

# Supervising Students

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# Summary

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- 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

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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

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

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Talk by Prof. Henry Thompson

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# Planning your supervisory meetings

# Planning your supervisory meetings- motivation

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Brainstorm the motivation for having a plan for your supervisory meetings

# Planning your supervisory meetings- motivation [2]

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➤ 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

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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]

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- 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]

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- 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]

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- 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]

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- 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]

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- 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

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Tackling possible problems during  
supervision

# Tackling possible problems during supervision

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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

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- 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

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- 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

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- 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

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- [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

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- 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 7<sup>th</sup> April 2019
- [University of Edinburgh Support Services](#)