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Overview of supervising

by Graham Gibbs, adapted by Chris Pegler

I'm looking forward to supervising final year projects but there don't seem to be any guidelines. My colleagues say things like 'play it by ear'. I've experienced quite a variety of styles of teaching but I've only ever experienced being supervised once, and I wouldn't want to replicate that, so I don't have a lot to go on.

I've noticed that some of the lecturers have very few students to supervise and you can see why – they're never there and the students know that their doors are always locked. Others have a queue at their door practically all the time. I'd like to be able to supervise all my students properly but to keep the thing manageable.

With essays you set the question and then mark the work – you don't give help with drafts. With supervision you provide help at every stage but then suddenly turn round and become the examiner. I think I'll find that switch very difficult. It makes me feel ambivalent about being as helpful as I could.

Last term I realised I wasn't supervising the way my research students wanted, and what I was expecting of them wasn't happening either. We had to sit down and agree a deal about what were reasonable expectations of each other. It's working out much better now and we know what will happen in our meetings.

When students are out on placements they can have a great time and learn more than they do here, but they can also have a terrible time and learn damn all. I'm not their work supervisor but half a dozen of them are still my responsibility so I need to know what work-based supervisors get up to.

These observations identify some of the anxieties that may face you as you think about taking on the task of supervision. This part of the course addresses some of the questions that arise commonly in the context of supervision, in particular:

1. What is the role of the supervisor of projects and dissertations?
2. What problems will you be helping your students with?
3. How should supervision meetings be conducted?
4. What style of supervision is appropriate in the work place?
5. What functions does professional practice supervision serve?

Supervising academic study on campus

Supervision takes many forms in higher education. Probably the most common is the campus-based supervision of undergraduate dissertations or projects, or postgraduate dissertations. You may already be aware that postgraduate supervision has attracted attention following criticism from research councils of poor PhD completion rates, and criticisms in published reports on teaching quality. This adds to the pressure on supervisors to improve the experience and performance of the supervised student and we hope to give you ideas and techniques which will help you and your students.

Students have a range of expectations of their supervisors, some reasonable and some not. These expectations relate to different roles that supervisors perform, and these roles often change as the supervision progresses. The will use extracts come from a chapter by Atkins and Brown (1988) on the supervision of project and research students to look at the role of the supervisor, discuss the difficulties encountered by students undertaking extended research and suggest structures for supervision meeting to ensure that difficulties are identified and addressed.

Supervising work placements

Increasingly supervision also takes place off campus as students experience a period of work placement during their undergraduate studies, varying in length from a few weeks to a year at a time. Teachers may not directly supervise such students, though they may visit them from time to time. But they usually set up supervision in the work place and may be responsible, for example, for the quality of that supervision, for briefing the supervisor, or for meeting them from time to time to review the placement. Saxton and Ashworth (1990), summarises research based on visits to undergraduate business students in the work place. It outlines the different styles that supervisors had adopted, and their implications for students and their learning.

Professional supervision

Professional practice courses, such as nursing and social work, especially postgraduate ones, often involve supervision by someone who may not be the student's work place supervisor. This usually involves periodic meetings in which details of students' practice, such as encounters with colleagues, patients or school classrooms, are reviewed. Butler and Elliott (1985) is set in the context of social work training and identifies three main functions of such supervision: management, help and education. These three main functions are evident in almost all professional supervision contexts. Supervision techniques, however, vary widely in different professional contexts. Examples are provided of a range of possible techniques used in social work contexts, not as recommendations, but to widen perceptions of what supervision can be about.
Supervision of students on distant or overseas placements, such as during their year abroad on language courses, and supervision of groups of students, are addressed separately as the ‘Demonstrating’ section of this pack.

Handling the role of supervisor

Supervision is often the only time that teaching is one-to-one and that a long-term relationship is established with a student. This can be both enormously rewarding and very challenging. Differences between yourself and your student in terms of personality, beliefs, values, interests or working practices – which are largely hidden from view in large teaching groups – come to the fore in supervision. The relative equality of relationship, compared with conventional teaching, reduces your authority and challenges the easy dominance of your values and beliefs. Some supervisors choose to maintain their authority within a supervisory relationship, but this may limit both the scope for learning and for the growth of independence in the student.

We are in this section of the course particularly concerned with roles. What roles supervisors should perform, and in what balance. Unlike conventional teaching, the focus of learning during supervision is not on the teacher, but on the individual student's work and experience, which is largely outside the supervisor's experience or control. The starting point is what the student is doing, not what the teacher knows. As a result, the relationship between teacher and student is profoundly altered and many of the dilemmas of supervision concern the balance between challenge and support and between structure and freedom.

Establishing the parameters

Supervision is often undertaken in contexts where there is a very poor definition of what 'getting the job done' actually involves: what is supposed to be learned or what the product of supervised research should consist of. Responding to the changing expectations and needs of individual students within the limits of your own expertise and personal style as a teacher, and within the often ill-defined constraints and requirements of the doctorate or work place, is a subtle and interesting process.

Theory and evidence about supervision

Due in part to its varied nature supervision is a difficult subject to research and there has been less research about supervision than about many other aspects of teaching. The readings we use and refer to in this part of the course are largely descriptive and analytical about experiences of practice. Only a small proportion of the literature that we draw on is based either on interviews or on questionnaire surveys of students’ and supervisors’ opinions. We can therefore offer no empirical evidence that if you follow the advice given here your students will be more likely to complete their PhD on time, or more likely to learn more from a work placement. Nevertheless, the literature we refer to helps in conceptualising common experiences of supervision and guiding teaching decisions.

Finally, it is possible that your most recent and vivid student experience involved being supervised yourself. This unit aims to draw on your own experience of being supervised.

References


This part of the course is available online as a series of digital 'learning objects'. In arranging the content in this way, so that each short section can be accessed separately and (largely) independently, we hope to encourage flexible use of the material. Most of you will be involved in supervision of some sort during your teaching practice in Higher Education, although this may not currently be part of your remit. Some of you may have recently completed courses in Higher Education which required supervision and have strong ideas about what to take from this experience into your own practice.

We have distinguished - where relevant - between supervision at undergraduate and postgraduate level and also identified some topics of significance to workplace supervision. You may be interested and involved in all of these areas, only one or them, or none at all. Whichever is the case we hope that you will find what you need by browsing the sections of the website that interest them, picking and choosing amongst the topics here. Those of you who already have, or soon expect to have, a supervisory role may wish to dip into some sections immediately and perhaps repeatedly, printing out and using some of the checklists or plans, or downloading and adapting these to suit their personal preferences.

As emphasised in the overview for this part of the course the website is intended to be a flexible resource to suit your requirements. You are not required to read all the pages, or to follow a set sequence in your reading. How much or how little you use or refer to this material is a matter of personal preference or interest. This flexible approach to use is also supported in the other online sections of Pack 5.
Criticisms of research supervision expressed in the literature seem to lie in four main areas: that it is inefficient, inappropriate, fallible, and abused.

- The charge of **inefficiency** is levelled particularly at those subject areas where PhD completion rates are low, or where students seem to require considerably more than three years of full-time study to complete a PhD.

- The system is seen as **inappropriate** on two counts: it places more emphasis on the outdated workings of the individual scholar than on the relevant competencies of the team member; and it gives more importance to the end thesis than to the acquisition of research skills.

- **Fallibility** is alleged in the lack of agreed criteria or procedures for assessment including the absence of full appeal rights.

- **Abuse** is said to occur through negligent supervision and, more seriously, through the practice of using research students as unacknowledged assistants or as a cheap teaching force for the department.

Behind these criticisms lie some genuine divergences in perception of the nature and purpose of postgraduate research, especially research for a PhD. At least four basic tensions can be discerned. These are set out in Fig. 6.1.

On the one hand, there are those who believe that a PhD study should be a work of scholarship, making a valued contribution to a subject in terms of new knowledge or new conceptualizations. A thesis is entirely the student's work, the product of original and independent thought, the foundation for a lifetime's study. As such the research period is not unlike an apprenticeship during which the student acquires the skills of the craft and is socialized into the (academic) profession. It follows that the PhD is the proving ground for those seeking a lectureship.

On the other hand, the PhD can be seen as pre-eminently a period of training in which the student should acquire a wide repertoire of skills that can subsequently be used on other projects both within and without the academic world. The specific problem for the student to research is best defined as part of a larger collaborative project on which the student is a team member. The thesis will take the form of a report and may well make use of the work of other team members. The results (or product) obtained by the student are not seen as his or her exclusive property, but rather as a contribution to the team project. The student is likened to an employee on contract to the project rather than an apprentice to a 'master craftsman'. There is no assumption that the student will automatically proceed to a tenured post in higher education.

Depending on your position along these dimensions and their associated values ... it is likely that the experience of research students will differ quite significantly. The satisfactions and difficulties of the scholar may not be those of the team member. The former, for example, will probably be given a significant degree of choice over topic, methodology, and ideological context; the latter, little or none. The former may find difficulty in managing his or her own time effectively; the latter may find frustration in being tied to the timetable and priorities of the team project. The scholar can feel isolated; the trainee may find that daily contact is superficial.

It is possible to identify a variety of roles that you can take as supervisor. Some of these are set out in Figure 6.3.

Given the range of possible roles it is not, perhaps, surprising that differences in opinion can exist as to what the role of the supervisor should be (Welsh, 1979; Rudd, 1985). Areas of potential disagreement exist at every stage of a research study. For example there may initially be disagreement over the extent to which the selection of topic should be the supervisor’s or the student’s. Choice of theoretical framework can be similarly contested. Once under way, there may be differences in expectation over the frequency of meetings and over the amount of practical help offered. Finally, there can be a difference in view about responsibility for the standard of the work done, and over the extent of assistance which should be given in the writing-up stage. These differences in perception can exist between subject areas, between academic staff within a single department, and between an individual supervisor and his or her research student ...
Effective research and project supervision

Roles of the supervisor

Supervisors in different subject areas may perceive these relationships differently. Thus what may seem perfectly acceptable to some (e.g. master-servant) may carry overtones of exploitation to others.

Styles of supervision

Welsh (1979) found that both supervisors and research students saw the relationship in terms of professional and personal characteristics. The supervisor was expected to offer expertise, skill, experience. But a good supervisor was also seen as one who shared friendship and showed a concern for the personal well-being of the student. If we take the complementary dimensions of structured direction and friendliness, it is possible to plot different styles of supervision on a grid (see Figure 6.5).

The evidence on student preference (Welsh, 1979; Battersby and Battersby, 1980; Rudd, 1985) indicates that the least preferred style is the cold and free approach. However, too little structuring, even when combined with a warm, friendly manner, is not popular either. This style may be characterized as 'a really nice guy, but no bloody good as a supervisor'. Preferable to this is the supervisor who, while somewhat aloof, nevertheless provides direction and keeps the student on track. But the most popular style was the one which coupled personal warmth with professional guidance.

Students, like supervisors, may change their idea of what constitutes an ideal style of supervision during the course of their project. McAleese and Welsh (1983) found that in the first year of research good personal relationships were seen as important, but that 'expertise' and 'regular contact' were given increasingly greater importance in the second and third years. Second- and third-year research students tended to find the amount of supervisory contact they received inadequate.

The increasing importance which research students seem to attach to expert assistance helps to explain the findings on 'ideal' supervisors' characteristics also reported by McAleese and Welsh (1983). From a pre-specified list of characteristics, the four items which received the greatest endorsement from the students were: knowledgeable, available, helpful, stimulating. These characteristics corresponded closely with the 'ideal' characteristics described by the supervisors in the same study. They emphasized: helpfulness, subject expertise, personal experience, and availability. The degree of congruence is illuminating though we should note that 'availability' had a higher priority for the students.
H850 Codes of practice

by Graham Gibbs, adapted by Chris Pegler

Institutions often have 'codes of practice' or other formal guidelines for supervision. They may specify procedures for such milestones as annual reviews or transfer from MPhil to PhD and they may provide guidelines on monitoring, the expected frequency of meetings or maximum turn-around time for comments on drafts. You will need to find and familiarise yourself with such guidelines and discover from a colleague if they are implemented flexibly or not.

Activity: Decoding your code

Find a copy of your own code of practice on supervision and read it. This may be available on your institution's intranet.

Compare this with the Open University's code of practice published as part of its Research Degree Student Handbook, noting similarities and differences and trying to decide why these differences occur.

The Open University code makes explicit the responsibilities of the supervisor and the student. From your own code generate a similar lists of rights and responsibilities for student and supervisor.

Drawing on this list, consider two or three hypothetical cases which students or supervisors could find themselves in and where the code does not give a definitive answer. Decide how you would proceed in each case.

