (PIs)** in SBS are expected to take 2-3 students on average per year, across these student cohorts. PIs are responsible for designing student projects with a strong research component and in line with the learning outcomes for the research project course. Projects should be designed to be feasible within the constraints of: the time available for the project, the funds available (which vary

dependent on student cohort), the capacities of physical lab space (when relevant), and the agreement and commitment of any members of the PI's group required to support the project.

PIs are responsible for the supervision of their project students, all Health and Safety aspects of the project and all marking associated with the student's performance. Supervision includes regular and frequent meetings with the project student to guide the project, discussing the aims and experimental design, results and next steps and providing feedback on draft documents. For quality assurance reasons, marking, particularly of dissertations, should not be delegated. Nevertheless, other members of the group (such as PhD students, postdoctoral researchers, research assistants and technicians) can provide support for day-to-day tasks. While this can be informal *ad hoc* support, it may involve overseeing day-to-day activities, (e.g. experimental procedures) particularly in laboratory settings.

PIs should inform the **Biology Teaching Office (BTO)** of the names of all personnel significantly supporting each project, by completing the corresponding fields in the project proposal form. This is to ensure that everyone involved receives relevant course communications, invitations to student project talks and end-of-course celebration events, and acknowledgement at the end of the project through the Certificate of Participation.

#### PGR students

As part of their training, **postgraduate research (PGR) students** are expected to contribute to good lab culture, which includes supporting other research projects within the lab (e.g. taught student research projects) and sharing their knowledge and skills. PGR students, especially those pursuing PhDs, are encouraged to support taught student projects, but this is not compulsory. All taught student projects involving input from **PGR students** should be discussed and agreed ahead of time with the PGR student so that the project can be designed to align with the PGR student's own research questions, skills and expertise.

It is advisable for PhD students in their first or last year, as well as MSc by Research or MPhil students, to weigh the advantages and disadvantages of supporting a student project so they can ensure a balance between their involvement in student-facing activities and the critical phases of initiating their project or writing their thesis. Where PGR students are anticipated to support a project, their individual experience and competency must first be assessed by the PI.

PIs should ensure that the number of project students supported by a PGR student is safe and reasonable. In wet-lab projects, that would ordinarily translate to no more than one project student per PGR student. However, if the PGR student agrees, exceptions may be allowed where additional project students can be accommodated safely without materially increasing the oversight demands on the PGR student. Where concerns arise, these should be directed to the Graduate School Office ([grad.biol@ed.ac.uk](mailto:grad.biol@ed.ac.uk)) or the Health and Safety Team ([sbsafety@ed.ac.uk](mailto:sbsafety@ed.ac.uk)).

Where data generated by the project student are used in a thesis or publication, both the taught project and PGR students should be appropriately acknowledged. Authorship in publications should be offered where an individual's contribution meets [widely accepted authorship criteria](#). Both students should also be consulted if the work is deemed to have commercial relevance. The University policy on intellectual property [is available here](#) and staff at [Edinburgh Innovations](#) can provide further advice.

## Postdoctoral Researchers

**Postdoctoral researchers** and other staff who have previously co-supervised at least one student project with a SBS PI, and have the required-expertise, may design, propose, and supervise student research projects, provided this falls within the scope of their contracts with the University and has the approval of their PI. This may, for example, provide postdocs the opportunity to develop new and independent research ideas. When a postdoc submits their own project, their status as primary supervisor must be clearly recorded on the project proposal form. Postdoctoral researchers with less supervisory experience must first co-supervise a student research project with their PI.

In all cases of postdoc involvement in project supervision, PIs remain responsible for all Health and Safety aspects of the project. The maximum number of wet-lab project students supported by a postdoctoral researcher (either as primary or co-supervisor) should usually be limited to two, working on projects that are related to the postdoc's officially funded research. Exceptions may be appropriate where additional students can be accommodated safely and without materially increasing the postdoc's supervisory, training, or oversight workload.

Where a postdoctoral researcher has a teaching accreditation or has been undergoing teaching accreditation training, they can take on marking responsibilities, where this would provide a good learning opportunity. Prior approval should be sought from the relevant Programme Director and the BTO (also ensuring that the work can be acknowledged) and support and mentoring for marking offered in the initial years. Co-supervising postdoctoral researchers may advise on the marking of the student's lab performance, but the PI is ultimately responsible for the mark.

Postdoctoral researchers and other staff who take on primary or co-supervision of student research projects should receive appropriate recognition in publications/other outputs that incorporate any research data and results generated during the student project. They will also receive a Certificate of Participation issued by the BTO that will detail the level of their involvement and ideally feedback from the project students.

## Expected behaviours

All members of the university (students and staff) are expected to behave in a professional manner being punctual, reliable and showing respect for the people working with and around them, as well as local health and safety rules. **Project students** should usually only work in laboratories during normal working hours (between 9am and 5pm) and clearly communicate any part-time working arrangements and other course commitments to everyone involved in supporting their project. Project students must not engage in lone out-of-hours working in laboratories.

As standard practice, following the project allocation, an early meeting should be scheduled with all parties involved, so that the project plan can be tailored to the student's existing skills and interests, the expectations of all involved can be clarified, and any practical preparations can be made ahead of the student's start date.

## Questions and comments

- The Biology Teaching Organisation [bto@ed.ac.uk](mailto:bto@ed.ac.uk)
- SBS Health and Safety Team, [sbsafety@ed.ac.uk](mailto:sbsafety@ed.ac.uk)
- Graduate School Office, [grad.biol@ed.ac.uk](mailto:grad.biol@ed.ac.uk)

Version	Authors / input from	Changes	Date
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v1	Julia Richardson, Cei Abreu-Goodger, Gerben van Ooijen, Lindsey Singleton.		February 2025
v2	Julia Richardson, Tovah Shaw, Patricia Castro, Atlanta Cook and Raquel Arribas.	Additions to benefits and guidelines section, following input from project coordinators. Addition to define Supervision in page 2. Added section on PDRAs.	October 2025
v3	Hannah Raddings, Max Fairhurst, Kitty Clouston, Cristina Ponce; Annegret Honsbein	Suggested rephrasing and (AH) enhancement of PDRA section.	December 2025
V4	Eric Schirmer, SEC members	IP section reduced. Signposting to UoE Library's guidance on fair authorship. Modifications to allow exceptions to maximum number of supervised students.	May 2026