

Guaranteed Transitional Support for Changing Advisors

Updated July 2021

The following list of FAQs aims to provide additional guidance and information for students considering or in the process of changing advisors under the Guaranteed Transitional Support program. The questions themselves were provided by the GAME Advising Working Group (AWG) and all answers were provided by the Graduate Officer in consultation with department leadership.

Transition Period (i.e. Period without a new advisor):

1 What happens if I can't find a new advisor before leaving my old advisor? What if there is a period of time that I do not have an advisor?

If possible, an orderly transition to a new advisor without a gap in between is highly recommended. If you do not have an advisor during the transition, a temporary advisor will be assigned by the department.

2 Is there transitional funding available for me from MechE or MIT?

Yes. See answers to Q7-Q12 below.

3 If my funding is not yet finalized with my new advisor, can I TA MechE classes?

MechE students are normally eligible for TA positions in MechE classes. Your support may be in the form of such a TA. You should submit the TA application form as per the email sent to all graduate students. If funding need cannot be met by regular TA appointments, contact the Transitional Support Coordinator (TSC) for alternative funding arrangements.

4 Beyond TA'ing, what are my other funding options?

You may be eligible for a Research Assistantship or Fellowship (external or internal to the department).

5 I am applying to fellowships, is there someone besides my past advisor that can write a letter for me?

When deciding who to request a letter from, try to identify someone who is sufficiently familiar with you and your work to provide a meaningful recommendation. Examples may include faculty who have had you in their classes, have served on your thesis committee, you have been a TA for, or you

have otherwise collaborated with in any other way.

6 If I have a period without an advisor, who approves my registration and “advocates” for me at the qualifying exam?

The temporary advisor assigned by the department (see answer to Q1).

Guaranteed Transitional Funding:

7 Who should a student contact to get transitional funding? What does the process look like?

The Department has a Transitional Support Coordinator (TSC). Currently, it is the Graduate Officer (Nicolas Hadjiconstantinou). All queries should be directed to this person; the TSC will keep these discussions private, although there may be times when the TSC is required to share information with a limited number of people (e.g. a report of sexual harassment, a concern about your safety or wellbeing). See the MIT [IDHR website](#) for details. If the TSC is obligated to connect you with IDHR, that office will reach out to you with information about your IDHR options but you are not required to respond or participate in any IDHR process.

The Office of Graduate Education is an additional resource for students considering changing research groups and can be reached at GradSupport@mit.edu. Note that transitional funding is provided by the Department.

8 How many semesters of funding are provided/available through this?

Normally 1 semester.

9 Under what circumstances would a request for funding be denied? (e.g. limit on number of changes, reason for leaving advisor)

Currently funding is available for cases where a student reports an unhealthy advising environment, i.e. an advising situation that the student believes is detrimental to their well-being through no fault of their own, such as a perception of bias, harassment or discrimination; see the [OGE website on guaranteed transitional support](#).

10 When should a student apply for funding? Before leaving an advisor? After?

You need to contact the TSC as soon as you are seriously contemplating a move. The TSC can help with many other questions beyond funding, such as

suggesting possible alternative advisors, Institute resources, transition logistics, etc.

11 Is my advisor notified of my request for funding? If so, when?

All preliminary discussions are private with the exception of issues for which the TSC may be required to share information as described in Q7. If the TSC is obligated to connect you with IDHR, that office will reach out to you with information about your IDHR options but you are not required to respond or participate in any IDHR process.

The student can notify the advisor when they have decided to move.

12 What if I find a new advisor but they do not have an RAship available, can I get transitional funding?

Yes. Funding is not only for looking for a new advisor. It is also for helping the transition in case the new advisor does not have funding. However, it will be important to verify with the new advisor that funding will be available after the transitional support semester.

Finding a New Advisor:

13 Can I choose a new advisor in any given department? If my (new) advisor is from outside the department, what MechE policies must I satisfy?

Students are free to work in any department, as long as they can produce a thesis that will satisfy the MechE degree requirements. Students working with an advisor outside the department satisfy the same (all) degree requirements as students working with an advisor in the department. These requirements can be found in the [official Grad Guide](#).