Seek advice from more experienced colleagues about their interpretation of how these cases would be treated in practice.
Most students' experience is of being taught rather than of being supervised. They probably have limited prior experience of independence as a student, of negotiation of topics or tasks and of sitting down with a teacher one-to-one. They nevertheless come to project or dissertation work with expectations. Phillips has identified the most common expectations students have of their supervisors (Phillips, 1987) and also the most common expectations supervisors have of their students (Phillips and Pugh, 1994). These are listed in the table below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Students expect their supervisors ...</th>
<th>Supervisors expect their students ...</th>
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<tr>
<td>... to supervise them</td>
<td>... to be independent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>... to read their work in advance, and thoroughly</td>
<td>... to produce written work that is not just a first draft</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>... to be available when needed</td>
<td>... to have regular meetings with them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>... to be friendly, open and supportive</td>
<td>... to be honest in reporting on their progress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>... to be constructively critical</td>
<td>... to be excited about their work, able to surprise them and fun to be with</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>... to have a good knowledge of the research area</td>
<td>... to follow the advice that they give, when it has been given at the request of the student.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>... to structure meetings so that it is easy to exchange ideas</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>... to have sufficient interest in their research to put new ideas in their path</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>... to be sufficiently involved in their success to help them to get a job afterwards.</td>
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Personally I feel quite comfortable with all the student expectations above except the one about being available when needed – because I know that I am unlikely to be as available as my student would like. I also suspect that my student would be unhappy to be expected to follow my advice, and that that might be a source of disagreement.

**Activity: Your students' expectations and your own**

1. Looking at the list decide which of the expectations for a supervisor would you feel comfortable accepting and responding to, and which do you think you would have to discuss and possibly reject? Assign a value to each expectation (ranging from 100% for fully accepting to 0% for totally rejecting.)
2. How could you prepare yourself to meet your student’s expectations, or improve your chances of meeting these?
3. Can you think of any different expectations that your students may have of you as a supervisor?
4. How might you be able to influence and perhaps alter the student’s expectations of the supervisor's role?
5. Which of the supervisors' expectations of students do you share, and what additional expectations do you have? Do your students know that you have these expectations?
H850: What is the role of the supervisor of projects and dissertations?

H850 Supervision roles and styles

by Graham Gibbs, adapted by Chris Pegler

‘Effective research and project supervision’ (Extract 1) is concerned with the different roles supervisors play, and different styles of supervision. The learning task a student is engaged in may be very different from any undertaken before – being much larger, more open-ended, more complex and more specialist – as well as undertaken over a much more extended time period. Consequently, the relationship between supervisor and student is different from that of teacher and student. As a supervisor, you need to perform not one role but many. You may need to begin by emphasising one role and then, over time, shift to another. For example, at the start of a supervision you might emphasise the roles labelled ‘director’ and ‘manager’ in Figure 6.3 in (Extract 1). In the middle section of your supervision, you might emphasise the roles of ‘guide’ and ‘supporter’ and towards the end you might shift role to that of ‘critic’ or ‘examiner’. These roles have a very different feel to them. At the outset your student may not be clear about what kind of relationship to expect and what kinds of role you will perform – especially if he or she has come fresh from a taught undergraduate course with relatively formal and distant relationships with their teachers. Once a research student has a PhD, he or she becomes, technically, a peer. Your supervision will frame this process of academic maturing from student to peer, as your roles and style shift over time.

Activity: Roles and relationships

The role that you adopt obviously has implications for the research student. A list of possible roles taken by the supervisor is shown here.

**Figure 6.4a Relationships between supervisor and student**

<table>
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<th>Student</th>
<th>Supervisor</th>
<th>Student</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Director</td>
<td>Auditor</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master</td>
<td>Editor</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guru</td>
<td>Counsellor</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doctor</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expert</td>
<td>Senior partner</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guide</td>
<td>Colleague</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project manager</td>
<td>Friend</td>
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</table>

1. For each of these roles decide what role the student would adopt in response.
2. Compare this with Figure 6.4b and consider any differences between the student roles that you and I have assumed in each case.
3. What key differences do you see in the type of relationship between supervisor and student playing these different roles? What sorts of difficulties and advantages do you envisage?

Different disciplines

There are significant differences between disciplines in the emphasis given to various supervision roles. For some disciplines it is a rigorous training, with an emphasis on learning to use specific advanced techniques, methodologies or equipment. Freedom to choose a topic is considered secondary and the student may work as part of a team with no choice over topic at all, and to a schedule determined by the team leader. Some may involve an initial period of one-to-one structured teaching, as this supervisor describes:

> Basically, first of all she had to learn some new mathematics so I gave her a good book that I like and basically got her to work through it, teaching herself the new techniques ... I then gave her perhaps fifteen papers to work through ... which then got her to the stage where she knew more or less what the problem was about ... And then we started to work on the problem itself.

(Pole et al., 1997, p. 55)

Other disciplines emphasise finding a personal research interest and learning to work as an autonomous scholar. Learning to use advanced methodologies may not be involved until a little way down the line, and extended periods of initial exploration – with considerable freedom regarding both topic and schedule – may be the norm. Supervisors need to understand these different emphases, which may be quite local and distinctive, if they are to adopt appropriate roles.

Activity: Supervisor roles

1. Read (Extract 1) if you have not already done so.
2. Go back to Figure 6.3 and think back to your own PhD or to any other academic project or dissertation work you have undertaken.
Which of the roles listed did your supervisor actually emphasise?

3. Although your supervisor may have had one overall style, the emphasis will have changed at different phases of your research. Using the 'time line' below, identify the different roles that were adopted by your supervisor at different phases of your research.

4. Start -------------------------------------------- Submission

5. Which roles would you have preferred your supervisor to have adopted to a greater extent, and at what stage?

6. In your own current supervision what roles do you find easiest or most natural to fulfil, and which might you need to work harder to fulfil?

7. Which would your students want you to emphasise?

In my own supervision I tend to emphasise the Advisor and Manager roles but I think those I supervise would prefer it if I emphasised the Supporter and Friend roles more. I am more task oriented than others sometimes feel comfortable with. In particular, I suspect that I push a task-orientated approach too early, before the students have explored their ideas enough.

Different levels of work

There are also differences between undergraduate project supervision and PhD supervision. Stefani et al. (1997) have studied the roles that supervisors prioritise in relation to undergraduate research work. These include several which might seem inappropriate at postgraduate level:

- 'teaching technical skills' and
- 'offering a lot of guidance and advice to less able students.'

Students undertaking these undergraduate projects also expected their tutors to perform more directive and supportive roles such as:

- 'explaining concepts and techniques'
- 'designing experiments'
- 'telling students how to write up their thesis' and
- 'defining the objectives and providing the initial sources of information'.

However, expectations that there will be a considerable degree of help may not be confined to undergraduates. This second-year doctoral student certainly expected more help than was provided:

[I expected] more specific knowledge in actually setting up the equipment, understanding the practicalities, understanding the, well really understanding the difficulties ... I was expecting more practical help in actually getting the project off the ground.

(Pole et al., 1997, p. 54)

It is clearly important to explain the roles you are intending to perform, and why you will not perform some that the students might expect.

While much of the focus of supervision in the examples above is on practical matters, it is also about power and authority. There may be strong local conventions about supervisory style, for example regarding the degree of friendship or equality considered appropriate in the supervisory relationship, or the extent to which a supervisor's decision is considered final. These are unlikely to be found in regulations but may operate as if they were formal rules. It is as well to ask colleagues what is considered normal, even if there is wide variation between individual supervisors.

Criticisms levelled at supervisors

Criticisms of supervision have been mentioned several times in Extract 1. This examines the nature and roots of this criticism and the roles which supervisors perform. It discusses the types of relationships possible between supervisor and student and the different styles which supervisors adopt and students' preferences for these styles.

Activity: Dimensions of supervisor style

Referring to Extract 1, use Figure 6.5 to illustrate the dimensions of supervisor style, plot the style of your own PhD supervisor, when you were a research student.

Next, plot yourself as you think a current student sees you as a supervisor. What does the research evidence reported by Brown and Atkins say about students' likely reaction to your style?

Finally, plot yourself as you would like to operate and be perceived.

Here is my response.
Undergraduate supervision differs from postgraduate supervision in a number of important ways. Undergraduate students may not be experienced as independent learners - indeed, their main experience of learning up to this point may have been very passive and dependent - so it may be necessary to provide more guidance than would be appropriate at postgraduate level.

Students may have few of the necessary skills, such as undertaking literature reviews, designing experiments, accessing and exploiting new forms of information, managing complex and lengthy tasks or writing extended pieces in a scholarly style. So it may be appropriate to teach a range of skills at an early stage, in the context of the subject matter.

You may be supervising a whole group of undergraduate students, rather than only one postgraduate, so you may be obliged to use methods which are economical of your time and that do not involve a great deal of one-to-one supervision.

The time scale will be relatively short, and the final deadline will be less flexible than for postgraduate theses, so there will need to be a greater emphasis on planning, scheduling and monitoring of progress than with postgraduate research. To cope with students' levels of experience and skill, as well as the time scale, there is likely to be a much tighter specification of what is required, so you will need to make sure students understand this specification. Students also differ more widely in their ability at undergraduate level than they do at postgraduate level, so some will need much more help than others and you may need to take this into account when marking their work.

In some subject areas it is common at undergraduate level to supervise projects on topics that are outside your research specialism, and sometimes outside your area altogether, so you may need to focus more on the supervision process and on the general educational goals of projects, rather than on content. Marking is likely to involve a percentage or a grade, rather than only a pass/fail decision as with postgraduate work, in which case, criteria need to be specified carefully and implemented rigorously. In addition, you are likely to mark undergraduate work of this type yourself, whereas you would be unlikely to assess postgraduate work that you had supervised. If you are both the supervisor and examiner, you may find it difficult to decide how much assistance is appropriate.
Because it is uneconomic to spend time negotiating every aspect of every undergraduate student's project, supervisors usually specify boundaries in a briefing of some kind in order to simplify and structure what takes place and to reduce the need for subsequent supervision. This specification tends to take one of a number of different forms. You may be very familiar with the form used in your subject area, but seeing how others do it may widen your perception of what is possible and also help you to recognise what you take for granted.

Physics

Physics lecturers characteristically specify the projects each is prepared to supervise, produce a list, and students select which one they would like to do and then negotiate with the lecturer concerned. Constraints with equipment and facilities and the sheer difficulty of undertaking original work in physics greatly limit what is possible. The initial procedure of selecting a topic and devising research questions and a plan is therefore not the issue it would be in, for example, social science. Equipment constraints also mean that much final-year project work has to be undertaken in pairs or even small groups, and lecturers in the sciences are used to distinguishing the relative contributions of individual students in collaborative project work, in order to allocate marks fairly (see Gibbs, 1995, in Further Reading). Work will be undertaken in a laboratory with other equipment and where other experiments may be going on, and experiments may be conducted for months at a time with others enquiring about and commenting on them.

Engineering

Engineers often use final-year projects as simulations of the kinds of complex projects that engineers will encounter as professionals. They may emphasise project management processes as much as content. Work may be divided into stages with marks allocated for detailed project plans, feasibility studies and project reports written in the form of consultant reports, all documented to a specified format and undertaken to a strict schedule.

Geology

Geologists characteristically require students to produce a geological map of a particular area. This brings together, in a large integrated task, skills and knowledge they have gained, in a process similar to those they might undertake as professional geologists. The form of this map and the work needed to produce it vary relatively little between students - what varies is the particular terrain they actually map. Students will already have used many of the skills needed in smaller fieldwork exercises over the previous two or three years. Originality is not a major criterion in such a context, but competence at specified tasks is.

Architecture

A student architect will characteristically be required to undertake a very large design project and to present and justify a design at a 'crit' - an event with an audience involving visual and oral presentation. The product is very much more visible than the process of getting there. There may be a range of criteria that could be brought to bear in marking such products - for example, the sensitivity of the design to the historical or social context of the site, or its innovative use of economical materials - and these criteria may be negotiated at an early stage as a design brief is established. Students will have undertaken many such design projects before, though not as large or open-ended, and will already possess most of the necessary skills and background knowledge, like the geologist. But, unlike for the geologist, the form of the product will not be specified at all. Much of the design work may be undertaken in a studio or workshop surrounded by other students who will see and comment on the designs at many stages, and several lecturers - not just the supervisor - may also see and comment from different perspectives.

History

In history, a student is likely to be allowed a very wide choice of topic - in fact the early work will be focusing on what to do. While the student may have tackled extended essays before, and may have some of the research and document skills necessary, this will be very much a new kind of challenge - larger, more demanding, more open-ended and using more skills than anything so far tackled. There would be considerable scope for students setting themselves projects which are much harder or more time-consuming than those tackled by other students on the course. They are very likely to work alone, and no one other than their supervisor may know what they are doing. What students get up to is likely to vary enormously in both topic and process, making it very difficult for the assessor to make comparisons between different projects.

Reflection: Briefing your students

What possibilities for briefing your own students do these different forms of undergraduate project suggest to you?

The ideas I thought of were:

- Outlining some project proposals myself as cues to students, and as a safety net for those who find it difficult to think up projects of their own.
- Providing opportunities at an early stage for students to see what others are up to. This might involve a project-briefing workshop in which students take turns to explain their plans to each other.
Thinking about the skills students had already acquired in order to identify whether they needed any additional skills.

