



### Section 3: Choosing a Supervisor

The three most critical choices facing you as you pursue your master's or doctoral research degree are what institution to choose, what program to attend, and the supervisor you will work with.

These three are not independent: for instance, some students know which supervisor they want to work with before they even start to apply. This will determine both the program and institution they will choose. Other students know exactly what research question they wish to pursue, which in turn may determine which institution, program and supervisor they want to apply to. At the University of Toronto, most students apply to a particular program where there may be many potential supervisors. While some programs assign an advisor at the start of a student's program with the supervisor identified only later in the program, most programs expect that students themselves choose a supervisor from the beginning or early in their program. In some programs, identifying a faculty member who agrees to work with the student is a required component of the application process, so the supervisor may be determined before the student even arrives on campus. Although it is not done frequently, it may sometimes be useful for a student to have a co-supervisor.

**It is important to understand that SGS regulations state that the final authority to approve or assign a supervisor rests with the head of the graduate program (Graduate Chair or Director).** Normally, the same supervisor will guide the student from the start of the program all the way to graduation, but in exceptional circumstances a student may need or want to consider switching to a new supervisor at some point in the program. While such a change may be possible, it is important that you first discuss a contemplated change with the Graduate Coordinator or Chair of your program. This will allow you to explore the potential implications of a switch before making a decision.

## The Student-Supervisor Relationship

The student-supervisor relationship is a key factor in determining a successful and satisfying graduate experience.

When it works well, you not only will learn the craft of research scholarship, but will also gain an advocate who will speak on your behalf, are welcomed into a network of professionals, and may work with someone who ends up being a lifelong colleague and maybe even friend. Most supervisory relationships allow the student to experience the deep satisfaction of academic work and the creation of new knowledge.

However, as any relationship, the student-supervisor relationship may not always go smoothly. It is hoped that in most cases this is only a temporary situation that can be resolved relatively easily and quickly. But sometimes it may not be so easy to resolve and it may be necessary to look at other solutions. Such difficult situations may lead to a student to lose their enthusiasm for research as a career and, in extreme cases, result in a student abandoning their dream and pursuit of a higher degree at the University of Toronto. These Guidelines will provide you with best practices on what you can do for establishing a positive supervisory relationship that will prevent or minimize the impact of such negative experiences.

While there are many factors that can affect the success of a graduate supervision relationship, a good place to start is to make sure you pick a supervisor that is right for you.

Here are some suggestions for what you can do as a student when looking for a supervisor:

- **Look up online information on potential supervisors.** First of all, the potential supervisor should be highly qualified in the expected area of research. Check their biographies on the graduate unit's website, noting their research interests, publications and other academic activities; their grant support; graduate students they have supervised; and how busy they may be on activities away from their lab or office. Look at their CV as well, if it is available. Remember that just because a faculty member is an internationally recognized research expert, this does not mean that their supervisory style fits what you are looking for. You have to look beyond the CV to find more information about the best fit.

## Key Points

### The Supervisor Search

- Look up online information on potential supervisors.
- Check other online sources.
- Talk to other professors.
- Contact the unit's graduate office.
- Arrange to speak face-to-face (or arrange for an online meeting) with potential supervisors.
- Contact other students who are studying or who have studied with the supervisor.

- **Check other online sources.** Use your favourite search engine to find more information potential supervisors. Look for blogs, discussion groups, or social networking sites they may have in order to get a sense of who they are.
- **Talk to other professors.** Check with professors you know who might be aware of faculty in your area of interest. They could offer valuable insights to help you identify and evaluate potential supervisors.
- **Contact the unit's graduate office and visit in person if possible.** Talk to the graduate coordinator (the faculty member responsible for the graduate program) and/or the graduate administrator (the administrative staff member assisting the graduate coordinator). These people can be an invaluable source of information about the program and the faculty.
- **Arrange to speak face-to-face** (or arrange for an online meeting) with potential supervisors and, if applicable, see if you can visit their research facilities.
- **Contact other students** who are studying or who have studied with the supervisor. You can find those students by checking the website or CV of the potential supervisor, or check with the graduate administrator in the department. You should try to contact those students and let them know you are thinking of studying with the supervisor. Ask them for comments on the style of supervision, the frequency of contact, the level of independence, the supervisor's personal interaction style, whether there are or have been any issues, and so on. Do this in person if you can or via an online meeting, as information is usually more forthcoming in person than it is by email.

### Finding a Supervisor: Some questions to ask

When you have identified a potential supervisor, you should contact them to ask about supervision opportunities, discuss your research interests, and what it is you are looking for in a supervisor.

