

## WORKING WITH SUPERVISORS

### Use this sheet to help you:

- understand the roles of supervisors
- understand how supervisors' roles tend to develop
- select a supervisor
- maintain a good relationship with your supervisor

### 5 minute self test

What do you think a supervisor should or shouldn't do? Tick (✓) or cross (✗) the boxes.

- help you to approach the chosen topic critically and carefully
- suggest readings
- motivate you to complete the project
- write material for you
- raise questions
- suggest alternative strategies
- act as a "sounding board" for your ideas and propositions
- read everything you write
- comment on drafts of the written work
- act an editor

**Check your answers on Page 3**

## Introduction: what supervisors do and don't do

In most university handbooks, the role of supervisors for graduate students is described in clear terms. This role is to:

- **assist** you to approach the chosen topic critically and carefully
- **suggest** readings
- **raise** questions
- **suggest** alternative strategies
- **act** as a "sounding board" for your ideas and propositions
- **comment** on drafts of the written work

Most misunderstandings between graduate students and supervisors arise from not understanding this role. Essentially, the job of the supervisor is to be an adviser and to help you develop independent judgement.

Their role is NOT to:

- **impose** ideas on you
- **motivate** you to complete the project
- **write** material for you
- **read** everything you write
- **act** as an editor
- **act** as your best friend

## The changing role of your supervisor

The supervisor has a number of roles at different stages of your research. You should be prepared for the transitions in the role:

### 1. Director/instructor

In the first phase, the "starting out" phase, your supervisor directs you in materials to read, people to consult and places to go. You are in the familiar teacher/student role. Make the most of this direction.

### 2. Critic/general guide

In the second phase, the "research phase", you will have much less guidance (mostly critical feedback). In this phase, you are more like colleagues as you have the benefit of closer familiarity with your detailed topic than the supervisor. Perhaps you might even need to familiarise your supervisor (by writing or orally) with the exact circumstances of the case you are dealing with so that you can profitably benefit from regular discussions.

### 3. Critical commentator/expert

In the third phase, the “completion phase”, you are likely to receive harsher and more detailed critical feedback on your written work. In this final phase, you are in the subordinate role again as your supervisor can see weaknesses in your written presentation that you often can't see. The main problems may relate to:

- your arguments
- the order and arrangement of material
- the data section and your inferences from the data to your conclusions
- your use and understanding of the literature
- format, literacy and style of writing

Your supervisor may begin to distance him or herself from the project at this point and attend to other graduate students who might be early in their research. This is to be expected—it is your thesis, not theirs—but it is the hardest phase from the candidates' point of view!

## Selecting a supervisor

When approaching a potential supervisor consider their:

- research interests (do they match yours)?
- strengths and weaknesses in terms of research output and conference contributions and/or experience in supervising before
- temperament (are they easy to get along with)?
- connections to the business community/to potential thesis examiners
- peculiarities as providers of feedback (are they “fussy” or preoccupied with their own work? NB: fussiness can be a good thing)

If you have the opportunity of having two supervisors who approach the topic from different angles, take it. You can greatly benefit from differences in perspective.

Don't assume that a supervisor who is not very good in commenting on specific details is not useful. Some supervisors are excellent at helping you see the global direction of your thesis; others are better at helping you with specific detailed problems.

## Maintaining a good relationship with your supervisor

1. Keep in contact with the supervisor and develop a mutually agreeable schedule of regular meetings. If arrangements cannot be maintained, re-convene and work out something better.
2. Keep your supervisor informed of any changes in direction in your research and

problems you are having making contacts and/or finding information. If they don't know your latest changes of perspective and other developments, they can't help you! (Remember that they are probably supervising others too—they can't be expected to keep abreast of what you are doing all the time).

3. Work out a joint understanding of expectations of each other (few supervisors will edit your writing for stylistic or grammatical weaknesses, for example). Supervisors may also suggest that you should consult another lecturer or international expert on a specific chapter you are writing. Get things like this clear as soon as possible.
4. Plan alternative arrangements for seeing other academics, attending conferences and keeping abreast of issues in your area. It's not the supervisor's job to do this.
5. When you meet with your supervisor, have a clear idea about what you want to discuss. Come prepared for the meeting with such things as notes or a chapter draft. Supervisors are busy people. Meetings with supervisors should be productive, and productivity depends largely on your preparation.

## Remember

Success in completing a higher degree arises largely from how well you can conduct and complete independent research.

## Answers

### 5 minute self test

- ✓ help you to approach the chosen topic critically and carefully
- ✓ **suggest readings**
- ✗ motivate you to complete the project
- ✗ write material for you
- ✓ raise questions
- ✓ suggest alternative strategies
- ✓ act as a "sounding board" for your ideas and propositions
- ✗ read everything you write
- ✓ comment on drafts of the written work
- ✗ act an editor