Making the form of the eventual product or outcome explicit - and ideally having copies from earlier years to show students what a project report or dissertation actually looks like.

Explaining exactly how their work will eventually be assessed and, in particular, attuning students to the criteria that will be used in marking their work.

Explaining the kind of help they can expect from their own supervisor and from other lecturers.

Allowing students to work collaboratively - in pairs perhaps - as they develop plans, even if they will have to work separately at a later stage when they are writing up their projects.

Clarifying the ground rules on students helping each other.

When briefing students for their final-year project or dissertation work, you may have the support of a departmental document outlining expectations and giving students advice - and students may even read it! You need to ensure that all the students you are supervising understand the nature of the task they are facing:

- **its size**, in terms of the scale of the product which will be assessed;

- **its form in terms of its nature**: by showing examples - preferably of a bare pass as well as of an outstanding product - from past years;

- **its form in terms of its process**: the stages involved, a 'normal' schedule for those stages, and any intermediate deadlines;

- **the skills involved**, and what opportunities there are for the students to learn skills that they do not already possess;

- **the role you will play as a supervisor**: the points at which you will expect meetings, plans, drafts or a final draft, and how much time you can allocate to each student;

- **the criteria used to assess** the product of the work.
It is important that you establish early on what both sides expect of each other and how things will work. It is becoming common for this to be negotiated explicitly in the form of a written contract.

The following list of questions (and illustrative answers) will help you and your student to be clear about the ground rules you will be working to. This may seem a little bureaucratic and indeed you may need to negotiate how structured you want to be. For example, not every meeting need have an agenda. But being explicit in this way enables students to see what they are entitled to expect.

### Framework for a supervision contract

#### Meetings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Answer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How often will you meet with your student, and for how long?</td>
<td>One hour every week for the first month. One hour every fortnight for the next three months, then about once a month.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can the student contact you outside of these times?</td>
<td>Yes - by e-mail, phone or just knocking on the door (not at home) but I can't guarantee more than a few minutes for unplanned meetings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who will initiate meetings (if they are not regularly scheduled)?</td>
<td>Scheduled for the first four months and by negotiation thereafter.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What will you do if one person can't make a meeting?</td>
<td>Inform the other person immediately and negotiate a new time within a week.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Will you set the agenda or your student?</td>
<td>I'll set most of the agenda for the first few meetings but then pass most of the responsibility for it over to you. We'll use an agenda agreed at the end of the previous meeting but can add items by negotiation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who will take notes of the meeting and in what form, and what will you do with these notes?</td>
<td>I'll take notes of the first meeting, to set the format, but I expect you to record things and give me a copy thereafter, and we'll review these notes at the next meeting.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Writing and feedback

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Answer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Is a project proposal required? If so, in what form and by when?</td>
<td>Yes. There is a standard departmental requirement for format and length and it needs to be submitted within two months and approved within three months. This will be the focus of the early meetings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are drafts expected, and if so at what stage?</td>
<td>Yes, I expect you to start writing immediately. I'll expect drafts of the introductory chapters within nine months and drafts of experimental chapters as they are worked on - we'll negotiate a schedule.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What feedback will be provided on drafts - in what form and at what notice?</td>
<td>Provided I know a draft is coming I promise to turn it round in a week. Without notice and at difficult times I'll probably have to take two weeks. I'll expect you to tell me what you want feedback on. I'd expect to discuss feedback with you at the next meeting.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At what point, nearer to submission, will feedback no longer be provided?</td>
<td>I’ll produce written comments right up to the draft before you submit, but they will be different in nature to those I’ll give at the start. They will alert you to issues I think you should address rather than correcting points or even redrafting bits for you. You have to do the last revision yourself.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Review and change
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>If the supervision relationship and methods need to be changed, how will this be negotiated?</th>
<th>Put any suggestions on a meeting agenda. Most of our arrangements are negotiable.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>If the supervision relationship has broken down and a new supervisor would be desirable, how will this be negotiated?</td>
<td>We can ask the department's research co-ordinator to come to one of our meetings and discuss the options open to us.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Student's expectations of the supervisor**

- Give clear advice but don't take over.
- Be constructive in criticism, especially on written work, but don't pull your punches.
- Respond to reasonable requests for help and advice between formal meetings.
- Treat me like a junior colleague, not a student.

**Supervisor's expectations of the student**

- Turn up to meetings on time and well prepared.
- Respond to advice that has been asked for.
- If there are problems, for example if you know you are going to miss negotiated deadlines, let me know and we'll negotiate extensions, rather than letting things slip.
Research topics are usually agreed in outline when students are accepted for a place or a grant. However, this does not mean that the topic is fixed or that a research question has been adequately refined and focused. There are three crucial issues to explore:

- Is your student genuinely interested in the question?
- Is it important enough to be worth asking?
- Is it feasible to attempt to answer?

In discussion you can ask, ‘When you read around this topic, what interested you and what questions did it spark off for you?’ and, ‘What would you really like to know about?’

Refining the question may involve gaining a good overview of the field rather than detailed knowledge of particular studies. It may be better for your student to start reading review papers or books summarising an area before focusing on articles reporting specific studies.

In the absence of a formal procedure you will need to negotiate an equivalent process with your student, involving a written research proposal. A research grant proposal may offer a suitable model, though your student may need more space to review the background literature and may not be able to be so specific about methodology. As the reading progresses, you can ask your student to produce a list of possible questions and you can suggest further reading that would help refine or eliminate these questions.

Students commonly spend about a quarter of the total available time on this stage of refining the question, as it is sensible not to rush to a premature decision or to close off options until a range has been explored. Three-year research theses often have reviews at the end of the first year or at a point where an MPhil is converted into a PhD. This first year may be used to undertake pilot studies, review the literature and develop a full research proposal to be undertaken in the second and third years. A useful way to write a plan is to outline the expected final form of the dissertation, with the section or chapter headings and an abstract of their content mapped out. This proposal is then usually considered by a panel to check two things: if it were implemented, it would justify the award of a PhD; and its feasibility.

Whether or not such a formal review takes place, your student should have prepared a full, detailed research plan, in a form that has been agreed with you, when one-third of the available time has elapsed.
A thesis is likely to be the largest and most technically demanding piece of writing your student has ever undertaken. It may appear a daunting task and many students delay getting down to writing. They may also not have experienced receiving feedback on drafts and on sub-sections before, or having a working relationship with someone who is helping them to write over an extended period of time. They may be worried about receiving feedback and having to face up to and talk about problems. This reluctance can be compounded by gender or cultural differences. You can employ a number of techniques in order to establish a productive working relationship in regard to commenting on drafts, and to help your students to develop their writing:

- Encourage them to write something very early on, even in the first weeks. For example, if they have not done this already, they could write a short personal piece in the form of a letter explaining why the topic area interests them or is worth studying, or an account of a standard experimental procedure which they may be using or modifying.

- Comment on such early writing in a very supportive way. Your aim might be to make sure that they keep writing and keep showing you what they write, rather than to correct every mistake or criticise the level at which they are writing.

- Discuss with your student what they will submit and what they expect from you in your reading and commenting. Students often submit drafts in a much rougher shape than their supervisor is happy with, and it is not always clear what they expect their supervisor to do with such material. You can ask your student to write you a cover note such as the one below:

  Dear Maria
  
  Here is my first attempt at Chapter 2, as we agreed. I'm reasonably happy about sections 2.1 and 2.2 but I'm in trouble with section 2.3 and I haven't got a clear conclusion.

  When we meet to discuss this (is our regular Thursday meeting next week still OK?) I'd really like your advice on how to tackle the literature on ... Other worries I have are: have I shown that I have read enough? do I show that I understand this literature at an adequate level - I don't feel confident about the way I have summarised the longitudinal studies. Is it readable? I'm too close to tell.

  The notes you gave me on Chapter 1 were great and I'd appreciate it if you could comment at the same level of detail and still be so nice when I've got things wrong!

  Thanks, Ali

Students can get valuable feedback from each other on whether what they have written makes sense and you can encourage them to swap drafts with their colleagues, and to respond to the comments they get, before giving them to you.

Once drafts of sections of the thesis are submitted, it is useful to comment in detail, and to provide examples of how to rewrite parts which are very weak, rather than just criticising them. Such detailed commenting and help may be the most time-consuming and valuable aspect of your supervision.

Ask your student to sort out specific problems and to re-draft sections that need revision almost immediately, rather than risk losing or forgetting detailed advice when a full re-draft is submitted many months later.

Your student will need to know how many drafts you are prepared to look at and what your turn-around time is. If you will be less willing to give detailed advice as the final draft approaches, perhaps because you are involved in examining, then your student needs to understand this.

Failure to follow a supervisor's advice or respond adequately to feedback on drafts is a major cause of serious weaknesses in theses. Your student may not understand how important it is to follow your advice. If they have ignored your advice and you are not sure why, consult a colleague.

Keep copies of earlier drafts and of your comments, so that you can check whether later drafts have responded to your feedback. You would have good reason to ask a student to rework a draft before you will provide detailed comments if you can see at a glance that your previous comments have not been adequately responded to.

If students have severe problems with use of language, possibly caused by using English as a second language, by dyslexia, or by little experience of extended writing at undergraduate level, seek specialist advice. Your institution may have writing experts in Student Services or provide short courses for overseas students.
At postgraduate level, it is not common for supervisors to be examiners as well, and you may not be asked to be an examiner for a PhD until you are quite an experienced and well known researcher. These notes are offered to enable you to understand the process your student may go through and to prepare your student for what will happen.

Examining theses

- A thesis can take several days to read and so you will need to put a substantial block of time aside, and to try to avoid having to read it more than once.

- As well as being long, theses are often complex and less than perfectly written, so you may have to adopt special reading strategies to cope. This might involve reading the abstract, the first and last paragraphs of each chapter, and the conclusion, in order to get a clear overview, before getting absorbed in the details of the literature review, methodology or particular studies. A well-structured and signposted piece of work, written clearly, makes a very good impression on a hard-pressed examiner struggling to make sense of a huge thesis under extreme pressure of time. Your student needs to understand this.

- Central to a thesis is whether it has a thesis or argument. At the outset, check whether the abstract and conclusion articulate a clear thesis. Then focus on whether the work undertaken, the evidence and the text support this thesis in a logical and coherent way.

- Remind yourself of the criteria your institution has laid down. They may demand that the thesis acts as research training and therefore emphasise methodological competence.

- You will need to take detailed notes - either to prompt your questions in a viva, or to give to the candidate if revisions or a re-submission are required. I have found it best to make these notes as I read, noting the page that prompted each comment, and to word-process and reorganise these notes every so often as I go along. Repeated or general comments gradually emerge until I have an overview list of themes as well as notes that are more detailed on individual points.

At the viva

Your institution may have regulations about the conduct of the viva. In my experience they vary greatly in their form and in the role the internal and external examiners play. In most institutions, the supervisor is not present. You may not be allowed to indicate whether the thesis is satisfactory at any point during the viva. If you are involved, there are a number of things you should do:

- Agree with the other examiner(s) in advance on the main areas of concern and who will address which questions in what order. You will have a good idea as to whether it is a pass, a referral with conditions, or a fail, before you start. Your agenda should focus on what will help you to make a borderline decision or to clarify any conditions you may wish to make. Let the student know, early in the viva, what your agenda is and who will ask about what aspects of the thesis, so that they are not taken by surprise.

- Do whatever you can to put students at their ease at the start: a viva can be a terrifying experience and many students do not do themselves justice because they are too nervous.

- Try to get the student talking and interacting, even leading, rather than let the viva become an interrogation.

- Be aware of gender or cultural difficulties caused by inappropriate choice of examiners - for example, two white male examiners of a black woman. Avoid what might be experienced as intimidating behaviour, or forms of questioning which might be misunderstood.

- The viva should be seen as an opportunity for the student to shine and to show ability and understanding beyond that revealed in the thesis, not an opportunity to trip the student up. Questions should be phrased so as to allow the student to talk about what they know and to reveal their awareness of problems, not just about what they might not understand. This may involve your giving the student an extended opportunity to explain the thesis - the main argument, evidence, conclusions and matters requiring further exploration - before questions are pursued.
While most postgraduate dissertations and theses are marked on a pass/fail basis, often accompanied by a viva and sometimes by detailed feedback which can guide re-drafting and re-submission, undergraduate projects are usually marked with a full grading system corresponding to degree classifications, without a viva, and sometimes without written or even oral feedback. Customarily, a second marker is involved who may not be familiar with the student or even with the specific subject of the project. You may find yourself acting as a second marker of projects outside your area of expertise. Project marking raises a number of issues. In particular, you may need to consult your colleagues to obtain answers to the following questions:

- As students spend much more time on projects than on other assignments, and gain more help along the way, should your marking standards be much higher than for other assignments?
- Is your grade expected to take into account the extent of your support for the student - the extent to which it is really their project or yours?
- Should the second marker be aware of the amount and quality of your supervision, or should they only mark the product in front of them?
- As students will probably have undertaken projects of different scale and complexity, should you be taking into account the difficulty of the project?
- As each project may be on a different topic, will you need to apply mainly generic criteria (for example, concerning the quality of report writing or use of appropriate methodology) rather than criteria concerned with understanding of specific content?
- Should you be giving feedback to support as much learning as possible, feedback that could guide a re-submission, or no feedback at all? As projects are usually much longer than other assignments, how much feedback should you give?
H850 What problems will you be helping your students with?

by Graham Gibbs, adapted by Chris Pegler

Completing a final year project may be the largest and hardest task an undergraduate student faces, as well as the most rewarding. Completing a PhD may be the hardest task a scholar ever undertakes and also the most traumatic. PhD completion rates within three years used to be very low, at least until the late 1980s, with text-based subjects performing particularly poorly. And although attention to supervision practices and an increased focus on completion by research councils have brought about a marked improvement in recent years, research students still face many difficulties, any of which could lead to delayed submission.

