



'A woman riding a bicycle loaded with produce',
Process France, Graduate School Research Images Competition 2012

The Graduate School guide to...

You and your supervisor

The research student–supervisor relationship is a central aspect of the overall postgraduate research experience. Unlike your undergraduate or master’s studies, your progress on your PhD or other research programme will be primarily guided and supported by just one or two key members of staff. Your main supervisor will act as a tutor, mentor, guide, critic and, sometimes, friend. For many research students, the relationship continues long after they graduate.

The aim of this guide is to help you to get the most out of this key relationship so that you work productively with your supervisor or supervisors during your time here. As with all relationships, this sometimes takes a little effort and compromise but it is certainly worth the effort. The progress of your research, the writing of your thesis, and your overall postgraduate experience will all go more smoothly if you work well with your supervisor(s).

This guide is part of a series produced by the Graduate School, which address in an informal way a number of the areas and processes central to your doctoral research studies. These guides are complementary to - and should be read in conjunction with - the University’s formal policies and procedures, as listed on the Graduate School website.¹

Contents

1. Do I choose my supervisor	3
2. What should I expect of my supervisor(s) and what should they expect of me?	3
3. Getting the relationship off to a good start	5
4. What other help can I expect from my supervisor?	6
5. Supervisory styles	6
6. Advantages and disadvantages of co-supervision	7
7. What can I do to ensure co-supervision works well?	7
8. Working as part of a team	8
9. What happens if I really can’t get on with my supervisor?	8
10. Do I get an opportunity to provide feedback more generally on my supervisor arrangements?	8
11. What happens about my supervision if I am ‘studying away’ from the University?	8
12. Final words	9

¹ <http://www.reading.ac.uk/graduateschool/currentstudents/gs-policies-and-procedures.aspx>

1. Do I choose my supervisor?

Some students apply to Reading to work on a specific advertised project that has been developed by one or more members of staff who also act as supervisors. In these cases, there is no choice to be made. For other students, supervisors are allocated by the relevant School/Department based on the research set out in the outline research proposal that was submitted as part of the application. In cases such as this, you would be informed of the nominated supervisor(s) in your offer letter. You may have indicated in your research proposal that you want to work with a specific supervisor (and you may already have been in touch with him or her on an informal basis). We do our best to take account of such requests, although it is not always possible. However, we only accept prospective research students if we are confident that we can provide high quality supervision from staff with appropriate expertise and experience.

It is now normal practice for students to be allocated more than one supervisor (although this is not always done at the time of the offer letter). In some cases, there might be one primary supervisor who will provide you with most advice and guidance, and one co-supervisor who you will probably see less often. In other cases, the two supervisors might be equally involved, often providing complementary expertise. A few Schools and Departments use supervisory or advisory teams, where there is typically one primary supervisor responsible for your day-to-day supervision, and one or two other members of staff who will oversee your progress and comment on your work at key stages. The advantages and disadvantages of co-supervision, and what you can do to ensure that it works well, will be discussed in sections 6 and 7.

2. What should I expect of my supervisor(s) and what should they expect of me?

The University expects all of its students to take responsibility for themselves as learners and as individuals. As part of this, you will be expected to be proactive in managing your learning and seeking help when needed, to manage your time to fulfil your academic and other commitments, to conduct yourself and your studies with honesty, and to keep appointments and communicate with staff in a timely and courteous manner. More generally, all members of the University (be they staff or students) are expected to treat one another with respect, tolerance and courtesy regardless of identity, background or belief, in person and on-line.

The University's Code of Practice on Research Students² sets out the more specific responsibilities of both students and supervisors. It is important for you to be aware of these. They are shown below.

The responsibilities of research students include:

- discussing with the supervisor preferred ways of working and agreeing a schedule of meetings;
- taking the initiative in raising problems or difficulties, and keeping in regular contact with supervisors;
- agreeing and observing any necessary health and safety precautions;

