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St George's University of London

Teaching and learning at St George's with a blended learning approach:

Undergraduate and Postgraduate Supervision

Overview and Aims

Successful supervision of undergraduate projects, Masters dissertations and PhD theses is underpinned by a shared understanding of the level of autonomy a student has for the project and the directiveness of the supervisor's role. The balance between student autonomy and supervisor direction should be appropriate to the level of study and is also likely to evolve during the project.

This guide will recommend strategies to support supervisors with facilitating their supervision online or as part of a blended approach. Included, will be ways of working through the stages of supervision to manage communication, building a relationship and avoiding student isolation, structuring the completion of the project, and managing effective feedback.

The Basics

Connecting and communicating

1. Agree at the beginning of supervision when, how often and how you will connect and communicate. In the online context, exploit **the range of channels for communicating** via work email and work telephone as well as through Canvas Discussion, or MS Teams. Working remotely makes more frequent but shorter check-ins useful for keeping on track. Factors to discuss when choosing the best way to communicate should include the student's access to technology, internet connectivity and location, as well as the different purposes for meeting. For example, use synchronous channels if it is important that you can see or hear each other to clarify tone of voice such as when giving feedback. Asynchronous channels might be more useful for more general checking up on progress.

2. Agree whether meetings using MS Teams should be recorded so that the student can revisit the recording to clarify any areas of confusion. At the end of the meeting ask the student to **summarise in their own words the action points** as an outcome of the discussion, either orally if recording or by using the chat function, so you both have a record of the agreed next steps.

3. Consider scheduling a regular **physical or virtual office hour** or **coffee break** in MS Teams so that students always know when they can contact you or just drop in. In particular, students who work remotely can miss out on more informal contact with supervisors and peers in the corridor or the lab, and may value an online space "to replicate a more serendipitous 'bumping into' them" in the on-site context (Shanks, 2020) between planned supervisory meetings.

Establishing expectations

4. Supervisors and students may have very different expectations about supervision and these differences can impact on the outcomes of a project. **Allocate time early on to discuss expectations and responsibilities**. Supervisor and project module guidance may already state these expectations and it can be useful to review these together at the beginning of the supervisory relationship. If these are not already defined, ask your student to make a list of what a supervisor and a student should be responsible for and share your own list. This will help to identify where there may be differences in your expectations about your responsibilities and reach a consensus about how the process and the relationship will work. A written record of this means you can also revisit it anytime if things go off track. Typical questions to discuss might include:
    - When should work be forwarded to the supervisor in advance of a meeting?
    - How frequent are meetings and who is responsible for arranging them?
    - Who sets the agenda for meetings?
    - Who is responsible for managing the progress of the project and monitoring milestones and deadlines?
    - When and how much feedback will be given on written work?
    - Who decides if the work is at an appropriate standard?

Building the supervisory relationship

5. While asynchronous communication such as email or file-sharing can be an efficient way to share and get feedback, make sure there is a balance between asynchronous activity and synchronous meetings. If meeting online, encourage students to **use their webcam when possible even if this is just at the beginning of a meeting to establish rapport.**

6. An important objective for project supervision is to develop the student's independence as a researcher. **Asking the student to set the agenda for a supervisory meeting and to capture action points at the end of meetings establishes their ownership of the project**. In remote supervision, screen sharing of documents or using a collaborative whiteboard is a useful way to build student responsibility by asking them to talk through, for example, data analysis, how they have responded to feedback or their project plan.

7. The traditional doctoral supervisory relationship between a single student and supervisor has for the most part been replaced by supervisory teams. For students at all levels, creating spaces for peers to work together is an important way to induct students into their peer and research community. **Set up a physical or online mini-conference where students present or upload a pre-recorded lightning talk** and

give each other formative feedback on projects in progress. Lightning talks are 3-5 minute presentations, usually with 1 or 2 PowerPoint slides, with the aim to introduce the audience to the topic and convey key messages about the ways a student has approached their project and why it is important. In the context of online learning, students can either deliver lightning talks live or alternatively prepare a pre-recorded presentation using voice-over for a PowerPoint presentation or Panopto. Presenting and giving feedback on a lightning talk develops students' presentation and research communication skills as well as engaging them with the research of their peers and working together to give feedback.