While many of the problems discussed by Brown and Atkins (in ‘Problems and Difficulties faced by Research Students’ (Extract 2) are technical in nature, there are also interpersonal issues involving style of supervision and sensitivity to the individual research student. Take, for example, these comments by two students, reported in a study by Pole et al. (1997):

> Sometimes because she thinks I’m not getting on fast enough and she wants to see what the problem is she just tried to take over. When she did that she just completely destroyed something that I was doing. So I don’t like letting her come in [to the laboratory] anymore. Well she can come in but stay away from me, you know.

> … sometimes the phone will ring, he will answer the phone … and he seems to still think that he has spent an hour with me. But the fact of the matter is that he has been doing other things. His secretary will knock on the door and something else has to be sorted out and all the time the work is broken up. So even the 20 minutes we spend discussing it, a lot of it is me saying, ‘I have just told you that, you have been on the phone and forgotten all about it’.

Pole et al., 1997, pp. 59 and 60)

Presumably these supervisors would not treat their colleagues like this. These research students might expect to be treated more like a colleague.

Extract 2 considers the most common problems identified in the literature and in studies undertaken by the research councils. This section identifies what the focus of attention should be in performing these the supervisory role. If you can anticipate these problems and work collaboratively with your research student, you may be able to avoid them.

Activity: Your response to student problems

Below are listed the main problems faced by students as identified in Extract 2. Next to each, note any problem of this kind you have experienced in supervising a student. Then note one idea for avoiding or tackling this problem which your own students could use, and one you could use. An example has been provided for the first problem area.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Problem area</th>
<th>Specific example</th>
<th>Possible action by your student</th>
<th>Possible action by yourself</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Poor planning and management</td>
<td>Student left too little time for writing up</td>
<td>Produce three-year outline schedule at start</td>
<td>Review schedule every three months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodological difficulties</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing up</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isolation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Personal problems</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inadequate or negligent supervision</td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Practical advice for tackling such problems can be found in:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Postgraduates: Handling supervision problems</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Postgraduates: Clarifying standards and expectations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postgraduates: Identifying training needs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supervising overseas students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problems and Difficulties faced by Research Students (Extract 2)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
H850 Postgraduate supervision: Handling supervision problems

by Graham Gibbs, adapted by Chris Pegler

Supervision involves a relationship and it takes two to make a relationship work. Problems are as likely to be associated with you and your manner, your views, your preferences and your level of tolerance and flexibility, as with your student. And some of the ‘problems’ dealt with here may be more of a problem for you than for your student. For example, some students start off very slowly but accelerate once they have gained confidence, and catch up without enduring difficulties. Excessive pressure or demands early on may exacerbate problems rather than solve them. Any perceived problems need to be discussed and solutions negotiated. Imposed analyses or solutions may not help.

Failing to get started

Students often have difficulty getting started because the task seems so enormous and the final deadline too far away. Effective strategies involve making tasks smaller and bringing deadlines closer:

- Get them doing something quite specific, such as finding and reviewing two papers. Break big tasks up into smaller tasks and set short deadlines for each sub-task - such as writing a review of four papers in a fortnight instead of writing an entire literature review in six months.
- Get them to replicate a simple existing study in order to gain insight into what is involved, rather than expecting them to design a completely new study from scratch.
- Suggest they visit a researcher in the field and talk with them one-to-one, in order to reduce unrealistic expectations of the level of ability required.

Failing to write drafts

Students often balk at handing over a first draft for comment or at starting to write anything at all, even if they have succeeded with essays or reports at undergraduate level. The level of writing and the audience have changed since their undergraduate work. A thesis should be comprehensible to a non-specialist within the discipline and so a sensible audience to have in mind would be a fellow postgraduate studying a different topic within the department. Get postgraduates to swap their drafts and give feedback to each other before they submit work to you. You can help students to get going in a number of ways:

- Ask them to break the writing up into manageable chunks, starting with two pages if necessary.
- Require them to start writing very early and to keep it going on a regular basis, rather than allowing it to build up into a huge obstacle.
- Be very supportive and positive with your comments on early drafts.
- Model how such writing is done, with specific suggestions for phrasing, and rewriting sections, rather than simply commenting on inappropriate style.
- Encourage your students to present their work orally - in informal gatherings of postgraduates, in departmental seminars or at conferences: explaining their work to others, and getting appreciative feedback, can help enormously with their writing.
- Focus on the positive aspects of what has been achieved and set goals for the next chunk based on that - you may need to build up confidence and productivity gradually.

Getting behind

A thesis is probably the largest task your student has ever undertaken, and it is in the least structured context they have ever experienced. It is not surprising that they often fall behind. Supporting students' time-and-task management should be a central focus of your supervision.

Propose and negotiate an overall timetable with milestones. For example, for a two-year research project:

| 0-3 months | establish topic and supervision, undertake methods training |
| 4-6 months | complete literature review, prepare and agree a full research proposal |
| 7-9 months | design data collection process, draft literature review |
| 10-18 months | collect data, draft methodology section |
19-21 months  finish data collection and analysis, draft experimental sections

22-24 months  intensive drafting and redrafting.

- Negotiate deadlines for specific outcomes: not just completing research tasks but producing summaries of data or drafts of the thesis.
- Ask your student to tell you immediately if a deadline looks as if it will be missed - don't discover a month after a deadline has passed that the student was nowhere close to completing that stage.
- When slippage occurs, break up big tasks into smaller ones and set a short-term deadline for each, making checkpoints more frequent but less threatening.
- Make pragmatic decisions, in negotiation with your student, about reducing the scale of the data collection or the scope of the thesis overall.
- Discuss the causes of the delay. Your student may need to learn some new skills, be allocated additional resources, or achieve a clearer understanding of what they are doing.

Lack of specific skills

You may discover that your student cannot use a word-processing program, or has little understanding of statistical methods, and this is holding them back. It may not be your responsibility to develop your student's basic skills. Your department may have a training programme and your institution may have staff development courses for many of the skills they need. Your student is responsible for choosing and taking necessary courses and should expect to have to do so. Your job is to identify the skills they need and possibly to help find a source of training, for example: 'By our next meeting, please do a literature search on ... using two different electronic search tools, and bring the print-out to the meeting for us to discuss how you went about it. The subject librarian, Madeline Roberts, will give you a user name and show you how to do it.'

Lack of independence

Your student may expect more structure and advice than you should give. Their thesis is supposed to be their thesis, not yours: an original piece of work. This may be a particular issue for some overseas students. Even if it is necessary to provide a good deal of structure early on, your student should understand that this structure will be gradually removed, building up to:

- longer periods between meetings;
- larger, more open-ended research activities between meetings;
- less focus, in meetings and in written feedback, on detail, and more on overall conception and standard.

Failing to respond to advice

You will want to encourage independence of thought and action, and this may mean students not taking your advice or arguing a line you disagree with. Academics disagree with each other all the time about fundamental matters, and your student may be taking an approach that someone other than you might support. But if a student repeatedly fails to respond to what you believe to be sound advice about, for example, whether drafts are at an acceptable standard, this may lead to serious problems later. Failed or referred theses are often the result of students ignoring their supervisor's advice. A point may come where you feel you cannot continue to supervise if there is too little respect for your views.

It would be wise to:

- record in your meeting notes that the advice was given and rejected;
- suggest the student obtains a second opinion - but make sure the person consulted has a written statement of your advice so that the student does not misrepresent your views;

and you may have to:

- negotiate a change of supervisor.

Personal incompatibility

The supervision relationship is also a personal relationship - and not all couples are compatible. Sometimes there is no relationship outside meetings and this causes difficulties because every encounter is formal and unequal in terms of power and authority. You may not want to socialise in order to establish a more equal relationship but it can be helpful to arrange work-related encounters outside of meetings - for example going to seminars or conferences together or writing a joint paper. Even if you do not get on, it may be possible to continue to be
effective in a formal and distant way, but some relationships will founder irretrievably. There will be established arrangements in your department for changing supervisors and it may be best to use these, without blame or rancour on either side, rather than struggle on. Students invest a great deal in undertaking a thesis and may feel that they have only one chance. They may be reluctant to admit that there is a problem and upset when it is brought out in the open. They may also be strident in demanding their rights to change.
by Graham Gibbs, adapted by Chris Pegler

MPhil and PhD standards and requirements are usually not at all well defined, and where there are written definitions they tend to vary between institutions even in basic things like word limits. The goal you aimed for in your own PhD may not be the same as the goal your research students may need to aim for.

The set of criteria below is based on documentation from a number of research universities.

**Criteria for MSc, MPhil and PhD theses**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Criteria</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MSc</td>
<td>A thesis ... shall be clearly and concisely written, show evidence of originality in knowledge and interpretation, and shall also be judged on its scholarly presentation ... In addition it shall contain a full bibliography.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MPhil</td>
<td>A thesis ... shall constitute an original contribution to knowledge. The thesis shall be clearly and concisely written, well argued and shall show a satisfactory knowledge of both primary and secondary sources. In addition, it shall contain a full bibliography and, where appropriate, a description of methods and techniques used in the research.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PhD</td>
<td>... a thesis shall constitute a substantial original contribution to knowledge which is, in principle, worthy of publication. The thesis shall be clearly and concisely written, well argued, and shall show a satisfactory knowledge of both primary and secondary sources. In addition, it shall contain a full bibliography and, where appropriate, a description of methods and techniques used in the research.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Such statements beg a number of questions, including:

- Can we assume that it is not necessary for an MSc thesis - as opposed to an MPhil - to be well argued?
- What does 'in principle, worthy of publication' mean, especially as it is one of only two features which distinguish a PhD from an MPhil?

I have emphasised a number of key terms and phrases: these are key terms that the students need to understand explicitly. Interpretation of such terms differs between disciplines, and local conventions and disciplinary expectations can be very important.

To make such general statements of criteria meaningful, look with your students at actual examples of successful theses from your department, in order to highlight strengths and weaknesses, especially where less than perfect theses are still good enough. While it is impossible to be prescriptive, there are often expectations of the number of experiments involved, the size of the bibliography, the length of the literature review, and so on. Students may well believe that standards are much higher than they are, and will benefit from understanding the difference between an adequate thesis and one worthy of the Nobel Prize.

**Activity: Regulations in your institution**

1. Find your own institution's statement equivalent to that above, defining the required standard for the research thesis or theses you are supervising.
2. Identify any crucial words or phrases that require interpretation.
3. Ask a colleague with experience of supervising and examining what these words and phrases mean in practice.
4. Show this statement to your research student(s) and discuss its implications for the standard they need to achieve.
Research councils expect institutions to have in place an organised programme of research training and your students will have specific training needs, but the two may not match. An important early task is to find out what skills the student is likely to need and to make sure they have ways to obtain these skills. You can simply ask your student what they have already done, and at what level of sophistication. You and they may become aware of other needs only as research plans develop and methodologies are specified in more detail. For example, a psychology student might not realise that they need to learn about a range of non-parametric statistical techniques until the nature of the data they are collecting becomes apparent.

In addition to formal training courses that may be available in your department or organised centrally by a research office, it may be possible to:

- devise short research tasks which develop skills, such as designing experiments, reviewing areas of literature, undertaking pilot studies or interviews, or analysing provided data sets using new statistical methods (you may need the help of colleagues to supervise such tasks);
- organise an 'apprenticeship' with a more experienced research student or with an established research team which is already using the research skills;
- provide one-to-one tuition yourself.

Students may be reluctant to be taught or trained, especially if they have just finished a taught undergraduate course. However, a PhD should provide research training as well as being a research project, and students should expect to acquire a range of new skills. In the US, the first year of a PhD may be entirely taught and this is increasingly standard in the UK.

Research councils often require evidence that research training is being provided, and you may need to document the training needs you identify and the steps taken to meet these needs.
H850 Supervising overseas students

by Graham Gibbs

Overseas students may experience the need for additional and sensitive support in three main areas:

- cultural differences concerning western forms of debate;
- practical difficulties associated with living in a strange country away from home;
- language difficulties.

