



Section 4: Responsibilities of the Student, Supervisor, and Supervisory Committee

While success in a master's or doctoral degree is the prime responsibility of the student, others share in that responsibility. Foremost amongst these for research-stream students are the supervisor and the graduate unit responsible for the program. In addition, the student's supervisory committee members often have an important role as well. In this section we outline some of responsibilities, both explicit and implicit, of these principal parties.

What will be expected of you

In order to graduate, a student in a graduate program must fulfill the degree requirements of the program and abide by the general and degree regulations and policies of the graduate unit, SGS and the University. Doing so, and being aware of these requirements and regulations, which are readily available on the School of Graduate School's website, is your responsibility.

But a high-quality graduate student experience should be much more than simply getting the degree. Ideally, you will graduate with a passion for learning and research, a respect for academic colleagues, a network of valuable contacts, a deep understanding of academic integrity and other professional standards, believe that you have had an excellent graduate experience, and that you have acquired a skill set useful in a wide range of related careers. Optimizing these depends not just on the academic environment, but also on you and your relationships with the other parties.

Some of the more important student responsibilities:

- **Be familiar with the policies and regulations.**
Become familiar with, and adhere to, the rules, policies, and procedures in place in the graduate unit, the 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 important information on intellectual ownership and research integrity.
- **Know your deadlines.**
Be aware of and conform to the timelines and deadlines associated with the various parts of the program such as registration, committee meetings, candidacy (for doctoral programs), and thesis submission.
- **Prepare a timeline for your program.**
Prepare a research plan and timetable for the program of study. A good approach is to work with your supervisor or advisor to formulate a timeline for your whole program, noting important milestones and deadlines such as: establishing a thesis topic; completing a literature review; achieving intermediate research goals; attending conferences, doing seasonal fieldwork, publishing papers; completing the research; analyzing data; and completing drafts of the thesis. You will have the opportunity to revisit this plan regularly (e.g., at your mandatory committee meetings which should take place at least once a year) and, of course, you should revise it when necessary.
- **Establish an appropriate supervisory committee.**
How much say you have in choosing committee members varies across graduate units, but ideally both student and supervisor approve of, understand, and are comfortable with the choices. Though timing depends on the culture of the graduate unit, this should be done as early as is reasonable, certainly no later than the end of the second year of study in doctoral programs. In many graduate units, particularly in the sciences, supervisory committees are formed as early as at the initial registration in the program. In others, they may be constituted after a research proposal or comprehensive exam is completed. For some research master's programs, a supervisory committee is also required. You should check the regulations for your graduate unit, which are usually included in your student handbook or can be found on your unit's website.

Key Points

As a student, you should:

- Know how and where to access graduate unit and university policies and regulations.
- Be pro-active.
- Keep your supervisor informed of emerging issues or upcoming events that may affect your academic progress.
- Be sure to have regular meetings with your supervisory committee (SGS requires at least one meeting each year).
- Prepare a realistic timeline for your program, review and adjust when needed.
- Seek conflict resolution as early as possible.
- Participate cooperatively and responsibly in the supervisory relationship.
- Understand that graduate supervision is a shared responsibility.

- **Have regular meetings with your supervisor.**
Your supervisor is your primary academic advice and support person during your doctoral degree. Some supervisors will expect to meet frequently with their students, others may not. Some may schedule regular meetings, while others will rely on you to request a meeting when needed. Remember that you should be proactive in your program, identify when (extra) advice or support would be helpful, and organize a meeting with your supervisor when needed.
- **Keep your supervisor informed.**
It is your responsibility to let your supervisor know how you can be contacted, when you will be absent (e.g., due to illness, a disability related issues, to attend to family obligations, or upcoming travels), and inform your supervisor of any significant issues or events that may affect your academic progress or that of others. If you are a member of a group, for instance in a large laboratory, you will also have responsibilities to others in the group. This includes keeping them informed of matters that may affect their work or studies.
- **Seek conflict resolution as soon as possible.**
If you experience any emerging problems in the supervisory relationship, you should try to discuss these with your supervisor as early as possible. If you feel uncomfortable talking directly to your supervisor about these issues, you should contact your graduate coordinator or chair. Remember that issues are usually more easily resolved if addressed early. You will find additional information on conflict resolution resources in [Section 6](#).
- **Have regular meetings with your supervisory committee.** Ensure that meetings with your supervisory committee actually occur. According to SGS regulations, you must have a meeting with your full committee at least once a year. Your graduate program may require more frequent meetings. As a doctoral student, you share equal responsibility for making sure that progress, results, and plans are discussed. You should feel free to request additional meetings if you feel it will be useful to your progress.

