GRADUATE SUPERVISION GUIDELINES

Faculty Edition

Section 4: Effective Supervision in Practice: From the Initial Stage to Finishing Up

Completing a graduate degree program requires a combination of goodwill, collegiality, flexibility, and rational decision-making on the part of both student and supervisor.

Problems sometimes arise when the expectations of both parties differ, which can have a particularly significant impact if discovered later on in the program. Also, problems may arise when shortcuts are taken and the proper University or SGS policies and procedures are not followed. This section offers strategies for helping students get off to a good start.

Getting Started

Agreeing to supervise a student

Establishing a positive student-supervisor relationship needs to start on day one. While there are many factors that can impact the success of a graduate supervision relationship, a good place to start is to make sure that the student and supervisor are a good fit.

Here are some suggestions for what you can do as a supervisor when deciding whether or not to supervise a student:

- Have a conversation (in-person, where possible) with the student to ensure that your expectations of a graduate student meet those of the candidate.

FIRST STEPS
Supervisors should:

- Establish positive communication with their student from the very beginning
- Help in setting up a supervisory committee as soon as possible
- Be aware of rules, policies, and procedures of both the Department and SGS
- Help plan their student's academic program, from start to finish
- Be knowledgeable about program funding structures
- Provide guidance, support, and feedback on student work in a timely manner

- Does their research interest fit with your work? Are you willing to supervise a student on a self-selected research topic that may fall somewhat outside your immediate area of expertise or current scholarly activities?
- If applicable, invite the students to see the research facilities.
- Consider how many students you already have -- will you have the appropriate time available for this new student? Discuss with the student what you expect in terms of independent work, frequency of meetings, deadlines, etc.
- Be aware of the graduate unit's policy on funding doctoral (or research master's) students. If you are expected to provide funding, do you have the funding available now? For how long will you be able to have access to funding? What are the funding mechanisms to support the student if your funding runs out?
- To what extent do you expect students to teach or work as a research assistant to generate the funding?
- Will the student report to you or is there another senior member of the lab who will work with the student?

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

Setting up a Supervisory Committee

Doctoral graduate students must have not only a supervisor, but also a supervisory committee. This is a formal requirement for all doctoral programs at the University of Toronto. A similar requirement exists in some master's degree programs.

Supervisory committees are most valuable if they are established as early as possible in the student's program, if the members are chosen carefully, and if both student and committee members are able and willing to interact more frequently than the necessary annual meeting.

While the primary supervisor is intended to be the first point of contact for students, the supervisory committee can add additional value to a student's degree program. They help ensure academic standards in the discipline through their evaluative role

Though it is ultimately the responsibility of the graduate unit to ensure a committee is appointed, committee members are best selected through consultation between the student and their supervisor.

The supervisory committee should:

- Meet regularly (at least once a year)
- Provide guidance during the student's research
- Add complementary value to your supervision
- Provide meaningful written feedback

in the required annual meetings.

In addition, the committee can and should provide considerable additional value. Committee members should be able to provide expertise that complements and expands on that of the supervisor. They can act as a valuable sounding board for discussion of ideas emerging in the research. In cases where the relationship between the student and their primary supervisor is less than ideal, they can provide advice, mentoring, and, if necessary, intervene in order to assist in problem solving.

The key components and roles of the supervisory committee are as follows:

- **A supervisory committee should consist of the supervisor and at least two graduate faculty members**, which are usually, but do not have to be, from the graduate unit responsible for the program. Interdisciplinary topics often benefit from the presence of a committee member drawn from another graduate unit.
- **The supervisory committee must meet with the student, as a committee, at least once per year** (some graduate units require more frequent meetings, a practice that should be considered good practice for most students) to assess the student's progress in the program and to provide advice on future work. This meeting should be substantive and rigorous, not a brief, casual one only held to satisfy regulations. Meetings should be more frequent if there are significant questions concerning progress and performance.
- **The committee must prepare a formal report** of its assessment, detailing its observations of the student's progress, and its recommendations.
- **The student must be given the opportunity to respond to the committee's report and recommendations**, and to append this response to the committee's report.
- **Copies of the report** must be given to the student and filed with the graduate unit.
- The supervisory committee is also responsible for **advising the graduate unit that a doctoral thesis is ready to proceed to examination**. This means that the committee should be involved in advising when and if the research is complete and adequate, reading and giving feedback on drafts of the thesis, and approving the final draft as ready for examination.