Cultural issues

You may be in the ideal position of benefiting from more than one culture yourself, and be able to offer help resulting from that. The following remarks assume a solely western background.

Overseas students may come with experience of higher education systems in which older people and academics are treated with veneration and are therefore considered almost infallible. They might consider it highly impolite to disagree with or even debate with their supervisor and might do whatever they were asked without question, as implied by the word 'supervision'. They may also have unrealistic expectations of the extent of the supervisor’s role. Deference can also be reflected in excessive quotation of others’ work, including the supervisor's own work, which the student may see as 'honouring' the author.

In some cultures the possibility of 'losing face' is also a serious concern, and this can lead to students approaching discussion very cautiously. They may find it hard to voice their opinions in case they are considered incorrect, and they may be reluctant to discuss any critical feedback on drafts. When such students do manage to join discussions, they may be so unused to contributing as to appear clumsy and even rude in the way they express themselves.

If you recognise these patterns of behaviour and attitudes, you might have to work hard to build up the confidence of such students so that they can discuss and challenge, express opinions and take risks with ideas. You can expose them to western forms of debate in seminars and, with other students, and - where possible - discuss the differences and difficulties they perceive.

Religious beliefs and practices may call for assignment of same-sex supervisors, for flexibility when supervision dates clash with observation of holy days, for dietary considerations in social events, and caution over some aspects of interpersonal behaviour such as shaking hands or eye contact. A sensitive awareness of such issues and a willingness to accommodate to them is all that is required.

Practical issues

Many overseas students, and their families, are giving up a great deal to come to the UK to study. Their funding is likely to be for a fixed term and so it is particularly important for them to keep to a strict schedule to finish on time and successfully. In comparison with home students, they may welcome direct advice, a more structured approach and more fixed deadlines.

Money may be a problem and, if they get into difficulties, they may have less opportunity than home students to earn additional money and moreover be hesitant about discussing such personal matters.

They may be socially isolated, or at least only sociable with others of their own cultural background. In contrast, home students may be more likely to mix with others with whom they can talk about their studies. You may have to take positive steps to integrate overseas students into the scholarly and social life of the department.

There are commonly specialist services to support overseas students, including confidential counselling, advice on accommodation and personal finances, and social gatherings. It is sensible to refer your student to these services and support mechanisms rather than attempt to manage alone.

Some overseas students may not be as familiar with photocopiers, fax machines and computers as you might expect, and may have little experience of using a large library or a sophisticated information retrieval system. It may be sensible to take nothing for granted.

Language

Linguistic competence should be thoroughly checked before a student is taken on, but it is still common to find that although a student may read and understand written and spoken English very well, their expressive language, both oral and written, is much less sophisticated. Many campuses have specialist language centres that can diagnose needs and provide specialist support, and you may need to insist that a student takes advantage of additional tuition which is available. You can also help by encouraging more writing and at an earlier stage than you might with a student whose first language is English.

You are likely to need to give more time to commenting on drafts. How much stylistic and copy-editing work you are prepared to do is a matter of personal judgement, but if you are not going to do it, they may need help from someone else. You can encourage such students to...
take advantage of every seminar or other opportunity to express themselves in speech, and to offer informal opportunities to present aspects of their work to other students.

You may have to moderate the speed and technical level of your own language and ask other students to do the same. Finally, you may have to take extra care that crucial instructions and advice, for example about deadlines or regulations regarding submission, are fully understood.
by Graham Gibbs, adapted by Chris Pegler

As an undergraduate, I had no idea what even close friends were doing in their dissertations and I discussed my work with no one except my supervisor - which in retrospect seems quite bizarre.

Individual supervision is very demanding on your time. It is sensible to exploit opportunities for students to support each other. There are a number of possibilities for developing a more mutually supportive environment.

- You could hold joint supervision sessions with all your students. This can be particularly sensible:
  - for briefings;
  - for sessions devoted to particular skills (such as writing, literature searching, using statistics) which might otherwise be repeated;
  - for students to find out more about what other students are doing at the outset;
  - for periodic review meetings where students can see where others have got to in their work.

- Where the exam regulations allow, you could encourage collaborative project work involving two or three students working together. You may need to be imaginative in devising sub-elements of a larger project for which individual students can be personally responsible.

- You could encourage students to form interest groups where their interests or project topics are similar, even if they are obliged by exam regulations to work on their own rather than in project teams. You could convene the first meeting of these groups and then leave them to manage after that.

- You could set up a framework for students to comment on each other's plans and early drafts: either in pairs or in a group. For example, one week before they are due to submit work to you for your comments, you could convene a meeting of all your students at which they could comment on each other's work in time for them to make improvements before they submit it to you.

- You could set up co-supervision, in which pairs of students help each other review progress by taking turns to go through a series of questions of a kind you might ask during a supervision, such as:
  - where are you in relation to your planned schedule?
  - what do you need to do next?
  - when do you need to have completed it by?

If you see students individually after they have undertaken such a co-supervision meeting you will find that many problems have already been sorted out and that you can move ahead much more quickly.
One of the commonest problems facing undergraduate students tackling projects is falling behind and, unlike the situation in postgraduate work, there is seldom time to catch up: there is usually a fixed deadline which, if missed, leads to immediate failure.

Before their final-year project students may have had all their deadlines imposed and all their study tasks specified. They will not have had to tackle a task so large that it requires breaking up into intermediate stages with their own deadlines. They may have had almost no responsibility or scope for planning their own work. Even the simple task of drawing up a schedule might be novel. Anything more sophisticated, such as a Gantt chart that allows planning of parallel or linked project components, is likely to be completely new. Furthermore, unlike postgraduates, they will usually be undertaking parallel studies on taught courses that will make regular demands on them and which may well, at times, take precedence. To help students to manage you can suggest two concrete strategies.

1. Suggest that students draw up a week-by-week schedule of activity. Initially this may have little filled in except the final handover date and any formal requirement - such as a deadline for an approved project plan. In supervision meetings, attention can be given to adding sub-tasks as they become clear, and sequencing and scheduling them into the weekly plans. An example would be very helpful.

2. Suggest that students draw up a project 'To Do' list. Large items, such as 'literature review' and 'collect data' will need to be sub-divided, and a number of the sub-items can be listed at the top under a heading labelled 'This Week'. If they word-process this or put it on a spreadsheet they will be able to update it easily. They can bring it to supervision meetings to review what they have recently done and ask questions about what they intend to do next. You can comment on their priorities and suggest what has been omitted. If you can show them how you manage your time and tasks in relation to research you are doing, this will interest them and make planning seem real.

It is important for students to have some kind of plan, however rudimentary, in order for them to be able to monitor how they are progressing. Without it they may be unaware that they are seriously behind or spending far too long on minor aspects of the work, or may not recognise the good progress they are making.

You may need to take a lead with students who are clearly behind schedule and poorly organised, even to the point of specifying tasks and deadlines for them:

Please bring me, by Wednesday 14th, the results of your first experiment and an explanation of how you intend to analyse them, so that when we meet on the 16th we can discuss them.
During a research project, the student undertakes many different types of task calling for different skills - skills which he or she may not necessarily have developed in undergraduate study (Wright, 1986; Zuber-Skerritt, 1985). In the early stages it is a matter of choosing, defining, and refining the topic until the nub of the problem is identified and its importance understood. The next stage in many subjects usually requires design skills and decisions over methodological techniques. The field-work, experimental periods, or document searches have their own practical competencies to be mastered. Once the data have been collected, analysis, synthesis, and interpretation of results come to dominate. Last but not least, the skills required for drafting and writing take over. Throughout many projects the student may have to cope with highly technical literature, complex statistical or mathematical techniques, and the use of the computer. In addition to these tasks, the research student has to learn to manage his or her own time effectively, to negotiate access to resources and expertise, and to handle materials and procedures correctly. Research life is likely to have a different rhythm from life as an undergraduate or employee, not least in the ambiguity of the position of the research student: neither member of staff nor undergraduate. Finally, if the student is on a short-term, temporary contract he or she will have to cope with the insecurity that such an appointment brings.

Postgraduate research students can encounter difficulties and problems in almost any of these aspects of their research. A recent study of postgraduate failure (Rudd, 1985) revealed that the reason for non-completion, or late completion, usually lay in a combination of difficulties rather than in a single factor. Figure 6.6 sets out the most common categories of problem.

**Figure 6.6 Common problems for research students**

1. Poor planning and management of project.
2. Methodological difficulties in the research.
3. Writing-up.
4. Isolation.
5. Personal problems.
6. Inadequate or negligent supervision

**Poor planning and management of project**

Careful organization is generally regarded as indispensable to successful and timely completion of a research project (e.g. SERC, 1982). Planning and management are needed at every stage and not just at the start. For example critical path analysis is needed for sequencing data collection; a timetable for writing-up. Nevertheless, a slow start to the study can be a particular problem in itself. It is possible for a student to spend too long refining the design, reading background literature, and building apparatus. Accordingly Rudd (1985) suggests that research students should have completed these preliminary tasks before registration for a research degree. Similarly the SERC recommends use of the long vacation prior to the start of the project for background reading, while the ESRC would like students to have completed any necessary training in research methods before they embark on a PhD study.

Associated with poor time management is the failure to plan carefully the relationship between the various aspects of the study. If the data collection has not been linked systematically to the definition of the problem, and if the analysis is not planned in relation to the data collection, the result can be a mass of uncollatable material. Students are then faced with the difficulty of deciding what are and what are not relevant data, and sometimes with the need to repeat experiments or search for yet more information. Gaps appear in the results, and relationships between results cannot be tested adequately. There is also the danger that one aspect of the work will come to dominate with consequent loss of direction. For example, without a clear structure it is possible for students to get 'hooked' on computing so that a methodological tool becomes an end in itself.

For research students on group projects a carefully elaborated programme is particularly important. Without such planning, a student may find himself or herself diverted on to aspects of the project which, while interesting, do not contribute to the student's own study. The project timetable may come to dominate, overriding the student's need to meet higher degree requirements, while daily, informal contact with project staff may be no substitute for properly planned supervisions (Rudd, 1985). Finally, those on short-term contracts may be under pressure to move on to new projects before they have had the time to write up their part of the previous project as a thesis. This has led the SERC to recommend that post-doctoral salaries should not be paid to project researchers until the thesis has been successfully completed.

**Methodological difficulties in the research**

Rudd (1985) argues that the ideal topic for a research student has three characteristics: it is interesting to the student, it is manageable within...
the time constraints, and it contains scope for original work while yet being capable of solution. Unfortunately, as he himself points out, it is sometimes impossible to know in advance if the third characteristic will pertain. One of the most serious difficulties, therefore, which research students may have to face, is the need to change design or direction, or methods, if the original plan proves too difficult to execute in practice.

But technical problems can arise for other reasons too. Chief among these is the lack of appropriate methodological skill and techniques, either in data collection or in data analysis. Inadequate skill emerged as the most common difficulty reported by the respondents to the Delamont and Eggleston survey (Delamont and Eggleston, 1983). The problem is likely to be exacerbated where unfamiliar computer programs or advanced statistical techniques are required. Although lack of skill emerges as a serious problem for many students, it is a problem that can be resolved (Delamont and Eggleston, 1983). Practical help and training can usually be obtained from service courses (though there may be difficulties in attendance for part-time students), and from supervisors.

Writing-up

Difficulties encountered in writing-up could be classified as lack of necessary skill. But it seems to be such a frequent problem that it is given separate treatment here. Rudd (1985) found two interrelated aspects to the problem: slowness in formulating what to write, and difficulty in bringing the material into coherent shape. Beard and Hartley (1984) report findings that show that academic writing is far from easy for lecturers themselves. Nor did they find much uniformity in the way academic staff approached their writing tasks. The same seems likely to apply to research students when writing their theses. Beard and Hartley do argue, however, that academic writing is a skill and as such can be broken down into sub-routines. These sub-routines can, in their turn, be learned separately and practised in combination until they become part of an automatic and integrated approach. This argument lends weight to the recommendation of the SERC, among others, that research students should undertake regular written assignments during their study. The writing-up of the final thesis should not be the first occasion on which the student has had to express him- or herself in coherent English prose. It may also be necessary to offer students workshops on thesis/dissertation writing (Zuber-Skerritt, 1986). Such workshops can function not only at the level of practical guidance but also as a useful source of group psychological support.

The second aspect of the problem - selection and ordering of material - usually arises from lack of systematic planning, or from inadequate record keeping. Good project management should avoid the 'shoe box syndrome' of non-related and unanalysable data. But for some research students there is the rather different problem of misplaced perfectionism. These students defer the writing up while further data are collected, or more literature is scanned, or yet more analysis is carried out. They find it hard to accept that no study is perfect, that not all variables can be controlled, that no instrument is totally free from bias, and that no interpretation of results can be completely exhaustive.