Key Points

Your supervisor should:

- Help you in planning your academic program.
- Provide guidance, support and feedback.
- Be accessible.
- Ensure academic integrity.
- Avoid conflict of interest.

Key Points

Your supervisory committee should:

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

- **Be cooperative.**
Behave in an appropriate way that contributes positively to the atmosphere, culture, and productivity of the research group and/or supervisor. Successful supervisory relationships are synergistic, with both student and supervisor benefitting more than they would without it. Both you and your supervisor share **responsibility in making it so**.
- **Be responsible.**
Acquire the necessary scientific, technical, health, and safety skills for undertaking the proposed research and adhering to the ethical and integrity practices appropriate to the discipline and as required by the University of Toronto.

What you can expect of your supervisor

Your supervisor will assist and guide you so that you can reach your scholarly potential. At the same time, your supervisor also must assess your progress and help ensure that you know and comply with the rules and regulations of the University.

Sometimes, the role of your supervisor is to enforce these rules and regulations. The balance between these various roles can be challenging and students as well as supervisors can expect some bumps along the way.

In general, you can expect your supervisor to assist you in these areas:

- **Planning.**
Guiding you in the selection and planning of a meaningful and appropriate research topic that can be successfully completed within the normal time limit for the degree program; helping you establish a realistic timetable for completion of your program, preferably including a number of milestones to measure progress along the way.
- **Guidance.**
Providing you support and resources to help you understand the relevant theories, knowledge, and background literature, and the methodological and technical skills necessary for the research; providing adequate opportunity and a positive environment for discussion and constructive criticism of ideas, research plans, research results, and thesis drafts as the research progresses.
- **Feedback.**
Providing sufficient and appropriate guidance and commentary on progress to help ensure successful completion of the program; keeping track of progress and investigating any concerns; being open, honest, and fair with you when your academic performance is not meeting expectations. Sometimes, the most helpful feedback a supervisor can give you is that you are not making sufficient progress and what is required of you for improving your academic performance. While dealing with inadequate academic performance can be difficult, it is in no one's best interests to prolong a program of study when success is unlikely (see [Section 6](#) for problem solving tips).
- **Accessibility.**
Establishing regular meeting times for discussion and review of progress; being reasonably accessible for unscheduled meetings; making arrangements to ensure continuity of supervision during leaves or extended periods of absence.

- **Assistance with setting up a supervisory committee.**
Check your program requirements, but this should be done as early as possible in the program, and no later than the end of the second year. Ensuring that you have a meeting with your supervisory committee at least once a year, that the meeting is meaningful and helpful, and results in a written report of your progress for inclusion in your academic file. You should be given the opportunity to include your own comments in the report.
- **Awareness of policies and regulations.**
Being aware of, and ensuring that you are made aware of, all relevant policies and requirements for both your academic program and research (see [Policies and Other Guidelines in Appendix 1](#)).
- **Ensuring academic and research integrity.**
Ensuring that you understand the need for and meaning of the highest standard of academic and scholarly integrity both in coursework and research.
- **Support and encouragement.**
Assisting and encouraging your wider professional development through such means as: participation in seminars and colloquia, attendance and presentation of work at local, national, or international conferences; publication of your work in appropriate journals; encouraging authorship or co-authorship on publications as appropriate; taking advantage of the numerous offerings provided by the University for professional development, including the Graduate Professional Skills (GPS) program through the School of Graduate Studies; assisting you in the transition from degree program to employment by, for instance, providing advice on various career options, how to prepare a CV/resume, and strategies for launching an academic or other professional career, introducing you to professional colleagues and assisting in establishing a network of contacts, being willing to write letters of reference and communicate with relevant contacts.
- **Health and safety.**
Ensuring that the research environment in the lab or research group is safe, equitable, and free from violence, harassment and discrimination.

