

Supervising Students

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Summary

- What are the attributes of a good supervisor?
- Talk by Professor Henry Thompson
- Planning your supervisory meetings:
 - Motivation
 - Possible activities during your first meeting(s) (once student was allocated)
 - Possible activities during subsequent meetings
 - Possible activities in between meetings
- Tackling possible challenges during supervision
 - The student who is falling behind
 - The student who cannot make decisions or take initiative
 - The perfectionist student who gets lost in details

Attributes of a good supervisor

On separate post-it notes, write down the 3 attributes which you think are the most important for a good supervisor

Attributes of a good supervisor- my list

- Knowledgeable
- Caring
- Empathetic/humane
- Available/reliable
- Approachable (easy to talk to, friendly, non intimidating)
- Supportive
- Encouraging
- Inspiring
- Fair
- Assertive/confident
- Firm
- Positive

Talk by Prof. Henry Thompson

Planning your supervisory meetings

Planning your supervisory meetings- motivation

Brainstorm the motivation for having a plan for your supervisory meetings

Planning your supervisory meetings- motivation [2]

➤ Useful to have a plan because:

- Playing 'by the ear' can lead to students failing
- Waiting for students to ask for help or formulate the right questions is risky
- Supervision should be seen as a work meeting, which benefits from good organisation
- Planning can help better cater for student needs
- Planning can ensure that important items of discussion are not missed
- Planning can help avoid unpleasant situations
- If more supervisors involved, good to plan on best supervisory approaches and common advice to avoid offering conflicting advice or arguing during supervisory meetings

Possible activities during supervisory meetings

In small groups, make a list of possible activities:

- (special ones) During the first supervisory meeting(s) (once student was allocated)
- At the start of any meeting
- In the middle of any meeting
- At the end of any meeting
- In between meetings

Possible “special” activities during the first supervisory meeting(s) [3]

- Introductions, interests if not already covered during interview for project
- Clarification of the project and its motivation
- Discussion around project methodology and university milestones; establishing work plan
- Clarification of expected contributions
- Establishing expectations and ground rules
- Discussing student preferences for the organisation of supervisory meetings
- Assessing the student’s needs with regards to training for being able to tackle the project
- Pointing student to literature for background and acquiring missing knowledge/skills
- Pointing student to sources of support (e.g. technology workshops, English classes)

Possible activities at the start of any supervisory meeting [2]

- Friendly discussion on non-academic aspects of student's life
- Student outlining progress since last meeting; supervisor probing for clarification
- Comparing progress with notes from last meeting to check goal achievement
- Student asking questions arising from work done at home
- Identification of problems, difficulties, knowledge or skill gaps, future needed steps
- Setting up purposes and items of discussion for meeting

Possible activities in the middle of any supervisory meeting [2]

- Analysis of problems, options with pros/cons, making decisions
- Supervisor probing/encouraging student to carry out the above; assessing feasibility
- Brainstorming ideas, discussion, extrapolation
- Explaining, demonstrating ideas
- Supervisor introducing new notions, pointing to relevant literature/sources of support
- Choosing different routes for steps which did not work out
- Asking questions of each other to establish common understanding
- Supervisor providing feedback on written work
- Reconsideration/rethink of the work plan
- Choosing new tasks for the student (potentially also supervisor), with deadlines

Possible activities at the end of any supervisory meeting [1][2]

- Summarising the discussion and decisions made
- Outlining steps further and actions TO DO for the student and supervisor
- Concluding on student progress
- Establishing the time of the next meeting
- Making notes of the above
- Ending with friendly discussion on non-academic aspects

Possible activities in between meetings [1]

- Student emailing notes from previous meeting
- Student emailing questions, supervisor addressing them
- Student sending written work, supervisor providing written feedback
- Supervisor sharing additional resources
- Supervisor checking on progress (e.g. if shared online) and contacting student if necessary
- Supervisor organising group meetings with more students around skills development e.g. dissertation writing, research skills, time management, etc.
- Student emailing description of progress to supervisor before next meeting
- Student self-evaluating progress by using a proforma

Tackling possible problems during
supervision

Tackling possible problems during supervision

In small groups, come up with solutions for one of the problems below:

1. *Your student is very capable, but has missed several deadlines*
2. *Your student is unable to make decisions or take initiative, and gets stuck unless you make the decisions and give him/her clear tasks to tackle*
3. *Your student is very analytical and quite the perfectionist, and has the tendency to overdo things and get lost in details.*

1. Supporting the student who is falling behind- my advice

- Discuss with the student to understand the reason:
 - **Finding the project difficult:** clarify what help is needed, break down problems, provide some explanations, point to relevant resources, consider meeting more often until back on track
 - **Personal commitments** (e.g. work during studies, interviews, moving house): point out importance to dedicate time to the project and try to stick to plan, discuss any alternatives for personal commitments, advise about possibility to get extension for submission deadline
 - **Difficulty with time management:** advise on strategies for time management, point to IAD and Student Counselling workshops and resources on time management, set up clear deadlines and expectations.
 - **Personal problems:** can direct to Informatics Student Support Officers, Personal Tutor, EUSA Advice Place, Student Counselling

2. Supporting the student who cannot make decisions- my advice

- Remind him/her of your expectations about bringing ideas and proposing solutions
- Refrain from doing any more such work for the student
- Prompt to help break down problems and think of alternative solutions, to develop his/her decision making skills
- Give him/her time to consider options by preparing at home
- Discuss together criteria for comparing options and point to relevant literature such that he/she can make an informed decision
- Give examples of very good past dissertations/theses in which decisions are well justified all the way through, or of literature reviews offering good comparisons of alternatives

3. Supporting the perfectionist student who gets lost in details- my advice

- Praise the student's analytical capabilities, and acknowledge that they are valued in Informatics projects
- Warn at the same time that “not seeing the forest for the trees” can make the project more difficult to manage time-wise, and may moreover lead to a lower mark if main contributions are not clear in the dissertation/thesis.
- Clarify expectations with regards to level of work and level of detail in dissertation/thesis
- Give examples of good dissertation/theses
- Emphasise the important of brevity in writing to meet page numbers (MSc, PhD projects)
- Bring the student back to the main topic of discussion when he/she deviates
- For the writing up, advise the student to always ask himself/herself “Is this important for the reader to know?”. If not, can avoid writing altogether or consult with you about.

Resources

- [1] Lewis, Vicky and Habeshaw, Sue, (1997) "Keeping Students Going" from Lewis, Vicky and Habeshaw, Sue, 53 interesting ways to supervise student projects, dissertations and theses pp.91-103, Bristol: Technical and Educational Services Ltd
- [2] George Brown and Madeleine Atkins, Effective Teaching in Higher Education, Chapter 6, 'Effective Research and Project Supervision' (pp. 115-149)
- [3] James, R., and G. Baldwin. 1999. [Eleven practices of effective postgraduate supervisors](#). Melbourne: Center for the Study of Higher Education and the School of Graduate Studies, University of Melbourne.

Resources

- University of Edinburgh [Code of Practice on Supervision](#)
- [University of Edinburgh regulations and policies relating to supervision of student projects](#)
- School of Informatics [Honours Project](#), [MSc project](#), [PhD project](#) pages
- “Supervising projects and dissertations” material on the [“IAD Resources on Tutoring and Demonstrating” channel in Learn](#)
- IAD course [“Supervising Projects and Dissertations”](#), Wed 27 March and 7th April 2019
- [University of Edinburgh Support Services](#)