² http://www.reading.ac.uk/web/FILES/qualitysupport/cop_resstudents.pdf

- carrying out a Learning Needs Analysis³ and attending appropriate training and development events;
- carrying out research in an ethical way and in line with University procedures for Good Practice;
- maintaining the progress of the work in accordance with the stages agreed with the supervisor, including in particular the presentation of written materials as required in sufficient time to allow for comments and discussion;
- providing at least annually (as required in University regulations) a formal written report to the School, outlining progress during the preceding year, the contents of which should normally be discussed with the supervisor(s) before submission;
- as part of the above, completing the survey on monitoring supervisory arrangements (submitted in confidence to the Graduate School);
- being honest when reporting on progress;
- deciding when he or she wishes to submit within the prescribed period of registration, taking due account of the supervisor's opinion, and informing the Doctoral Examinations Officer;
- keeping supervisors informed of any special circumstances which may be adversely affecting their research;
- showing their supervisor(s) the final draft of their thesis before submission;

The responsibilities of the supervisor include:

- giving guidance regarding all aspects of the project;
- helping students to carry out an analysis of training and learning needs, and ensuring they participate in appropriate training events;
- maintaining contact through regular meetings;
- being accessible to the student at other appropriate times when advice may be needed;
- helping the student to gain access to the facilities, equipment and resources they need to complete their PhD;
- giving advice on the necessary completion dates of successive stages of the work so that the thesis may be submitted within the scheduled time;
- requesting written work as appropriate, and returning such work with constructive criticism and in reasonable time;
- arranging as appropriate for the student to talk about the work to staff or graduate seminars;

³ <http://www.reading.ac.uk/graduateschool/training-and-development/gs-reading-researcher-development-programme.aspx>

- reporting in writing at least annually on the student's progress to the School Director of PGR Studies and the student (in line with designated University procedures);
- advising on appropriate dissemination activities (including publication), external engagement, networking etc;
- when the thesis is submitted, sending a written report to the Examiners via the Doctoral Examinations Officer;
- preparing students for their viva, and advising on any subsequent corrections they may have to undertake;
- engaging in training and other development events to help undertake the role of the supervisor effectively.

You can see that you will be expected to operate at a much more independent level (at least as your project progresses) than is generally the case for undergraduates and taught master's students. It is important to remember that your supervisor is a guide, not an instructor. They will help you to think things through for yourself. They may also challenge you at times, questioning your ideas and your thinking. This does not mean that your thinking is necessarily wrong, but that you need to learn to justify and defend your ideas, and also learn how to constructively challenge your own thinking as well as that of other researchers. Your supervisor(s) may also push you at times to ensure that your progress is on track and that you are publishing or disseminating your research in appropriate ways.

Although the above list sets out the responsibilities of your supervisor(s) and what you can rightfully expect of them, it is worth remembering that it never does any harm to acknowledge, and show your appreciation for, the support that you receive, rather than simply take this for granted. This is particularly the case if your supervisor has gone out of his or her way to help you or to comment on your work at short notice. A simple 'thank-you' is all that is needed.

3. Getting the relationship off to a good start

It is important that you get to understand your supervisor's way of working and that he or she understands yours. Most staff here are very busy people, who will have a range of duties and responsibilities other than supervising you. You cannot expect a supervisor to be available 24/7. You need to get a feel for how your supervisor structures his or her week, times when they are more likely to be available, and so on. You may need to change some of your working habits to fit in with those of your supervisor and the wider Department.

The best way to get to grips with some of this is to have an open discussion about these aspects in an initial meeting with your supervisor(s) soon after you start your programme. For example, you need to find out how you should contact your supervisor – should this just be by email, or is telephoning or dropping by his or her office ok? How should your supervisor contact you? How often will you meet and what form will those meetings take? What preparation should you do in advance? Should you take responsibility for taking notes and keeping a record of what is agreed in such meetings? What should you do if you are ill and need to postpone a meeting at short notice?

The frequency and pattern of supervisory meetings may alter as your project progresses. At first, meetings are likely to be relatively frequent as you begin to plan your project in detail and determine what training you need. It is useful to agree a minimal number of meetings, even if more frequent meetings are sometimes interspersed between these.

The University Code of Practice on Research Students⁴ recommends that, normally, the minimum number of meetings should be 10 per year and that there should be more meetings initially. However, many supervisors (particularly in the Sciences and Life Sciences) will want to meet with their students on a more frequent basis than this.

It is also important to try to establish some clarity about what written or other work will be required of you, and what sort of feedback you are likely to receive (in terms of the nature and amount of this, and the timescale by which it will be provided). A few students seem (unrealistically) to expect their supervisors to comment in detail on endless drafts of chapters and to provide the feedback within just one or two days of their handing the work in. On the other hand, it is not unreasonable to expect to receive feedback within around three weeks of submitting the work in most cases.

