Student-Supervisor Relations

Graduate Training Seminar
18/10/2018

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nature of the relationship: roles and responsibilities
Gatfield’s Paradigm of Supervisory Styles

- High support
  - Pastoral
  - Contractual
- Low support
  - Laissez-faire
  - Directional

There are different types of relationships - all can be satisfactory.

Some responsibilities

**STUDENT**
- follow regulations and agreements (e.g. meet deadlines)
- keep supervisor(s) informed about progress of research
- give serious considerations to advice, criticism, feedback
- inform supervisor(s) about anything that might affect progress

**SUPERVISOR**
- provide guidance on research-related issues
- respond in a timely manner
- acknowledge student’s unique needs
- ensure a safe research environment
- advice student on career options and opportunities
- assist those seeking employment (e.g. reference letters)
- communicate regularly
- discuss roles, responsibilities, and expectations
- prepare a research plan
- identify barriers to academic success
- be informed on univ. and dep. policies

adapted from Ashley Quan, Queen’s University
Supervision and Termly Reporting

IN THIS SECTION

Introduction

Key people

Supervision and Termly Reporting

Your rights and responsibilities

Progression and Key Milestones

Extensions and Suspensions

This section includes important and essential information for completing your graduate supervision reports via the Graduate Reporting System (GSR), a Project Initiation Plan for you to use to ensure you have a clear plan for your project, and also provides information on yours and your supervisor's responsibilities.
potential conflicts
seems familiar?

AVERAGE TIME SPENT COMPOSING ONE E-MAIL

PROFESSORS: 1.3 SECONDS

YES.  
(SEND)

DO IT.  
(SEND)

SEE ATTACHED.  
(SEND)

NO.  
(SEND)

GRAD STUDENTS: 1.3 DAYS

DEAR (?) PROF. SMITH,
I WAS WONDERING IF PERHAPS YOU MIGHT HAVE POSSIBLY GOTTEN THE CHANCE TO POTENTIALLY FIND THE TIME TO MAYBE LOOK AT THE DRAFT PAPER THAT I TOOK ATTACHMENT (IN JUST CASE). I THINK I AM ATTACHMENT. IF YOU DON'T HAVE ANY Q's OR WHATSO, PLEASE DON'T HESITATE TO...
perceived mismatch in priorities can lead to conflicts
Potential conflicts

- asymmetries in the supervisory relationship
  e.g.: power asymmetry, asymmetric dependency, different benefits
- frustration about expectations not being met
  supervisor is expected to play multiple roles (PI, advisor, “friend”, ...)
- relationship changes
  students become more independent
- severe conflicts
  e.g.: intellectual property rights, harassment
Potential conflicts: The supervisor’s perspective

What, in your experience, is the most common cause(s) of problems in student-supervisor relations?
Potential conflicts: The supervisor’s perspective

What, in your experience, is the most common cause(s) of problems in student-supervisor relations?
avoiding and solving conflicts: communication
“Yeah, not bad, getting there.”

TRANSLATION

Life is falling apart.
Good communication is essential

- meet regularly and set a specific agenda
- discuss expectations and try to reach an agreement
- be open about any circumstances that affect your progress
- set realistic deadlines (both ways)
- request feedback very specifically
- keep everyone updated
when things do go wrong:
departmental points of advice
your supervision concerns and questions

↓

**read** graduate supervision guidelines

↓

**try** to work it out directly with your supervisor(s)

↓

**consult** with other students, independent advisors

↓

**seek help** from director of graduate studies
your supervision concerns and questions

↓

read graduate supervision guidelines

↓

try to work it out directly with your supervisor(s)

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seek help from director of graduate studies
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read graduate supervision guidelines
try to work it out directly with your supervisor(s)
↓
consult with other students, independent advisors
↓
seek help from director of graduate studies

You might also want to talk to:
Assessors at transfer of status

Departmental Harassment Officers
Sunetra Gupta  Tom Pizzari  Stu West

Head of Department
Ben Sheldon
fictive examples
Sarah gave her supervisor a copy of her literature review for feedback two months ago and is getting frustrated by the long delay. What should she do?