### Here are some question topics you might find useful:

- **What previous supervisory experience does your potential supervisor have?** Faculty are usually self-taught in the art of supervision, starting with their own experience and learning as they go. With a novice supervisor, you might want to ask how supervision was handled in their own doctoral program. With an experienced supervisor, you should be able to consult former or current students.
- **How many graduate students does a potential supervisor have?** Compare this number to others in the same graduate unit or discipline. High numbers are more common in the sciences. They may mean a high-profile successful researcher and supervisor, but could also mean you get less direct supervisory attention and a more impersonal, standardized program. Small numbers are not uncommon in the humanities; in any discipline, fewer graduate students for a supervisor could mean you get to interact one-on-one more often with your supervisor, but may also mean you have fewer student-peers to talk to, particularly in small graduate units.

- **What is the "culture" of the supervisor's research or scholarly activities?** Is it one where you are expected to work quite independently and only occasionally meet with the supervisor? Will you be working independently on research topics that are not part of the supervisor's own research program? Or conversely, would you mostly be part of a research team, be responsible for a specific part of a larger project? Will you be expected to report frequently (e.g. weekly) or only when you have completed a self-defined significant part of the project? This varies not only across disciplines, but even within single programs. Make sure you would feel comfortable with the expectations of the culture in the supervisor's research group.

- **How long does it take students to complete their program with this supervisor? How does this compare with the graduate unit norm? Do the majority the supervisor's PhD students finish within or close to 4 to 5 years? How many students take 6 years or more to complete their degree? How many students did not complete their PhD degree?**

While graduate units may not always be able to provide specific and detailed information, they should be able to provide you information on average times to completion.

- **Do you have any personal characteristics or circumstances that might affect whether this supervisor is a good fit?**

Decide early on what you are willing to discuss with the supervisor, even before starting your program. You may have family responsibilities, health or disability issues, or special travel needs. If you are aware of any issues that may affect academic progress, try to resolve them prior to entering the program or as soon as possible after you start. You may choose to have discussions with potential supervisors and the graduate coordinator to discuss your particular circumstances to make sure they will be appropriately accommodating. Remember that you cannot expect a supervisor to accommodate needs that he or she is unaware of. The first step to obtain disability related accommodations is to register with Accessibility Services if you are on the St. George campus or with AccessAbility Services on the UTM or UTSC campuses. You will find tips on how to disclose (or not) a disability in [Section 5](#).

## Key Questions

- What is your supervisor's research environment like? What are his/her expectations?
- Will your supervisor be reasonably available during your program?
- On average, how long does it take to complete your program?
- Do you wish to disclose a disability or other personal circumstance to your supervisor? What resources are available to support you?
- What kind of financial support will you receive during your studies?

- **What is the supervisor's role in providing financial support?**

You should find out what the graduate unit's policy is on funding doctoral (or research master's) students, and to what extent you are expected to teach or work as a research assistant to generate the funding. Particularly in the sciences, support in the form of research assistantships (RAs) is usually available from a supervisor's research grants. Ask your supervisor or the graduate office whether your potential supervisor has appropriate grants to do this. You might also want to find out whether the supervisor has historically provided support if students don't finish before other funding ends. What are the graduate unit's policies on providing teaching assistantships? Some supervisors or graduate units also require that students apply to external funding opportunities during their program to help pay for their research and/or stipend.

- **If you anticipate significant research expenses to pursue your topic of interest, what is the program's expectation for covering them?**

Research programs in the sciences may need substantial equipment and supplies. In all disciplines there may be travel or field expenses. Is the equipment available and does your potential supervisor have sufficient grant funds to support the research? How much, if any, of these expenses are you expected to cover? In any program, travel to present your research at conferences should be expected; can and will your potential supervisor provide travel funding? What other funding sources are available in the department, at the university, etc. and how can you find them?

- **What advice and assistance can your potential supervisor provide for finding a suitable job after graduation?**

For some students, this is not important, whereas others may expect assistance. Check the supervisor's presence on the web and social media; if possible, talk with their former students. The CV may indicate how actively involved the supervisor is in national and international communities within the discipline, and whether they have the scholarly or professional status and connections to help. If possible, ask your potential supervisor directly what you can expect.

- **Is the potential supervisor going to be reasonably available for the duration of your program?** Do they have significant administrative responsibilities, and if so, how might that affect their ability to supervise effectively? Are they frequently away from campus, e.g., do they travel extensively to conferences and other meetings? Do they plan to be away for a research, administrative, or parental leave? Who will be the supervisory contact during their absence? Are they intending to retire sometime during the duration of your program?

Of course, you may not find complete answers for all of your questions, but asking them may help you anticipate and minimize problems down the road. Setting up a personal meeting with your (potential) supervisor will often give you a good sense of whether this is a person who fits your learning style and someone you can see yourself working with.