Isolation

After difficulties with methodological skills, isolation emerged as the most common problem for research students in education (Delamont and Eggleston, 1983). Moreover, it was a problem for which there had been no preparation and for which there seemed to exist little by way of solution. Other authors have reported similar findings (Welsh, 1979; Beard and Hartley, 1984; Rudd, 1985). The problem may be particularly acute for part-time and for overseas students. While a certain amount of isolation may be creative and even essential for independent or original thought, it is clear that too much isolation is debilitating. Absence of external 'push' factors, such as discussion of ideas, can lead to a general decline in motivation (Rudd, 1985). Practical help with methodological problems may not occur, thus setting back the study. The student can then become increasingly insecure, and doubting of his or her ability. Equally serious, there may be too few sources of constructice criticism and feedback in the course of the study and this can lead to eventual failure which could have been avoided. Recognition of these dangers has led to recommendations for more opportunities for research students to share, test, and defend their ideas and work. Collaborative projects have been encouraged on similar grounds (Beard and Hartley, 1984). However Rudd sounds a warning note: in times of scarce job opportunities research students may be less willing to risk disclosure of their tentative results to potential competitors or in front of potential employers (Rudd, 1985).

Personal problems outside the research

Rudd (1985) identified several factors outside the research project which could contribute to late completion or to failure to complete. These factors included problems with personal relationships, family commitments, finance, employment, illness, and injury. The first four may pertain particularly to part-time students. Such difficulties, however, are not usually the sole cause of failure. Rather, they tend to travel in company with other problems more directly connected to the research such as loss of interest in the topic or a change in career plans. Indeed the picture given is one of complex and highly idiosyncratic causality.

Inadequate or negligent supervision

Poor supervision does not emerge as a major problem in the few studies of postgraduate research reported in Britain. However, for a minority of respondents in each survey it was a significant problem. Given the very high level of dependence on a single supervisor as the sole source of encouragement, support, advice, and criticism, the reported bitterness of students who have experienced poor supervision is understandable. The quality of supervision is, arguably, the single most important factor in successful undertaking of research. The criticisms of supervisors are set out in Figure 6.7.

Figure 6.7 Common criticisms of supervisors
Too few meetings with students.
No interest in student.
No interest in topic.
Too little practical help given.
Too little direction.
Failure to return work promptly.
Absence from department.
Lack of research experience.
Lack of relevant skills and/or knowledge.

Unfortunately, when students have experienced poor supervision, they have not always been able to find alternative supervisors (Delamont and Eggleston, 1983). However, current recommendations from the research councils in Britain may mean the introduction of formal procedures to uncover and remedy inadequate supervision on a departmental basis (SERC, 1982; CVCP, 1985). Such procedures do not obviate the need, however, for careful selection of supervisors and for careful matching of supervisor, student and topic. Training in supervision skills may also be needed (Moses, 1984).

Students at risk

The discussion of the problems and difficulties faced by research students suggests that it should be possible to identify students at risk. A student who avoids encounters with his or her supervisor, or a student who seems unable to accept any responsibility for the conduct of the study, are two obvious examples. But as supervisors we may need to be alert for other signals. For example can the student state, clearly, the central problem being investigated? Does the study require techniques which the student has never used in practice before? Is the student personally well suited to the type of research that has been decided on? Are there major changes in the student's personal life? Is the student behind schedule? Is there evidence that the student can write adequate academic prose? Some of the more common behaviours which can be 'warning indicators' are set out in:

**Figure 6.8 Warning indicators**

Postponing supervisions.
Making excuses for unfinished work.
Focus on next stage, not current task.
Frequent changes in topic or method.
Filling time with other things.
Resisting advice or criticism.
Procrastinating on writing.
Intellectualizing practical problems.
Blaming others for shortcomings.
Failing to integrate earlier work.

Overseas students
Students who have not been undergraduates in this country may face additional problems to those already identified. A survey conducted by UKCOSA (1982) shows that loneliness and difficulties in forming relationships were the two most frequent problems. But incorrect expectations were the next more serious source of difficulty. The style of teaching and learning experienced by some students prior to arrival can be a poor preparation for independent and original research. Such students may find it hard to assess evidence critically, or to question authoritative assumptions, or to engage in knowledge creation. Their undergraduate studies may also have afforded few opportunities for deep and critical reading, for practical laboratory work, or for computer use. Written English may not be of an acceptable standard, and the canons of academic writing poorly understood. At a deeper level, overseas students may have very different cultural traditions for the presentation of evidence and argument (Gassin, 1982). This can affect the way they approach the design of a project and the structure of their final thesis. Teaching such students the 'correct' way for the host academic context may be a vital task for the supervisor. Paradoxically, where an overseas student is insecure it may be harder to get him or her to adopt western intellectual practice than if he or she is confident and able. Valuing the 'home' customs of the overseas students may be a precondition to effective transition to those of the 'host' country.

The UKCOSA research also revealed difficulties in making cultural adaptations. This could show itself both in the context of the research project (for example uneasy relationships with technicians) and, of course, in their personal lives. Finally, in addition to anxieties over finance and accommodation common to many research students, there was the added burden of liaison and negotiation with sponsoring government departments both in this and in their home country. It would seem therefore that in accepting an overseas research student you are often accepting greater responsibility for supervision. Put rather bluntly, supervising overseas students may require more time, effort, and skill than supervising home British students ...

Part-time students

The BERA study of part-time research students showed that not only do they tend to have greater commitments outside the research but also they experience the problem of isolation in a more acute form (Delamont and Eggleston, 1983). The intermittent nature of their attendance can make it difficult for their supervisor to form a close academic relationship with them. It also makes it hard for them to meet other research students, to get to libraries, or to attend service courses. Departments may need, therefore, to think out ways of facilitating contact for these students. Evening or weekend seminars, distance learning arrangements, or the setting up of self-help groups can be appropriate.

More fundamentally supervisors may need to direct or advise part-time students towards certain kinds of research project and away from others. Given the length of time between start and completion there is a real danger of data becoming dated, of problems being overtaken by events, of findings being pre-empted by others. On the other hand, designs which include cohort studies, or evaluation over time, are particularly suitable for part-time study. Whatever the design chosen, however, you probably need to give as much, if not more, attention to the management and monitoring of the stages of the research as you do for full-time students.
H850 How should supervision meetings be conducted?

by Graham Gibbs, adapted by Chris Pegler

There tend not to be formal requirements about how often supervision meetings should take place, how long they should be or how they should be conducted. Arrangements are often casual, as in this example:

How often do I see him? A lot of people are asking that question and there is no specific [answer], we don't have a frequency of once a week ... Professor X says just come and see me when you have got a problem sort of thing. And you wander along to see him when you have got a problem and 'Oh I am too busy' sort of thing. 'Come back and see me later.' And of course you go and see him later and he is not there. And he disappears to America for a couple of days and things like this, and you can end up for two weeks trying to find him.

(Pole et al., 1997, p. 60)

It is not just the availability of Professor X that seems a problem here, but the unplanned nature of the supervision, prompted only by problems arising. As a postgraduate student myself I saw my supervisor only twice in my first two years, despite having problems. In contrast one of my fellow research students saw their supervisor for an hour a week, every week, at a fixed time with a fixed agenda and a record of the meeting, whether they had problems or not. I know which kind of supervision I would have benefited from.

Structuring a supervision (Extract 3) proposes quite a structured approach to meetings, with a focus on reviewing progress, decision making and planning, based on the work of Shaw (1987). Your department may have formal expectations as to frequency of meeting and documentation of supervision meetings, which you will need to meet. Such structured approaches should not, however, squeeze out opportunistic meetings that arise in response to unplanned problems, or based around a shared interest, such as having read the same newly published article. Not all supervision is about planned activity.

Part of the structure of such meetings involves being explicit about what the student is entitled to and what the supervisor can reasonably expect of the student. These entitlements and expectations are, increasingly, being formalised in a contract at the outset of the supervision relationship. Hockey (1996) analysed the kinds of 'troubles' supervision suffers from and has drawn up a framework for a contractual relationship between supervisor and student in order to minimise such troubles:

A possible contract

Firstly there are agreements of a general nature pertaining to the dynamics of supervision:

1. The background and reasons for the drawing up and implementation of the contract.
2. Agreement about how often supervision is to take place, the duration, timing and locations of this supervision.
3. What actions the parties should take if keeping a supervisory appointment is not possible.
4. What records are to be kept of each supervisory session and who will be allowed to see them.
5. How the contract can be modified if the parties' experience indicates that the research relationship does not appear to be working productively.
6. What actions can be initiated if either the supervisor or the student fails to hold to his/her side of the agreement.
7. Changes in circumstances which necessitate revision, variation, review or termination.
8. Particulars of how crises will be managed and what will occur in the event of breakdown, or how difficult contingencies happening between supervisory sessions will be managed.
9. A statement covering the expectations and responsibilities of the supervisor and student.

Secondly, there are agreements pertaining to the specific research being carried out by the student:

1. An outline of the agreed aims and objectives of the parties and how these are to be pursued (general strategy, etc).
2. What is to be focused upon, and priorities within the agreed foci.
3. Particular tasks which need to be achieved, and who is responsible for their completion.
4. The time-scale for the completion of the tasks identified in (12) above.

(Hockey, 1996, pp. 366)

The use of such contracts is now especially common where supervisors have a number of students to supervise: structure is necessary to cope with the diversity and time demands involved. Graham and Grant (1997) provide a checklist of items for discussion at the outset of supervision, which can be used with a group of students together. (A timetable on which to base a contract with your students is provided in

http://students.open.ac.uk/desktop/h850-05k/files/super.zip/super_conduct.htm (1 of 2)
Handling supervision problems.

Activity: Meeting agendas

Using the Brown and Atkins proposal given in Extract 3 as a starting point, draw up an agenda for the next supervision meeting you are due to have with a student: be very clear about just what you expect to be happening at each of the stages identified. Show it to a student and ask them what they think about it. Does it look useful? Workable? Would they like to use it in future?

Activity: Supervision contracts

Using the Hockey proposal for a supervision contract as a framework, draft a contract you could use as a starting point with your own students. Again, it would be useful to discuss with a research student the extent to which your draft could form the basis of a supervisor-student contract.
While for you a meeting with a research student may be one of several different kinds of meetings that day, for your student it may be the single focus of their entire week. They may well be wound up and have very high expectations of the value of the meeting. Arrange to have your incoming telephone calls diverted, put a ‘do not disturb’ notice on your door, and give your student your full attention for the agreed time.

Meeting time is precious, so be purposeful and well prepared, expect your student to prepare, and keep a record of what happened. Take the meetings seriously and expect your student to do the same.

Be clear about the purpose of meetings

There will be a natural tendency to simply review whatever the student has done since the last meeting and to discuss whatever emerges. Some unplanned meeting time can be both useful and enjoyable, but if not much is accomplished in the whole meeting, the student can find it demoralising and it means harder work for you. You should aim to schedule meetings to address particular topics as your student’s research progresses and some of these topics will be about the process of the work rather than its content. Structuring meetings so as to make communication effective requires more than simply responding to your student’s questions. Agenda items at different points might well include:

- defining the standard and nature of a PhD thesis; negotiating ground rules for the supervision relationship;
- refining research questions;
- discussing reading that both student and supervisor have undertaken;
- developing a research plan;
- advising on details of research methodologies;
- giving feedback on drafts;
- periodic reviews of overall progress, including preparation for any formal reviews such as at the end of the first year or when transferring from an MPhil to a PhD;
- teaching specific skills, such as how to undertake a literature search or how to use a statistical technique.

Prepare for meetings

Expect your student to turn up having done some previously specified preparation so as to make the best possible use of your limited time, such as:

- writing up an outline of a plan rather than just turning up with some half-formed ideas;
- providing a written review of progress, having gone back through meeting records to check whether all actions have been completed.

Recording the outcome of meetings

Record-keeping may seem intrusive and over-formal, but it is easy to forget what was agreed and to find yourself going over old ground. Clear records of clear decisions, couched in terms of agreed actions with agreed deadlines, not only help enormously in moving things along but also give you a sense of making progress.

Keeping records is not just a matter of efficiency or conscientiousness. You may need a record of your supervision in the event of an appeal or dispute. For example, if a student is accused of plagiarising material, you may need to prove that the policy on plagiarism was raised in a supervision meeting or that you gave a specific warning that you suspected plagiarism after you read a draft. There have been a number of well publicised student appeals against decisions to fail a thesis, on the grounds of inadequate supervision or failure to inform the student that work was not of the required standard. Without records you could be vulnerable to such an accusation.

The form below can be used as a framework for planning and recording meetings. You can agree most of the agenda at the previous meeting, adding any additional agenda items at the start of the meeting. After writing up the first meeting to show how you expect it to be done you can ask your student to write up meetings thereafter, and to provide you with a copy of the meeting record within 24 hours. Keep a file on each student and keep the meeting records together so that you can review progress at a glance.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agenda</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Decisions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Action Points</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concerns*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Next meeting</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Place</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Notice the section labelled 'Concerns'. You should be explicit if you have worries about your student getting behind schedule, or if they make a decision you strongly disagree with, and they should be aware of your concerns. They may also have concerns, for example, about whether their plans are realistic in the time available, which you should acknowledge.*
Joint supervision is an excellent way to learn how to supervise, especially if your co-supervisor is prepared to discuss supervision issues with you. It can also be beneficial for the student, who gets a wider range of expert advice and, perhaps, greater access to advice when they need it. It may also be standard practice where a student’s work is interdisciplinary and one expert from each discipline is required. It is also common where the real expert in the student’s field is in another department or institution or where the main supervisor is simply too busy, or absent too often, to take sole responsibility for a number of students.