**Scenario 1**

Some Thoughts

- polite reminder and asking for an expected completion time
- send the document along again, it might have gotten buried in the supervisor’s inbox
Scenario 2

Tom and his supervisor discuss a new experiment during Tom’s final year. Tom is unsure of the feasibility of the set-up his supervisor suggested, but spends several weeks trying to make it work. Given the apparent waste of time with the experiment, Tom begins to feel troubled about the project. What should he do?

Some Thoughts

- don’t confuse suggestions with non-negotiable directions
- seek discussion and raise concerns: be self-confident about your knowledge of the study system and explain why the suggested method might not be suitable
- run a small-scale pilot study
- recognise that failure experiments are common in science
• **Expect disagreements**  
Most students have some problems with the relationship with their supervisor at some point.

• **Take a proactive approach**  
Advising goes both ways, i.e. if you think you’re not getting the guidance you require, you must address the deficiencies.

• **Good communication is essential**  
The more you communicate honestly, the better aligned your expectations will be, thus avoiding frustration.

• **Have mutual respect for each other**  
Ultimately, you’re aiming for a collaborative relationship with your supervisor by the end of your PhD.
further resources
Checklist for planning first meetings with a new DPhil student

Use this checklist to plan what to discuss in initial meetings with a new DPhil student in light of what you hope to achieve over the long term.

___ Explain the goals for meetings and clarify how confidentiality should be handled
___ Discuss what each of you perceives as the boundaries of the supervisory relationship
___ Review the student’s current experience and qualifications
___ Discuss and record the student’s immediate and long-term goals
___ Explore useful professional development experiences in view of these goals
___ Record these (or ask the student to) as a professional development plan
___ Discuss and record any issues that may affect the supervisory relationship such as time, financial constraints, lack of confidence, or newness to the role, etc.
___ Arrange a meeting schedule with your student. Clarify how meetings will be documented.
___ Record topics discussed and feedback given at each meeting (or ask student to do so – see “meeting minutes” idea)
___ Ensure that meeting records are kept confidential and in a safe place
___ Discuss activities beyond the research project which could form part of your supervisory relationship, e.g.
   • Providing advice on teaching
   • Opportunity for work shadowing
   • Availability to consult on issues or concerns the student has with colleagues in study or research groups
   • Consulting on career opportunities
   • Other ___________________________
___ Create a provisional action plan (or ask the student to) that reflects institutional requirements, intermediate goals to achieve them (and any pertinent professional development needs)
___ Agree on schedule to review and amend the action plan as needed
A toolkit for managing multiple (busy) supervisors

20/6/2018  0 Comments

The science we do is becoming increasingly interdisciplinary as we grapple with big questions requiring diverse expertise. This is having an impact on the make-up of PhD supervisory committees, with large supervisory committees increasingly becoming the norm.

My PhD spanned the fields of animal behaviour, parasitology, immunology and epidemiological modelling and involved a mix of field, lab and modelling work. This diversity was represented in my supervisory committee; two modellers, a parasitologist and two ecologists split between two institutions (and three locations). On top of this, four of my supervisors were busy professors.

Now a postdoc, I realise that this experience played a key role in shaping me as an independent researcher. It drove me to take a wider view of my research, and to develop additional skills which have proven to be invaluable in my research career so far (e.g. project and people management). Of course, there were also many challenges along the way, but in this blog post, I hope to provide some practical suggestions for overcoming (or even better avoiding) some of these, and making the most of your many supervisors:

Make sure you have a main supervisor
As the number of supervisors increases, the division of responsibility amongst them becomes more complex. The danger is, that the lines of responsibility become blurred and, you, the student fall through the gaps. To avoid this, ensure that your project has a main supervisor appointed, a person you can touch base with on a regular basis and assess whether your project is going in the direction you want it to go. They will be particularly important at the start of your PhD when you are still finding your feet and the many voices around you will feel overwhelming. As you move through your PhD, you will need this person’s support less.

Plan your supervisory meetings carefully
This may sound mundane, but I think this is probably the most valuable piece of advice I can give you. As a PhD student with five (busy) supervisors, I learnt that the way to get the best out of them was to hold formal meetings which were scheduled well in advance, and followed up by brief minutes, including clear action points.

It is important to direct the discussion with an agenda and chair the meeting around this. Having many supervisors surrounding you, all with their own strong opinions, can be intimidating at first. The discussion can quite easily become