14 How do I talk to new advisors without letting my old advisor know? Or should I let them know?

You can ask the prospective new advisor to keep this information private, while at the preliminary stage. You can explain your situation and ask them to contact the TSC if they have any questions or need someone to vouch for you.

15 What if a potential new advisor does not have an RA-ship for me? Can I TA MechE classes?

Yes. And if your move qualifies as described in Q7-Q12 above, some form of funding will be guaranteed by the department. However, an important consideration when selecting a new advisor is whether long-term funding will be available after the transitional support semester.

Retaliation:

16 Should I be worried about retaliation from my old advisor?

No. Retaliation has no place at MIT. The TSC will oversee the transition and will report any evidence of retaliation to the appropriate office at MIT. For details, see MIT's [policy on non-retaliation](#).

17 I'm finishing up my Master's thesis and I'm afraid that if I tell my advisor I'm leaving, they will not sign my thesis. Is there any protection from this?

See answer to Q16.

Timing Logistics:

18 When do I need to tell my advisor that I am leaving? When should I tell my advisor?

When you are sure that you will be leaving.

19 If I take the quals after switching advisors, can/will I present research from my old advisor?

Yes, you can present research that you did with your old advisor if you like.

20 If I take quals after switching advisors, can/will my old advisor be present during the quals presentation? During the faculty deliberation?

Personal issues have no place in the qualifying examination and associated faculty deliberation. Your old advisor may be present at your subject quals or research quals presentation depending on the topic of the exams. If you are presenting the work you did together, your advisor will not be allowed to participate in any way in the research exam. If you have any concerns you should let the Graduate Officer know before the exams, so that appropriate arrangements can be made.

Your old advisor will be present at the faculty deliberation. The role of the deliberation by the whole faculty body is to protect you from a small number of

faculty (the advisor) making these important decisions.

21 If I take quals without a new advisor, who will “advocate” for me?

The temporary advisor assigned by the department (see answer to Q1)

22 Should I wait to take the quals until I have an advisor?

This will very much depend on the situation (including the timing of your admission to the PhD program) and is best discussed with the TSC.

23 I’m worried changing labs will make it take too long for me to graduate. Is it too late for me to change? [When does it make sense to just finish and leave vs switch to a new lab and start fresh?]

Changing advisors may prolong your timeline. See answers to Q25 below for more details.

24 Does my PhD timeline get affected by changing advisors?

Yes, your PhD timeline may be impacted by changing advisors.

a. Will my previous research with my old advisor count towards my progress towards my degree/thesis?

In general no. Unless a special agreement/situation is in place, a new advisor will usually mean a new thesis.

In the majority of cases, a particular thesis topic is defined by the research interests and expertise of the faculty member who secured the research funding for the work. Finding another faculty member with similar interests, expertise *and* funding for the same type of work such that the thesis continues uninterrupted is very unlikely.

In general, the work performed under the supervision of the old advisor cannot be put in a thesis to be signed by you and a different advisor.

b. Is there a minimum amount of time you need to spend with a new advisor before defending/getting your PhD?

Defending your PhD is at the discretion of your thesis committee. Defending will therefore require forming a committee (after passing the quals) on the new subject and satisfying the members that sufficient progress has been made to merit the award of a PhD in the topic.

c. How do I communicate my desirable timeline with my new advisor? Or understand their expectations?

This is very important and will need to be done up front and very clearly. It may be an important consideration in whether the advisor change is feasible. The TSC can assist you in preparing for this and other critical transition-related conversations.

25 I want to change labs, but I'm still considering staying in my original lab. Is there help for me to discuss this option with my advisor?

The TSC may be able to advise you on how to bring the subject up and think through the options.

The Office of Graduate Education is an additional resource for students considering changing research groups and can be reached at GradSupport@mit.edu. Note that transitional funding is provided by the Department.

26 Are there any departmental requirements/logistics that I should be aware of when changing advisors?

Those will depend on the case and will be taken care of with the help of the TSC and/or the department Graduate Office.

Department

27 Who can I contact if I have questions not on this list?

The TSC (currently Graduate Officer).

Additionally, the Office of Graduate Education is a resource for students considering changing research groups and can be reached at GradSupport@mit.edu. Note that transitional funding is provided by the Department.