However, joint supervision can also cause students problems. Who do they go to first, whose advice do they take if there are differences, who is responsible for setting up and recording meetings, who will comment on drafts, and so on? If you are involved in joint supervision:

- Have a joint meeting with the student early on to clarify who is responsible for what and how meetings will normally be arranged. Thereafter, have three-way meetings every so often to check that the joint supervision is still working out and to attune yourself to how the other supervisor is thinking about the thesis.

- Have at least one meeting a year with the other supervisor without the student present to have a frank review of progress and arrangements.

- Take minutes of meetings with your student and make sure the other supervisor gets a copy.

- If crucial decisions are made (such as a change in title or schedule), make sure the other supervisor is consulted as well as informed.
If the maximum benefit is to be obtained from the meetings with your research students then such meetings require planning and structuring.

It is limiting to see the supervision merely in terms of an ad hoc discussion. As Moore said of the Oxford tutorial, it is essentially 'a meeting for work, which usually involves discussion ... both sides should be at work, understanding, discovering, adjusting' (Moore, 1968). Rudd (1985) also suggests that supervisors who gave no advance thought to supervisions, preferring to play them 'by ear', were in part responsible for the failure of their students. Such supervisors failed to notice when their students were falling behind on work, or were wasting their time. Relying on the student to ask for help, or even to know which questions to ask, is risky, especially if the student feels reluctant to take up your time.

One way of ensuring that supervisions are purposeful working encounters is to consider the structure of an individual supervision. The model set out in Figure 6.11 below is based on the work of Shaw (1987).

The opening of the supervision may contain enquiries as to the non-academic aspects of the student's life; so may the conclusion. Some such conversation from time to time is desirable to help maintain the personal aspect of the relationship. The review of the current context, aided by notes made from the previous supervision, allows you to check perceptions of decisions made, to recall previous discussions, and to enquire into progress towards the goals established. The definition of the purpose of the current supervision can include the identification of problems and difficulties which need to be sorted out. But there may be other purposes such as the giving of feedback on written work, the organization of field-work, or discussion and interpretation of results.

Following identification, the purposes and/or problems should be explored. This stage may contain analysis, reconstruction, explanations, demonstrations, discussion, extrapolation.

**Figure 6.11 Stages in a research supervision**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1. Opening</th>
<th>Rapport established</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2. Review</td>
<td>Current context established</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Definition</td>
<td>Scope and purpose of present meeting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Exploration</td>
<td>Problem(s), results, and so on</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Clarification</td>
<td>Decisions needed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Goal-setting</td>
<td>Decisions taken, next tasks identified</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Conclusion</td>
<td>Evaluation, summary, disengagement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Recording</td>
<td>Notes on supervision made and filed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Links may be made to other aspects of the project or to previous work. Some avenues may prove to be abortive and there will probably be a few digressions. At some point, however, the supervision should move into a clarification and decision-taking stage. Alternative routes and procedures will be evaluated and provisional solutions identified. Tasks will be established for the next period of work with suggested deadlines. At this stage, the supervision may enter an iterative sequence if there was more than one purpose or problem to be covered.

The concluding stage should be marked by statements summarizing what has been achieved in the supervision and how well the student is progressing. The date of the next supervision should also be fixed. Ideally, a brief record of the main decisions or solutions reached should be made both as a record and to provide the basis for review in the next meeting. This record keeping can be done singly or jointly. It is not suggested that every supervision should conform to this model. More important that this particular set of stages is the idea that there should be a purposeful structure behind supervisions of research students.
H850: What style of supervision is appropriate in the work place?

by Graham Gibbs, adapted by Chris Pegler

This section discusses how work-place supervision is actually conducted, and the issues that are raised in the process.

Most higher education teachers do not themselves supervise students in the work place, though they may visit students, for whom they are the tutor, during their work placements.

Teachers may also be responsible for briefing or monitoring the work-place supervisor. This section highlights some of the issues that may arise in the context of work-place supervision and which you may need to be aware of. Again, we focus on the nature of the supervision role.

The work-place supervisor's role

What Saxton and Ashworth 'The workplace supervision of sandwich degree placement students', (Extract 4) call 'styles' is very similar to what Brown and Atkins 'Effective research and project supervision' (Extract 1) call 'roles'.

A work-place supervisor does not usually act as a trainer or a teacher, so the roles outlined in Brown and Atkins for research supervision are not likely to be duplicated in the work place. Moreover the roles supervisors actually do perform are likely to be out of the control of the teacher. The demands of the work place on the student may override the learning needs of the student, unless the supervisor can modify these demands.

Extract 4 describes the range of 'supervisory styles' found in the work placements of a number of business students, and the potential benefits and drawbacks of each.

Activity: Work place visit

Imagine you visited a student you were responsible for, in the work place, and found that their supervisor was adopting one of the styles listed below. What could you do to change the situation so as to maximise learning for your student?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Supervisor style</th>
<th>What you could do ...</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mothering</td>
<td>Seek more challenging work opportunities for the student, encourage the student to be more assertive with the supervisor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negotiating</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goading</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establishing-as-colleague</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neglecting</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protecting</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encouraging</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

You may have limited opportunities to influence things but you can at least:

- prepare your students for the work place and brief them about how to negotiate a productive relationship with their supervisors at the start of the placement, and how to manage this relationship over time
- brief work-based supervisors about your expectations of their role
- discuss the supervisor's role with them when you visit
- hold a discussion with the supervisor and student together, when you visit, to provide a forum for negotiating any changes which might be productive.
- ensure that expectations on each side about workplace supervision can be brought out into the open and mismatches can be ironed out.
On the placement visits we have made in connection with our project we have seen many different ways in which workplace supervisors approach their responsibility. This, presumably, largely reflects their general management style ... Each supervisor is an individual and will supervise in his or her own way but it is possible to group together those whose approaches are broadly similar. The styles and examples identified describe some of the supervision we have come across. The list is not intended to be exhaustive but more to illustrate the diversity involved in this one factor of sandwich placements. We have observed instances of these styles during the course of our project and an example of each is provided after the summary table.

**Observed examples of the supervisory styles**

Full descriptions of each style are provided in Table 1.

**Mothering**

The supervisor takes on the role of a rather over-protective parent. The student's pastoral welfare is a concern but the supervisor may not be so concerned with the level of work given or with ensuring a progression of responsibility.

*Alison* worked for her placement year in the offices of a large company's engineering section. On the first placement visit she expressed satisfaction with her supervision; she was pleased that her supervisor was so concerned about her. However, by the second visit she was becoming increasingly frustrated by her supervisor's approach:

> He treats me like a daughter... He has a motherly attitude towards females, he doesn't really think we should be at work.

She told us about her enthusiasm to gain experience on the computers but complained that:

> He [her supervisor] decided I was of childbearing age and they're not good for me. So when I've been using it for an hour and I'm just getting into it - the spreadsheets set up or whatever - he says 'Right, away from that now, young lady'. It's really frustrating!

**Negotiating**

The student and the supervisor discuss the direction and progress of the placement and both parties' needs are considered and reviewed. Problems are tackled before they reach unmanageable proportions and feedback is good.

*Sarah* and her workplace supervisor met once a month to discuss progress and future direction. They talked about the tasks she had been involved in, whether there had been any problems and what benefit she felt she had gained for the previous month's work. The 'plan of action' for the following month would be formulated and this would become a discussion item for next month's meeting, i.e. it would be reflected upon and the extent to which targets had been reached would be considered. For instance, at one of these monthly reviews, Sarah's supervisor asked her how she had coped with acting as minutes secretary at a meeting. They then decided that she should chair the next of these meetings.

**Table 1: Supervisory styles - Summary**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Style/description</th>
<th>Potential benefits</th>
<th>Potential drawbacks</th>
<th>Overall effect/appropriate occasions for style</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mothering: Supervisor 'fusses' over student in an over-protective and restricting way</td>
<td>Well-being is assured in the sense of not being 'thrown in at the deep end'</td>
<td>Can be 'claustrophobic', little responsibility or chance to show initiative</td>
<td>May be frustrating for student; only appropriate early on in the placement</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Negotiating:  Student and supervisor jointly determine the nature and goals of placement  

- Work likely to be appropriate to individual; feedback, etc., good; progressive responsibility  
- May seem rather 'artificial', especially if 'real work experience' is the placement goal  
- Learning, and recognition that learning has taken place, is maximized; placement dynamic; appropriate at all times, but relies on good student/supervisor relationship

Goading:  Student persistently urged along by dint of supervisor pressure  

- Student may become aware of 'real' organisational life; can be right style for some weaker students(?)  
- Student likely to be passive, and unaware of learning achieved; lack of relationship conducive to communication  
- Student may feel emotionally negative; likely to be lack of experiential learning, and of organisational loyalty; rarely if ever appropriate, except as possible technique of discipline

Establishing-as-colleague:  Student is accepted as genuine member of the organisation with recognised role  

- Real work experience; likely that 'people skills' will be acquired; often a steady progress in responsibility  
- Learning may be restricted to one area of activity; some work will not be challenging (inevitably?)  
- Student develops specific, concrete skills; organisational loyalty; especially right for student whose career goals match the placement

Neglecting:  Supervision non-existent or perfunctory. Student left to 'get on with it'  

- Encourages self-motivation and self-reliance in some students  
- No encouragement, support, or monitoring; training may be lacking; work may be mundane or otherwise inappropriate  
- Outcome depends on personal resources of student; only acceptable for limited time periods

Protecting:  Supervisor acts as intermediary between work and student  

- Work may be appropriate to student and not merely mundane; student not a 'dogsbody'  
- Possibly experienced as restrictive; responsibility and initiative may be limited  
- May be especially useful in early stages of placement, and where colleagues tend to 'take advantage' of student; but tight protection can restrict and limit experience

Encouraging:  Supervisor sees role as 'confidence building'; allocation of work, monitoring, feedback, and pastoral care emphasized  

- Good if student lacks confidence; advantages seen here of close monitoring; work may be right for student's skill level  
- May lack experience of dispiriting side of work; could be felt as stifling by an already-confident student; supervision might be blind to poor motivation in some students  
- Likely to have generally good educational effect; monitoring and feedback good, and helpful to student with low self-esteem; perhaps best used as one strand of supervisory style rather than the total style

Goading

The supervisor constantly nags or prods the student assuming that, left to his or her own devices, the student will not work hard. There will probably be little in the way of encouragement, support or positive feedback.

Graham described his supervisor as 'adopting the stick and carrot approach - only there's usually no carrot!' Although Graham worked hard and produced a high level of work this was not acknowledged by his supervisor and no praise was given for his efforts. In fact the supervisor took the credit for work Graham had done. Graham was 'thrown in at the deep end' with no training or induction period. By the end of the year he felt that he had achieved a great deal but at the expense of being in a very tense, frustrating and stressful situation.

Incidentally, in this case, the supervisor presumably applied this 'style' broadly since on completion of his placement Graham was the...
The supervisor, in a very natural way, accepts the student as a valued member of the organisation. He or she will have a job title and may receive job-specific training. Tasks are not carefully chosen but the student performs all the functions that normally go with the job.

Anne and her supervisor worked very closely together. They occupied adjacent desks and shared the workload. Her supervisor involved Anne fully in all the activities of the department. This meant that the work wasn't always exciting but it was all part and parcel of real organisational life. As Anne said:

Every job has its mundane and boring aspects ... We had to go through checking loads of price lists but it had to be right so it is responsible even though it doesn't feel like it is.

The supervisor consciously planned a progression of responsibility and autonomy in Anne's work with the result that, by the end of the placement, she was happily undertaking complete projects single-handedly.

Stephen’s placement was set against organisational confusion and uncertainty. Not only was the future of the department in the balance but his supervisor was inexperienced, de-motivated and constrained by a lack of real authority. Consequently Stephen found himself with nothing at all to do or absolutely snowed under with quite responsible work depending on the prevailing departmental situation. (Happily, towards the latter stages of the placement, organisational problems were at least partially resolved and Stephen's supervisor left and was replaced. As the new supervisor admitted things were still not ideal but progress was made within the constraints of the situation.)

Tony worked in a large organisation in which he was the only sandwich placement student. His supervisor had put a lot of effort and hard work into securing the go-ahead to employ a placement student so she was very concerned that everything should work out well. Tony was plainly 'her student' - she carefully scrutinised and prioritised all requests for him to undertake tasks or projects before consulting Tony himself.