8. Set up a shared collaborative space, such as Miro or an MS Whiteboard, so that student **peer groups can post short videos and question and respond to each other**. This can be used for a general introduction, for frequently asked questions, or for specific topics. Alternatives are, Canvas Discussion https://canvas.sgul.ac.uk/courses/36/pages/creating-a-discussion-online?module_item_id=71564and the post functionality in MS Teams, which can be used as group chat tools to increase student responsibility for their own and each other's work.

Scaffolding the project

9. Students at different stages of their research career will have different levels of experience of undertaking a project independently. Think about the milestones and **plan how you will scaffold learning between these stages**. Initially, establish a series of specific steps for a student to undertake the first stages of the project such as directing them to specific resources, providing templates or breaking larger tasks down into more manageable activities, all of which can support students to tackle what can seem an overwhelming challenge at the beginning of supervision. For doctoral theses, Trafford and Lesham (2008) recommend using visual methods to develop and share the structure or "architecture" of a project early on as a way to understand the conceptual argument of the research, for example using mind-mapping to visualise the research problem, literature reviews and structure of the argument (Kernan, 2018).

10. Neurodiverse students including those with dyslexia, ADHD or autism, will benefit from ongoing support to organise and progress a project as well as clear communication of objectives, deadlines and feedback. Preece (2023) argues that many of the typical ways we communicate in academic settings can be unclear or ambiguous whereas neurodiverse students may use and understand language in literal ways. **Meta-communication is a way of providing clear signposts for your students while speaking or writing to explain how the information you are providing, such as feedback or instructions, should be interpreted**. For example, paraphrasing or summarising key points to take away or actions, clearly signposting

humour or critique, and checking with students to confirm their understanding. **Use different communication modes to convey important information** (e.g., consider flow charts, mind maps and oral explanations). Be aware too of the environment where meetings take place or of resources used to support learning. Visual and auditory distractions can impact on focus so try to remove these barriers in your teaching (Fabri, 2016).

11. **Curate and repurpose external resources in a range of different formats** to support students to complete their projects. Use the units structure in Canvas to organise self-directed study materials into a clear, staged learning journey. Invite students to collaborate with you to find and share relevant hyperlinks as well as videos/podcasts of experiments, data analysis and use of statistical packages. Make sure all resources on reading lists are available using Hunter Library or speak to the subject librarian if you need to organise specific material.

Giving feedback

12. Self-assessment involves learners evaluating performance against stated assessment criteria in order to internalise standards and develop metacognition and self-regulation. Ask students to **self-assess areas of strength and weakness in relation to the assessment criteria** and identify two or three specific aspects of work they would like to receive feedback on from their supervisor when they submit a draft.

13. One of the main barriers that impacts on the effectiveness of supervisor feedback is how students engage and act on the feedback they have received. As supervision is concerned with building student independence as researchers appropriate to the level of study, developing a student's capacity to not only receive but also to plan how to act on it is central to supervision. As an outcome of feedback on a draft, ask students to **identify the key areas they need to focus on from their feedback and to define the appropriate actions they will take to respond to the feedback**. Dependent on how many drafts you review, ask students to indicate when submitting revised or new work how they have taken account of previous feedback.

References

Fabri, Marc (2016) "How to help autistic students succeed at university", *The Guardian*, 13 April.

Kernan, W. D., Basch, C. H., & Cadorett, V. (2018). "Using mind mapping to identify research topics: A lesson for teaching research methods", *Pedagogy in Health Promotion*, *4*(2), 101-107. DOI: 10.1177/2373379917719729

Preece, K. (2023) "Supervising neurodiverse postgraduate students", *Campus, Times Higher Education.*

Trafford, V., & Leshem, S. (2008). *Stepping stones to achieving your doctorate: By focusing on your viva from the start*: McGraw-Hill Education.

Shanks, R. (2020) "Supervision at a distance, sometimes less is best", Community Acuity Blog, "Supervising PhDs".

Further Resources

Roberts, L. & Seaman, S. (2018). "Good undergraduate dissertation supervision: perspectives of supervisors and dissertation coordinators", *International Journal for Academic Development*, 23(1), 28-40, DOI: 10.1080/1360144X.2017.1412971

UK Council for Graduate Education (n.d.) Resource Library. This is a regularly updated research supervisor bibliography of the latest education research on postgraduate level supervision. The resources can be filtered by theme, for example: supervisory relationships with candidates; encouraging students to write and giving effective feedback.

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