Key Points

What can you expect of your supervisor?

- Planning.
- Guidance.
- Feedback.
- Accessibility.
- Assistance with setting up a supervisory committee.
- Awareness of policies and regulations.
- Ensuring academic and research integrity.
- Support and encouragement.
- Health and safety.
- Avoiding conflict of interest.

- **Avoiding conflict of interest.**

Avoiding personal or business relationships that may constitute a (perceived) conflict of interest (see [Appendix 1](#) for links to relevant documents).

What you can expect of your supervisory committee

All doctoral students should not only have a supervisor to assist them throughout their program, but also a supervisory committee. This is a formal requirement for doctoral studies at the University of Toronto, but many graduate programs also require supervisory committees for research master's students, which SGS considers a very useful practice.

A supervisory committee should consist of the supervisor and at least two graduate faculty members, which are usually, but not always, from the graduate unit responsible for the program. Interdisciplinary topics often benefit from the presence of a committee member drawn from another graduate unit.

Supervisory committees not only help ensure academic standards in the discipline through their evaluative role in the mandatory annual committee meetings, but can and should provide considerable additional value to the student. Committee members should be able to provide expertise that complements and expands that of the supervisor. They can act as a valuable sounding board for discussion of ideas emerging in the research.

And since committee members can be important to help if things go wrong, it is good practice to avoid having committee members that have close personal relationships, or other potential conflicts of interest, with your supervisor, such as being a junior member of the supervisor's research team or being a former graduate student of your supervisor.

Your supervisory committee should:

- **Meet regularly.** The supervisory committee must meet, as a committee, with you at least once a year to assess your progress in the program and to provide advice on future work. This meeting should be substantive and rigorous. It should not be a brief, casual meeting which is only held to satisfy SGS regulations. Meetings should be more frequent if there are significant questions concerning progress and performance, or if it would benefit your academic work or research.

Key Points

How do you choose committee members?

Though it is ultimately the responsibility of the graduate unit to ensure a committee is appointed, committee members are best selected in consultation with your supervisor.

Here are some key questions when considering prospective members:

- Can they add value (e.g., field-specific advice) to your research program?
- Will they be around and available for consultation and meetings throughout most of your 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 your supervisor or other members?
- Is there a good balance? Do their areas of expertise cover a sufficient range?

- **Allow for individual meetings with committee members.** Sometime you may benefit from individual meetings with one or more members of your committee to discuss specific research or personal issues. You should check with your committee members how such meetings can be requested.
- **Provide formal written feedback.** The committee must prepare a formal report of its assessment of your progress after each committee meeting, detailing its observations of your progress, and its recommendations, including whether you are considered in good academic standing. You 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 you as the student and filed with the graduate unit.
- **Provide guidance during research completion.** Your supervisory committee is also responsible for advising the graduate unit that your doctoral thesis is ready to proceed to examination. This means that the committee should be involved in reading and giving feedback on drafts of the thesis, advising when and if the research is complete and adequate, and approving the final draft as ready for examination.

Though the relationship between you and the members of your supervisory committee is typically much less close than the one you have with your supervisor, some of the earlier suggestions for choosing a supervisor may be useful when thinking about prospective committee members. Consult the column "**How do you choose committee members?**" on page 6 for additional suggestions.