When we visited Tony, he was very impressed with his supervisor's keen involvement in his placement and was grateful for the interest which she showed. However, by the second visit he admitted that he found the supervisor's constant attentions somewhat wearing. He felt he would like to be able to take on more of the responsibility for his work himself although he still remained happy with the quality and level of the work he was asked to do.

Elaine worked in a large public sector organisation. At college she had always been very shy and timid, reluctant to speak in seminars and lacking in confidence. Her placement supervisor recognised that the primary goal in Elaine's case must be to increase her confidence and encourage her to recognise her capabilities. So he gave her quite responsible work but backed up with strong support and encouragement. Elaine responded well to this; she felt able to tackle what previously would have seemed to be quite daunting tasks in the knowledge that she had back-up if she needed it.

Most of Elaine's work was directed towards one major and very responsible project - this she executed exceptionally well. Her supervisor felt that she had been a major asset to the organisation and she herself was very pleased with what she had been able to achieve.
The arrangements made to supervise students while they are in professional practice placements vary enormously, not only between disciplines but between universities. Contexts can be as varied as working as an architecture graduate in a design office, as a trainee nurse on a ward, as a teacher-training student in a classroom, or as a social work trainee in clients' homes. These contexts differ in the demands made on students and in the roles performed by the various kinds of supervisors: mentors, trainers, practice-based tutors, or whatever.

It is difficult to generalise across such varied contexts and to select literature that applies to most settings. However, supervision of professional practice usually focuses on three things:

- **management** of the work context to maximise learning opportunities
- **help** to support the student in an often difficult and challenging situation
- **education**, that is, focusing on the learning itself, and linking the professional practice to the academic content of the course.

These three main roles of supervisors, outlined in 'Teaching and learning for practice' (Extract 5) in the context of social work training, are identifiable in most supervision contexts.

### Activity: The professional context

In the professional context in which you work, indicate below:

- which of the three roles outlined below is likely to be most important to the student;
- which is usually emphasised most by the supervisor;
- which matters most to academics, such as yourself?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Supervision role</th>
<th>Importance to student</th>
<th>Importance to practice supervisor</th>
<th>Importance to academics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Management</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helping</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educative</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

What do you think are the implications of any differences of perception or emphasis? Make a few notes about your conclusions.

- The academic may be mainly interested in concepts and theories and in the opportunity that practice provides to bring these concepts to life. The academic is therefore likely - though by no means certain - to give priority to the educative role.

- The supervisor is most likely to be mainly interested in management - making sure that the student gets the job done without causing problems.

- And the student - on the whole - may feel in need of help and support in surviving a challenging experience.

Being conscious of this kind of mismatch - and being prepared for it - may mean, for example, that the supervisor pays a little more attention to what students feel their own needs to be, and that the academic spends a little more time with the supervisor and the student explaining the educational goals of the placement.

### Alternatives to an informal meeting

In the absence of any guidance, inexperienced supervisors may well be very tempted simply to meet their student and have an unstructured chat, in the hope that something positive or useful will somehow emerge.

There is, however, a wide range of structured alternatives. Some methods focus on details of skills, some on feelings and self-awareness, and some on the wider social and organisational context in which the profession is practised. Many of the methods described below take students round the experiential learning cycle: that is, they reflect on recent experience, recontextualise that experience and then plan for future experience. A priority for the supervisor can be to make sure that the student does indeed progress round the learning cycle, and avoids the pitfalls:

- getting stuck endlessly going over a past experience;
H850: What functions does professional practice supervision serve?

- retreating into theoretical issues and avoiding feelings, personal reflection or practicalities;
- rushing on to planning the next work task without thinking about learning points from completed tasks.

'Teaching and learning for practice' (Extract 5) is, of course, set in a context where interpersonal skills, attitudes and feelings are very important. While other professional contexts may not emphasise the same features, similar methods may nevertheless be adopted so as to maximise learning.

Below, we briefly outline some of the alternatives to unstructured meetings.

1. Reviewing recent experience

The student can be asked to select powerful or important recent experiences to discuss. The student may need to keep a reflective diary to record feelings - or a log to record the use of skills - in order to have access during supervision meetings to details of exactly what happened in incidents that might be productive to review. A simple descriptive log which records work tasks may also be useful, so that the supervisor can select work experience to review, and to help plan future experience in order to fill gaps.

2. Critical incident analysis

The student can be asked to recall any incidents that went particularly well or particularly badly in order to analyse the general features of effective and ineffective practice. Over a number of meetings these analyses can be developed into a personal theory of what works and why.

3. Observation

Observation is likely to be of most value where interpersonal skills are involved. It can involve direct observation, spending some time with the student in the work situation, or using video or audio recordings to examine incidents jointly afterwards. The benefits of the supervisor's more direct access to the nature of the students' experience have to be balanced against the potentially threatening and intrusive nature of such supervision. It can best be undertaken at the students' request to explore a specific aspect of professional practice, with an agreed focus of attention.

4. Live supervision

This can involve undertaking joint work tasks with the student or becoming actively involved during, for example, a consultation with a client the student is conducting. Observations and questions may be used during the encounter, prompting 'reflection in action' rather than only reflection after the event.

Supervision meetings can sometimes focus exclusively on looking backwards, either to professional experiences or to contrived experiences such as role plays, which have already taken place, rather than looking forward to forthcoming professional experiences. Students in such contexts are often worried about a client they know they will have to meet, a task they will have to do or a problem they will have to tackle. They do not just want to review what they have already done - they want advice on what they should do next.

Supervision meetings take place at one point in a cycle of practice and reflection. It is important to help the student to continue cycling round: planning on the basis of principles and conceptions, acting in a skilful way, reflecting with perceptiveness and awareness on what happened, analysing it in rigorous and rational ways, leading to more sophisticated planning for what happens next, and so on round the cycle. As with project and research supervision, professional supervision meetings should be seen as points along a continuous process of learning, giving momentum and direction to that learning.
There is general agreement that supervision in current social work practice includes the three elements identified by Kadushin (1976) as managing, educative and supportive. Young (1967) outlined the role of the supervisor as educator, helper and administrator, Pettus (1979), in a revised edition of an earlier work, identifies the skills required as administrative, teaching and enabling, emphasising that communication skills are a key factor in each area; while Westheimer (1977) acknowledges the management and teaching elements in supervision along with an examination of the meaning of support in this context.

The management function

The practice teacher operates in a management function in relation to the student since the role involves workload allocation and the carrying of accountability to the manager in the agency by the practice teacher for the work undertaken by the student. Supervision also involves management functions, such as the communication and interpretation of agency structure and policies, facilitating the student's communication with other agency workers, and planning of the placement experience which will often include negotiating with other workers who may be able to provide additional learning experience. Negotiating physical resources such as a desk and telephone for the student may also fall within the management function of the supervisor. When the student on placement is undertaking a basic qualifying course the supervisor will be required to assess the student's performance and give a pass/fail recommendation on the placement. This function is different from the educational function of evaluation and feedback, and in so far as this function involves the use of authority, then it is appropriate to interpret it as a management function.

Although the practice teacher may not carry authority within the agency management structure as a team leader or an officer in charge, there is nevertheless an authority element within the role of practice supervisor in relation to the student. Many practice teachers find difficulty in accepting this role because they may see it as opposed to, rather than supplementary to, the educative and supportive roles in supervision.

The helping function

The helping function in student supervision should be regarded as a subsidiary function to the main educative one. But it is also an important supplement and often a catalyst to the educative function, in that a healthy emotional state is a desirable condition if learning potential is to be fulfilled. Thus the development of self-awareness and insight is one function in which Kadushin (1976, p. 201) suggests the supervisor will offer 'reassurance, encouragement and recognition of achievement, realistically based expressions of confidence, approval and commendation, catharsis - ventilation, desensitization and universalization, and attentive listening which communicates interest and concern'.

The helping function should be directed towards the prevention of undue stress where possible, as well as to dealing with stress that has already occurred. The key to effectiveness is the relationship between the supervisor and student: mutual respect, honesty and trust are clearly needed. Westheimer (1977, p. 19) points out that support has often been interpreted in social work as apparently accepting - and certainly not challenging - whatever the other person does or says. She suggests, in contrast, that the 'supervisor supports by asking challenging questions about the worker's performance, by stimulating his thinking and by the very recognition that the worker has the strength and the capacity to respond and develop'.

In most cases, it helps if the student is referred to someone such as a student counsellor, if personal problems become evident.

The boundaries of the helping function within supervision need to be clear and, by and large, when the helping function consistently takes precedence over the educative one then those boundaries may be said to have been transgressed.

The educative function

The term 'educative' is deliberately chosen in preference to the term 'teaching' to describe this function in student supervision, because it is a wider term incorporating the notion of facilitating learning and of self-directed learning.

Payne and Scott (1982) offer a helpful framework for staff supervision which can be usefully drawn on and adapted to student supervision. They suggest that supervision can be seen in terms of modes, methods and arrangement. In their framework modes of supervision fall into four categories:

- **Formal and planned sessions** which may be on an individual or group basis and where the agenda is agreed between the parties involved.
- **Formal and ad hoc sessions** which are unplanned discussions as a response to a situation which is creating problems. These are formal in the sense that the participants withdraw from other activities in order to focus on the problem.
Informal and planned

where an agreement is reached between those involved to give feedback whilst the task continues. Direct and live supervision methods come into this category.

(d) Informal and ad hoc.

This mode of supervision arises out of situations when practice teacher and student may be working in the same

The traditional approach to supervision in social work has usually been in the formal and planned mode supplemented particularly at the beginning of a placement by informal and *ad hoc* sessions.

**Supervision arrangements**

The mode identified as 'informal' in the Payne/Scott framework in both its planned and ad hoc variations, has much to offer and it is as well to consider at the beginning of a placement what combinations of modes of supervision are the most appropriate to achieve the learning objectives identified for the placement.

Payne and Scott (1982) suggest a number of possible supervision arrangements which depart from the tutorial or one-to-one model:

- *pair supervision* may be undertaken for two students with similar practice experience and background;
- *tag supervision* occurs where the student is attached to a worker on-the-job, whilst the supervisor retains an overall coordination function (this arrangement is often used in residential placements but has potentials for use in other settings too);
- *tandem supervision* occurs where two similarly experienced workers supervise each other and the supervisor acts only as a monitor;
- *group supervision* has obvious advantages for placements in student units;
- *team supervision* concentrates on the functioning of a working team rather than on individuals within the team as in group supervision;
- finally *peer group supervision* is where group members supervise each other, the supervisor retaining only a nominal role.

Use of these different arrangements involving a combination of two or more arrangements as appropriate to the setting, the experience of the student and the learning objectives to be achieved, offers a more imaginative and a potentially more effective approach to supervision.

In selecting the most appropriate modes and arrangements, it may be that a particular one is more appropriate for one function than another. Thus the support function may rely heavily in some placements on an informal and ad hoc mode, whilst the management function may be carried out more effectively in the formal and planned mode.
For supervisors

Cryer, P. (1997) *Handling Common Dilemmas in Supervision*, London, Society for Research into Higher Education, 25 pp., ISBN 0 9463760 2 6. This brief guide addresses thirteen dilemmas such as ‘How far should I encourage my students to aim for originality and how far for conformity?’ and ‘What balance should I strike between working with students to help them to impress examiners and remaining detached and impartial?’


Graham, A. and Grant, B. (1997) *Managing More Postgraduate Research Students*, Oxford, Oxford Centre for Staff Development, 72 pp. ISBN 1 873576 52 8. This practical manual is concerned with the methods required for the successful supervision of many students at once, in less time. It contains valuable examples of structuring the supervision relationship and advice on group supervision. It is based on the experiences of a university which greatly increased its postgraduate population.

Lewis, V. and Habeshaw, S. (1997) *53 Interesting Ways to Supervise Student Projects, Dissertations and Theses*, Bristol, Technical and Educational Services, 171 pp., ISBN 0 9478859 2 7. This cornucopia of ideas focuses on undergraduate supervision to a greater extent than most such books. It is based on many years of first-hand experience of supervising humanities and social science students. Its sections include ‘Getting students started’ and ‘Keeping students going’.


For students


Phillips, E. M. and Pugh, D. S. (2000; 3rd edn) *How to get a PhD: A handbook for students and their supervisors*, Buckingham, Open University Press, 203 pp., ISBN 0 335 20550 X. This is a justifiably popular book written primarily for research students but which supervisors and their students can draw on together to negotiate an effective working relationship. It is packed with vivid first-hand examples.

1. My own supervisor tended to see our relationship only in terms of work, rather than as a partnership or a friendship, and so was rather cold and formal. However, he/she didn't have particularly clear ideas about structuring the work, so it wasn't always clear which way we were going, but this suited me as I had my own clear ideas.

2. The evidence cited by Brown and Atkins would suggest that those I supervise might react positively, if not warmly, to my current style. My experience is that my emphasis on structure is not always welcomed!

3. Ideally, I would like to operate at point (3), which would represent a better balance between my tendency towards task orientation - being too directive and denying students the opportunity to organise themselves - and my desire to allow students to explore, with its attendant dangers of their drifting aimlessly and getting short of time.