COMMITTEE MEMBERS:

- Do members add value (e.g. field-specific advice) to the student's research program?
- Will they be around and available for consultation and meetings throughout the time that the student is in the program?
- Will they be approachable and offer constructive advice?
- Can they be objective enough to help if problems arise?
- Will they be able and willing to offer their opinion even if contrary to that of yourself or other committee members?
- Is there a good balance? Do their areas of expertise cover a sufficient range?

Program Timelines, Good Progress, and Academic Standing

Key responsibilities of supervisors

- All supervisors should **be aware of, and adhere to, the rules, policies, and procedures in place** in the graduate unit, SGS, and the University as outlined in resources such as graduate unit websites or handbooks, the SGS Calendar and SGS website, and the University's website. This includes being familiar with the timelines and deadlines associated with the various parts of the program, such as registration, committee meetings, candidacy (for doctoral programs), and thesis submission.
- Supervisors should also work with their students to **prepare a research plan and timeline for the program of study**. This exercise should include the creation of a timeline for the entire program, noting important milestones and deadlines: establishing a thesis topic, completing a proposal, applying for funding; achieving intermediate research goals; attending conferences; doing seasonal fieldwork, publishing papers; completing the research; analyzing the data; and completing drafts of the thesis. This plan should be reviewed regularly (ideally at the supervisory committee meetings) and revised as necessary.[1]
- **Formal written feedback is necessary for the student's success.** Therefore, SGS requires that the committee must prepare a formal report of its assessment of the student's progress after each committee meeting, detailing its observations of your progress, and its recommendations, including whether the student is making satisfactory progress and is considered to be in good academic standing. Students must be given the opportunity to respond to the committee's report and recommendations, and to append this response to the committee's report. Copies of the report must be given to the supervisor and the student, and filed with the graduate unit.

Funding

Student funding is a critical factor in allowing a graduate student in a doctoral-stream program to make good progress in their program.

Graduate Administrators are a key resource on policies and procedures for supervisors and students.

While funding arrangements vary across discipline and program, supervisors should be aware of some of the additional funding resources that are available to their students. This includes being familiar with how the tri-council research awards (SSHRC, CIHR, and NSERC) operate. Supervisors should also find out what the graduate unit's policy is on funding doctoral (or research master's) students.

Supervisors, in collaboration with departmental administrators, should also discuss with their students the level and duration of research-related funding that will be provided to the student including support for conferences and travel for research. Supervisors should assist with the review of grant applications, wherever appropriate.

Additionally, supervisors should be aware of the financial aid programs and advising services available to their graduate students. Specifically, the emergency grant and loan programs, accessibility bursaries, and master's tuition fee bursary offered through the School of Graduate Studies. Supervisors may also want to direct their students to the Financial Advisor available through SGS.

Timely Feedback

Timely and constructive feedback on thesis drafts is an important responsibility of the supervisor; ideally, the supervisory committee should also be available to read and comment on later drafts of the thesis. How drafts are handled should be discussed well in advance. Supervisors should clearly explain to their students what their expectations are regarding the submission of written material for review. For instance, does the supervisor expect students to submit only completed sections of a thesis or other written work, or can the student submit outlines or drafts of parts of the material for review? Should the material be submitted in electronic or hard copy?

Students also should provide sufficient warning that a draft is about to be submitted, and allow sufficient time for reading and comments, which can depend on the supervisor's other commitments, how lengthy the draft is, and how much it has changed from previous versions.

Generally speaking, a reasonable turnaround time for drafts needs to be determined by both parties in advance. Expecting a thorough reading and commentary for a lengthy chapter in less than a week would probably be unreasonable. Equally unreasonable would be for a student not to hear back for more than a month, unless the supervisor has provided notice to the student that the review may take longer. The supervisor being away on research leave should not preclude timely reading of drafts or sign off on the final version in these days of electronic communication; if it does produce a problem, an alternate acting supervisor, often a member of the supervisory committee, should be found. If drafts have been read, and comments acted upon, reading of the final version should also be possible within two or three weeks of submission.

Submitting the thesis for the Final Oral Examination

When the thesis is ready for examination, the graduate unit is responsible for notifying SGS and nominating both an external appraiser and the membership of the Final Oral Examination committee (see the SGS Calendar for details). However, the supervisor and student are usually expected to provide suggestions for both. SGS regulations require external appraisers, whose function is to assure quality control and the application of international standards, to be appropriately experienced, to be sufficiently knowledgeable in the field, and to be "at arm's length" from both student and supervisor.

Notes

1. School of Graduate Studies, "Graduate Supervision Guidelines: Student Edition," 11-12.

2. School of Graduate Studies, "Financing Your Graduate Education." University of Toronto, 2016. Retrieved from: http://www.sgs.utoronto.ca/currentstudents/Pages/Financing-Your-Graduate-Education.aspx