4. What other help can I expect from my supervisor?

Supervisors are appointed to guide you in your research and to provide you with appropriate support to carry this out effectively. In addition to advising you about your specific research project and appropriate training and development that would be of benefit to you, they may well suggest particular professional organisations you should join, conferences and meetings you should attend, when and how you should present and publish your research, how to prepare for you viva and address any required amendments, and how you might best further your career at the end of your research programme.

Your supervisor should also be made aware of any paid employment that you are undertaking, or considering undertaking, or other activities that might have a significant impact on the progress of your studies. He or she should be able to advise you on what would be a suitable balance so that you do not stretch yourself too far. Occasionally, a supervisor might ask a student to take on some additional work (such as proof reading a draft manuscript, or helping with editorial duties) in order to help the supervisor. If you are in any doubt about whether or not this is appropriate you should speak with the Director of PGR Studies or the Graduate School for advice.

In some situations, supervisors will be required to offer considerable pastoral support to students who have difficulties that affect the progress of their research. These difficulties may relate to personal or medical problems, family matters, or employment / financial issues. If this does happen to you, it is important that you let your supervisor(s) know as soon as possible. If, for any reason, you are reluctant to confide in your supervisor then you should talk to the School/Department Director of PGR Studies or to the staff in the Doctoral Research Office within the Graduate School. There are people and structures available in the University to support students who encounter difficulties and it is important that you know about these at the earliest opportunity. In some cases, it may also be necessary to make a case for a suspension, and your School Director or the Doctoral Research Office can advise you about this.

5. Supervisory styles

Supervisors are people and, like all people, they will have different personalities and different ways of communicating and interacting with others. You should not necessarily expect your supervisor to interact with you in the same way as a fellow student's supervisor interacts with his or her students. Some supervisors naturally adopt a very friendly and open approach to supervision, forming relatively close relationships with their research students, while others have a tendency to be more formal and

⁴ http://www.reading.ac.uk/web/FILES/qualitysupport/cop_resstudents.pdf

distant in their dealings with their students. The particular style supervisors adopt is also likely to be affected by the type of student being supervised and how he or she typically works and communicates. Whatever their personal style however, your supervisor(s) should provide you with appropriate support and advice and fulfil their responsibilities as set out in section one above.

6. Advantages and disadvantages of co-supervision

As stated above, it is now normal practice for students to be allocated more than one supervisor. There are clear advantages of having more than one person involved in the supervision of your work. They will usually cover a wider range of expertise and / or have experience of different approaches and methodologies. They will also have different contacts and networks that you might be able to tap into at some point. Finally, having someone other than your primary supervisor who is familiar with your work is a useful back-up should your primary supervisor become ill or move to another University.

Occasionally, however, having more than one supervisor can cause you some concern. You may sometimes receive conflicting advice or feel that no one person has a good oversight of all of your work. There is sometimes a lack of clarity over the roles and responsibilities of particular supervisors, with each one assuming it is someone else's responsibility to take a particular action. However, you can do your bit to help to ensure that co-supervision does work well for you, as outlined below.

7. What can I do to ensure co-supervision works well?

It is important that you, and all those involved in the supervision, are clear on the different roles and responsibilities of the relevant individuals. This needs to be made explicit in an initial meeting between you all. If you are not clear about this, then ask the supervisors to explain what they see as their role and how they see you all working as a team. Good communication here is absolutely vital. You will also need to establish to whom you report to in terms of different aspects of the project and reporting on your progress.

Even where different supervisors have clear roles, it is important that you keep them all aware of how you are progressing. Any reports that you write should be submitted to all of them, even if it has been agreed that one person will be taking responsibility for providing you with feedback. The others should still be copied into communications and given a copy of the report for their records.

It is also important that you have joint meetings at agreed stages. For some students and projects, all meetings might operate on this basis whereas, for others, there might be more frequent meetings with one or other supervisor, which are interspersed with joint meetings where all of you are present.

You need to find out about the different skills, expertise and contacts of your supervisors, and make use of these, ensuring that you make the most of the broader range of experience and knowledge that is available to you.

