

Managing Supervision for Postgraduate Research students



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The student-supervisor relationship is a vital component of successful postgraduate research. It is a relationship that is built on mutual responsibility, professionalism, trust, and strong communication. Functioning properly, this relationship should provide guidance and advice to keep you on course as required, but will also encourage your independent development.

Students must be proactive and responsible in managing this relationship and taking steps to ensure that it becomes, and remains, productive. This can seem a little daunting at first! This leaflet provides an introduction into developing and maintaining a healthy relationship with your supervisor from the outset. It is also recommended that you read Policy on Supervision for Postgraduate Research Degrees which sets out your responsibilities along with those of your supervisor, supervisory team and advisor.

Most PhD degrees last for at least 3 years of full-time study. Over such a substantial amount of time even the most well-managed, solid student-supervisor relationship may encounter difficulties or misunderstandings at some stage. It is essential that the student takes ownership and addresses any problems, regardless of how they arise and whatever they involve.

The way in which you go about resolving an issue will depend on the particular circumstances you encounter, so it is important that you are aware of your options in terms of what you can do and who you can speak to if things start to go wrong.

Communication

It is vital that you are honest and realistic with your supervisor at all times.

This can feel a little frightening at first but you will soon get used to it. Breakdowns in communication between you and your supervisor invariably lead to problems. Causes of poor communication include:

- Seniority – students can feel intimidated by the reputation or seniority of their supervisor, leading to anxiety and a breakdown in effective and honest dialogue. (“I don’t agree with the advice I’ve been given, but how can I disagree with a Professor who’s an expert in their field?”)
- Cultural differences – poor communication often arises when international students struggle to appreciate and adapt to the UK’s academic culture and the expectations of the student and supervisor. (“It’s not appropriate to mention a personal problem affecting my academic progress to my supervisor”)



- Concern about how the supervisor will react – students might not suggest improvements to working practices or discuss academic issues if they worry that to do so would be seen as questioning their supervisor's authority. ("I work better when given strict deadlines, but my supervisor is very relaxed. He'll think I'm not independent enough if I mention this")
- Embarrassment or a lack of self-confidence. ("Am I supposed to know this already?")

These inhibitions can lead to problems remaining unresolved and becoming increasingly serious, as in these examples:

Case Study 1:

Xian is working towards a deadline when he has an unexpected family emergency and is unable to work on his PhD for a period of time. He doesn't want to bother his supervisor and is reluctant to discuss his personal problems. Eventually, he misses the deadline. Xian's supervisor questions his professionalism and begins to doubt whether Xian is capable of completing a PhD within a permissible timeframe. However, Xian's supervisor would have been prepared to renegotiate the deadline had Xian informed him about the family emergency at the time it arose.

Case Study 2:

Amy attends a meeting with her supervisor at which her work is criticised. She leaves with no clear idea of how to rectify the problems highlighted, but does not reveal her uncertainty to her supervisor as she is worried about appearing stupid. At the next meeting Amy's supervisor becomes frustrated as Amy's work hasn't improved. This situation would have been avoided had Amy overcome her fears in the first meeting, asked her supervisor to clarify their criticism and discussed how she might begin to resolve the problems identified. This would have made the first meeting more productive for both parties and led to a more honest and trusting relationship.

Although the student will always remain the junior member of any student-supervisor pairing, effective communication with your supervisor encourages your professional relationship to develop a healthy spirit of teamwork and collaboration as opposed to a strict hierarchy.

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Meetings

- At the outset, you and your supervisor should agree on how frequently you will meet: this will be determined by the nature of the research that is undertaken, but in normal circumstances students should expect to meet with their supervisors at least once a month.
- Even if you see your supervisor on a daily basis, it is worthwhile to establish a routine of regular, formal meetings at which you can review your progress and identify future objectives. Periodic formal meetings will encourage you to consider how your current work contributes to broader long term goals.
- Some students find it helpful to prepare an agenda before each meeting, as well as sending their supervisor work/research/data that they wish to discuss beforehand. This ensures that meetings are more productive and efficient for both parties.
- Utilise the online forms on eProg (www.eprog.manchester.ac.uk) to summarise what was discussed and agreed at each meeting to avoid misunderstandings with your supervisor.
- At the end of each meeting agree a date and time for the next one. Supervisors generally have a lot of demands on their time so it is important to plan meetings well in advance.

Where can I get more help?

If you are worried about your relationship with your supervisor, it's important that you talk to someone. There are a number of people you can approach:

- 1. Your supervisor:** obviously this depends on the circumstances, but many students find that the most productive way to overcome an issue is to talk honestly about it with their supervisor.
- 2. Within your School:** another member of your supervisory team (a co-supervisor or an advisor) or the Director of Postgraduate Studies or a PG Tutor might be able to address any problems you are having and make suggestions about how you can move forward.
- 3. The Student Guidance Service:** This service offers independent, confidential information and guidance. Here you can discuss your situation and the possible steps you can take to resolve whatever issues you raise. You can contact the Student Guidance Service at www.manchester.ac.uk/sgs.

For more information about Managing Supervision please visit www.manchester.ac.uk/sgs.

Written by Alex Drury in association with the Student Guidance Service, the Office of Student Support and Services and the Graduate Administrators Group for The University of Manchester.