Trinity College Dublin
Coláiste na Tríonóide, Baile Átha Cliath
The University of Dublin

Navigating a conflict in the Supervisor - Research Student relationship

Conflict management

A degree of conflict at some point during the supervision process is common. The flowchart in Figure 1 outlines the steps that can be taken to navigate an issue that is a potential source of conflict for a research student and/or their supervisor.

The guidance document from the Postgraduate Advisory Service, *Advice for resolving conflicts between Supervisors and Students*, should be used to support meetings in which a potential conflict issue is being discussed.

Figure 1 outlines three types of approaches to navigating a potential conflict issue, as summarised below.

1. **Avail of mechanisms that are available as part of standard supervision to seek clarity on issues.**
   - Suggest that a Supervisor-Research Student Agreement is put in place, if one is not already in place.
   - Use an existing Supervisor-Research Student Agreement to re-confirm responsibilities.
   - Use time in normal meetings of the Thesis Committee to discuss a potential issue.
   - Thesis Committee meetings are encouraged to allow time for the Supervisor and Student to discuss their experience of the research process with the Thesis Committee without the other present in the room. This private time with the Thesis Committee is not a mandatory part of meetings.

2. **If a conflict issue is not resolved through standard supervision procedures, request advice from relevant persons in line with Figure 1.**
   - You can request advice from persons in Section 2 of Figure 1 without initiating a formal complaint.
   - Persons or committees you approach may be unable to provide advice if they feel that their input is not suited to the advice requested.

3. **If a conflict issue is not resolved through the steps in Sections 1 and 2 of Figure 1, formal complaint processes can be considered.**
   - The Student Complaints Form and associated procedure supports students to raise a complaint.
   - The Grievance Procedure supports staff to raise a complaint.
   - If the issue falls within the remit of the Dignity and Respect Policy, its procedures should be followed.

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1. Complete a Supervisor-Research Student Agreement[1] and review it regularly during supervision.

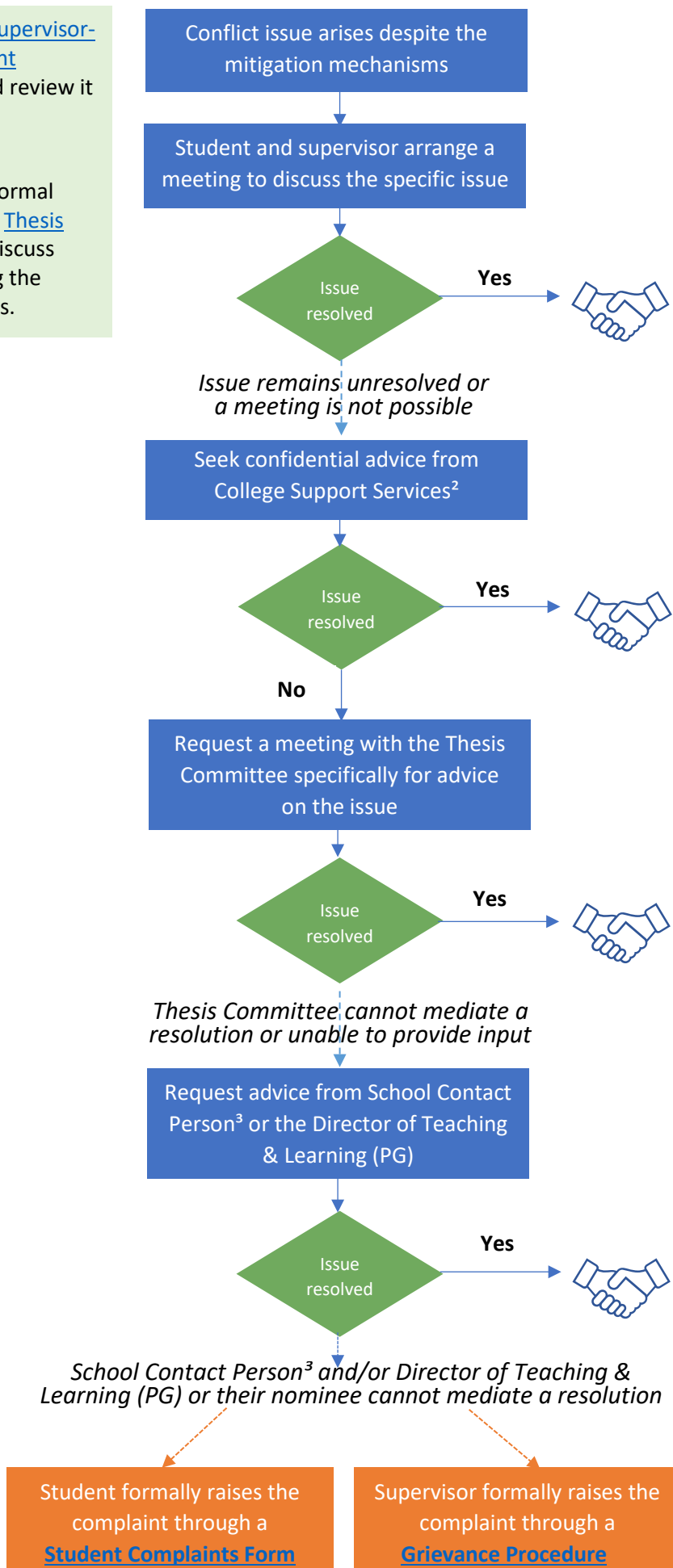2. Use time in normal meetings of the Thesis Committee to discuss factors affecting the research process.

Conflict issue arises despite the mitigation mechanisms

Student and supervisor arrange a meeting to discuss the specific issue

Issue resolved → **Yes** → 🤝

Issue remains unresolved or a meeting is not possible

Seek confidential advice from College Support Services[2]

Issue resolved → **Yes** → 🤝

No

Request a meeting with the Thesis Committee specifically for advice on the issue

Issue resolved → **Yes** → 🤝

Thesis Committee cannot mediate a resolution or unable to provide input

Request advice from School Contact Person[3] or the Director of Teaching & Learning (PG)

Issue resolved → **Yes** → 🤝

School Contact Person[3] and/or Director of Teaching & Learning (PG) or their nominee cannot mediate a resolution

Student formally raises the complaint through a **Student Complaints Form**

Supervisor formally raises the complaint through a **Grievance Procedure**

Figure 1. Recommended sequence of actions to navigate a conflict issue

[1]A formal Supervisor-Research Student Agreement is recommended practice but is not mandatory. If an agreement is not in place, it is advisable that normal supervisory meetings include time to review and clarify responsibilities and expectations in the supervisor-student relationship.

[2]College support services that can be contacted for confidential advice include:

- Postgraduate Advisory Service
- Student Counselling
- S2S Student Peer Support
- TCDSU Welfare and Equality
- Employee Assistance Programme (for supervisors)

Additional services for students are available on the College website. Additional services for staff are available on the College website.

If conflict arises in a relationship based primarily at a site external to the College (e.g., in a hospital setting), it might be more appropriate to contact the School Contact Person for advice (see No. 3 below).

[3]The School Contact Person varies by School. It can be the Dignity and Respect Officer, and, in many cases, it is the Director or Associate Director of Teaching and Learning (Postgraduate). The details of the School Contact Person can be obtained from your School Manager.