A key point is that you should never try to 'play one supervisor off against another'. If you are not happy with the advice you are given from one supervisor, do not simply go to another with the hope of receiving different advice. This is only likely to back-fire on you. It is much better to query why that particular advice is being given and try to openly discuss different options. Occasionally, you may find that your two supervisors might disagree about the way something should be taken forward. If this is the case, it is important to discuss the nature of the disagreement openly with them (in a joint discussion) and try to resolve it. If this does not appear to be possible then you should speak to your School/Department Director of PGR Studies to seek their advice.

Finally, having two or more allocated supervisors does not mean that you cannot talk to other staff members about your research. On the contrary, you should do this when the opportunity arises. As a developing researcher, you can benefit enormously from discussing your ideas and thinking with others who bring different perspectives and viewpoints. It is also good experience to start getting practice at being able to describe what you are doing, and why, clearly and succinctly.

8. Working as part of a team

In many areas of research, particularly in science-related disciplines, research students are likely not only to have more than one supervisor but also to work as part of a wider research group or team. This can bring considerable advantages as, in such cases, there will usually be several knowledgeable people, in addition to your supervisor(s), to whom you can turn to for support and advice. However, it is important to remember that, when working as part of a team, you also have obligations to fellow team members to ensure that you work constructively with them and are respectful of their needs and preferences, as well as your own. You should also remember that you need to take intellectual responsibility for your own research project (even if it is linked to other related projects in the School) and develop your own independent ideas.

9. What happens if I really can't get on with my supervisor?

As noted in section 5, different supervisors have different styles of supervision and it can take time to adapt to a particular supervisor's style and way of working, and to develop a working relationship that is acceptable to both parties. In a small number of cases, however, a supervisory relationship does not work well, or breaks down at some point, to the extent that a change of supervisor needs to be considered. If this does happen, you should talk to your School/Department Director of PGR Studies (or Head of School/Department) in the first instance. You should not feel bad about doing this; raising such issues will certainly not reflect badly on you. The Director or Head will see if the particular issues can be resolved and, if not, will try to make suitable alternative supervisory arrangements. If you prefer not to discuss any problems within your School, you can speak with staff (in confidence) in the Graduate School, who will be able to advise you.

It is also sometimes necessary to bring in a new supervisor when staff become ill or move away from the institution. Again, if this happens to you, every attempt will be made to ensure that appropriate new arrangements are made and that your research is not overly disrupted by the change.

10. Do I get an opportunity to provide feedback more generally on my supervisory arrangements?

The short answer is 'yes'. All research students are asked to complete an evaluation of supervisory arrangements questionnaire each year. The process is overseen by the Graduate School so that students will feel able to provide honest feedback in confidence. If you raise any significant points of concern, the Head of the Doctoral Research Office in the Graduate School will contact you. He or she will not speak with your supervisor or School about the issue without your agreement.

11. What happens about my supervision if I am 'studying away' from the University?

We have an increasing number of research students who spend some of their time studying away from the University, either within the UK or, more usually, overseas. Students who are registered as

'PhD by Distance' are encouraged to be present in the University for a few weeks at the start of their programmes. One reason for this is that it helps you to start to develop a relationship with your supervisor(s) and to agree how the relationship will work whilst you are 'away'. This is typically done as part of a more general learning agreement that covers the periods when you will be studying at a distance. Being present will also enable you to undertake key training sessions in person. However, where this is not possible, the Graduate School has around 24 high quality online training courses particularly aimed at those studying at a distance.

With the enhancements in digital communication, supervision by email, Skype, and other forms is increasingly available and can be used to supplement your face-to-face meetings with your supervisor(s) during periods when you are in Reading or when your supervisor visits you whilst you are away. Where appropriate, students who are studying at a distance are also allocated a local supervisor or mentor. The role of this person is to provide a regular point of contact at the studying away location, to act as an advocate (for example, in helping you to gain access to certain facilities) and to provide more general pastoral support to supplement that being provided from Reading.

12. Final words

Whether you are based in Reading or studying away, the key point to remember is that the main ingredient of success in a supervisory relationship is good communication. Regular contact, adhering to agreed actions and deadlines, raising any issues that arise at an early stage when they can be more easily addressed, and being clear of what is expected of you and what you should expect of your supervisor(s), should all result in a more productive and positive relationship, which in turn should impact positively on your overall experience as a research student.

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