

Before you start

Good supervision starts before the supervision starts at all. There are a number of questions you should ask yourself before you take on a student.

About you

Time?

Do I have the time? If you take the student on there is an implicit expectation that you will make time for meetings, reading drafts and sorting out issues.

Absences?

Will I be absent for a significant period? For example a sabbatical or study leave? Is it realistic to take on a student and then leave them for an extended period? Are there suitable alternative sources of supervision during your absence?

Expertise?

Do I have sufficient expertise in the area? If not this will cause concerns for the student later. Do you have time to develop the expertise?

Interest?

Are you interested in the area? If not then you will create a lot of extra work for yourself.

Resources?

Do you or the department have the necessary resources to carry out the research?

About the student

Compatibility?

Will you be compatible? Some people just find it hard to work together. You will be with this person for the next 3-4 years.

Capacity?

Do you think this student has the capacity (intellectual or circumstances) to complete a PhD. This is very hard to know at the start (usually much easier after two years but then it's a bit late!) If you have concerns then do some background work. Ask questions. Look at previous work.

Commitment?

Doing a PhD takes a lot of time and energy and ideally self-management. Do you think this student will be able to persist when things go wrong, when they encounter setbacks? It would be good if they started off with some enthusiasm because it will likely be tested along the way.

Finding students

You can wait until students find you. This does leave it a bit up to chance. It depends on who happens to come along. Your chances of success are greater if you take a more active approach.

Publicise your potential projects

Approach potential students

Grow your own PhD student. Most academics have access to a pool of potential research students. These are your undergraduates. In every group there will probably be someone who could potentially go on to a PhD. Growing your own means fostering their interest and providing opportunities. Growing your own takes time but greatly increases the chances of a successful supervision.

The Supervisory Team

Almost always there will be more than one person involved in the supervision. There are some questions you should consider when putting together the team.

Compatibility?

You don't have to love each other but you do need to be able to work together.

The role of each person?

Who is the primary supervisor? What roles do the others play? How active are they expected to be?

Meetings?

Will all supervisors be at every meeting? If not who should attend? How will those who don't attend be kept up to date?

Feedback?

Do all supervisors provide feedback? What does the student do if there is conflicting feedback?

Decisions?

How will decisions be reached? Does everyone have to agree? Who has the final decision?

Disagreements?

How will major disagreements be resolved? It is unreasonable to expect the student to resolve major issues between supervisors.

The Changing Relationship

Over the course of a PhD the relationship between the supervisor and the student will change. At the start of the Ph.D. the supervisor will have much more content knowledge than the student. You will also know more about the requirements of the Ph.D. and the type of academic writing required. Most students come to a Ph.D. with very little understanding of any of these issues.

This means that at the start you will need to take a more directive and hands on approach.

As the Ph.D. progresses the student should develop more confidence and be able to take more ownership. There should be able to take more decisions and work more independently.

Towards the end of the Ph.D. the student should be working quite independently. At this stage they will probably know more about the topic than you do. At this stage your contribution is about making sure the work is at the standard of Ph.D. and providing support through the writing process.



Meetings

Effective meetings are a central part of good supervision.

How often?

Because each situation can be different it's hard to give exact rules about how often you should meet. But there are some guidelines. You should meet frequently at the start of the Ph.D. At this stage the student probably doesn't know much about what is involved and where to start. So at this stage you should meet frequently, perhaps weekly, and you can be quite directive.

As the student shows that they can work independently you may decide to meet less frequently, perhaps once every two or three weeks.

At critical times in the PhD, for example complicated analysis and the write-up period it's probably useful to go back to more frequent meetings.

Types of meetings

Face-to-face meetings are probably the ideal but there are several of the ways you can meet.

Skype meetings

Telephone meetings

Group meetings

Email meetings

An Agenda

A simple agenda is useful to help keep meetings on track. For example:

1. What have you done since the last meeting
2. Questions or issues
3. Feedback
4. What will you do before the next meeting
5. The next thing
6. The next meeting

Writing

Academic writing is a complicated skill. It takes time to learn. So get your student writing as early as possible. This is useful to help your student establish a good writing routine, but even more importantly it helps you assess the standard of their writing. If they have problems with the writing you need to know this as early as possible. If they do have problems start organising writing support.

Types of writing?

It's unreasonable to expect your student to be an accomplished writer from day one. So there will be several levels of writing.

notes

early drafts

brief summaries of the literature

seminar presentations

conference posters

academic papers

chapters

First Annual Review

It is essential that you take the first annual review of progress very seriously. If there are issues they must be addressed at this stage. If you don't deal with them at this review point the problems will become much more serious later. If you don't say anything at this point the student is reasonably entitled to assume everything is going OK.

Plan B

In an ideal world our planned research will proceed smoothly, the student will get usable data and to be able to write up their thesis. Unfortunately research isn't like that. We don't know the answer before we start. Things often go wrong. In reality minor setbacks are par for the course. However sometimes major problems emerge. Experiments don't work. Participants don't participate. Industry partners go out of business. These problems can endanger students whole Ph.D.

One of your roles as a supervisor is to have a Plan B. What can the student do if plan A doesn't work.

Good Feedback

Whenever someone asks me to provide feedback on their work my first question is “What kind of feedback do you want?” Do you want me to tick and flick? Do you want me to comment on the overall structure or argument? Do you want me to check the spelling? It’s a bit more complicated than just “Here’s my chapter. Give me feedback”. So here are some aspects of feedback to get you thinking.

1. What type of feedback do you want?

Here’s just a sample of the types of feedback you could provide

- Spell checking and proof-reading
- Checking facts and references for accuracy
- Commenting on argument and logic
- Level of critical thinking
- Structure and flow
- Style
- What’s missing

When you give feedback are you doing all of the above at once? Or do you separate them out? How?

2. Feedback can be positive

As academics and researchers we are trained to be critical, to look for the flaws in arguments; to find inconsistencies. However this leads to a tendency to assume feedback must be negative. The reality of course is that people can learn just as much from positive feedback: for example telling a student “The way you expressed that idea is really good”. “I like the way you’ve structured your argument here”. And the good news is that as well as being effective people like getting good feedback!

How much positive feedback do you give?

3. Feedback for the Stages

Supervisors often treat PhD students as though they were fully formed right from the start. But doing a PhD is a learning process. So the type of feedback you give at the start needs to be different from the feedback you’ll give to the final thesis.

How does your feedback vary over the stages?

4. The Person v The Thesis

When you write “This isn’t good enough” you think you are commenting on the thesis. What do you think the student sees when they look at that feedback? “I am not good enough”. Remember there is a person behind the words. (To help you empathise remember the last rejection letter you got!)

How do you react to negative feedback?

5. Timeliness

Feedback that comes three months after you’ve written something is too late. In most cases your head has moved on. To be most effective feedback needs to be close to when the work is done.

What is a reasonable turnaround time?

6. Can you be more specific?

Comments like

- “This needs work” or
- “Not at the standard” or
- “A bit unclear”

don’t help very much. In fact they probably lead to confusion. So, what type of work is needed, where is the standard, which piece is unclear and why.

How do you avoid spoon-feeding while still being specific?

Conclusion

So the next time someone asks you for feedback remember to ask them what type of feedback they want.

This article was a contribution to a practical guide for supervisors developed by the National Academy for Integration of Research, Teaching and Learning, Ireland, 2012.

Developing an institutional framework for supporting supervisors of research students.