

Key Factors in Postgraduate Research Supervision

A Guide for Supervisors
2nd Edition

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"Nothing in life is to be feared, it is only to be understood. Now is the time to understand more – so that we may fear less."

- Marie Curie

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FOREWORD

Henry Ward Beecher once wrote that,

“We should not judge people by their peak of excellence; but by the distance they have traveled from the point where they started.”

In this context, the supervision of a postgraduate research candidate should be a journey of knowledge for both the research candidate and the supervisor. However, for the supervisor, the journey is far more complex than the conduct of the research itself. It is ultimately about assuming a level of responsibility for a human being – more specifically, their physical and emotional safety, wellbeing, learning and professional development. Unlike the undergraduate learning environment, where one academic seeks to educate many students simultaneously, in postgraduate research supervision, there is a one-to-one relationship, which is intrinsically more difficult to manage.

Some academics believe that the process of research supervision is centered around a professional bond between a supervisor and student, a shared interest in an area of research, a common desire to achieve field-specific outcomes, and provision of mentorship to the student. This may be partly or wholly true, but it is an oversimplification. A modern university is not just a place of learning, it is also a workplace – and a complex one at that. Each institution has numerous internal and external regulations, as well as processes that must be addressed. Beyond these, there exist national and regional laws that impinge upon the supervisory role, in terms of treatment of students and staff, as well as general research ethics issues.

When disputes arise, both the institution and the supervisor need to ensure that the supervisory process has been undertaken in a diligent, systematic and professional manner – and not solely based on an informal/friendly relationship between supervisor and student. The responsibilities of supervision are therefore significant, with potential career ramifications and legal sanctions, in addition to basic academic objectives.

A common challenge that academics face in tackling new areas of responsibility is an overload of information and ideas. This is particularly true in the case of research supervision. For many activities there are innumerable valid approaches to the tasks at hand. Reading and understanding all these approaches can become an insurmountable challenge in its own right – and an impractical one, given the demands on academic/research time. In addition to the various approaches, one then has to superimpose consideration of all the specific rules and procedures

imposed by the universities themselves. How then is one to tackle the complex issue of postgraduate supervision for the novice supervisor?

I have found that the best approach to tackling a complex task in a complex environment is to evaluate what an experienced practitioner does, and then formulate an approach around that – borrowing, adapting or rejecting elements as required – in order to achieve something which suits the specifics of the task at hand.

In 1999, I released the first edition of *Key Factors in Postgraduate Research – A Guide for Students*. In that book, I took the decision to present the issues in a straightforward, linear manner, so that students could read the book from cover to cover in a few hours, and then decide on what additional information they required, or what alternative approaches they could take. Since that time, many thousands of copies of the book have gone into circulation at universities around the world, and the feedback has been positive. People liked the idea of a guide that could be read as a regular book, rather than an academic treatise that covered every conceivable angle. Many research students have used the book as a background template, in order to develop their own approach.

The view taken herein, therefore, is similar. Rather than presenting potential supervisors with every conceivable approach to their task, the aim is to present a broad, linear perspective, and then to allow people to use this as either a point of reference or a point of departure. The assumption is that those entrusted with the supervision of a postgraduate researcher have the judgment/wisdom to formulate their own specific approach – or, perhaps, explore an array of other opinions when they encounter something herein which doesn't sit well with them.

I have supervised numerous postgraduate research students to successful completion and, more importantly, have made sufficient errors of judgment to learn the hard lessons of what happens when things do go wrong. I have also been called in on numerous occasions to assist in resolving problems that have arisen when the relationship between a supervisor and student has broken down. The broad lesson is that any competent academic can be a good research supervisor when things are going well – real supervisory skill only comes to the fore when a supervisor/student relationship isn't working, or the research program itself has gone completely awry.

A key lesson I have learned after more than two decades of supervision, and working as a problem solver and intermediary, to resolve other supervisions that have gone awry, is that no two supervisions are the same; no two supervisors are the same, and no two students are the same. It would therefore be simplistic to believe that there is a single, universal

model that works. Further, no amount of reading will be sufficient to resolve all the problems that supervisors will encounter. Practical experience, mistakes and, most importantly, learning from those mistakes and hopefully not repeating them, are ultimately the only real learning tools that we have.

This book cannot realistically attempt to prevent supervisors from making errors of judgment. However, by providing a broad background to the supervisory process and the common errors that occur – as well as their resolution – supervisors may be able to preempt and correct problems before they become serious.

Notwithstanding these realities, there is one cardinal rule that does need to be taken seriously – and that is that every decision that a research supervisor makes has to be in the best interests of the research student. If this rule is observed in full, then many of the other problems that will inevitably arise during the course of the supervisory process can be resolved in a professional manner.

Dr. Dario Toncich

QUICK REFERENCE BOOK GUIDE FOR SUPERVISORS

Supervisory Outcomes	Chapters/Sections
Creation and maintenance of a safe and healthy research environment	2.10, 2.11, 2.12 Chapter 3 10.6, 10.7, 10.11
Oversight and support of student mental/physical health, safety and wellbeing	Chapter 3 7.4 10.6, 10.7, 10.11
Co-development of a graduate program of investigation with student	6.3, 6.5 Chapter 8
Training/preparation of student in research ethics as relevant to field	3.6 6.5 Chapter 13
Induction, training and development of student in the principles and processes of research relevant to field	Chapter 7 Chapter 11 Chapter 12
Training, development and oversight in/of student research documentation and written, oral and visual presentation skills	2.5, 2.6 Chapter 11 Chapter 12
Training, development and input in/to student publication and peer review process	Chapter 11 Chapter 12
Development of student thesis preparation skills and editing through iterative process	Chapter 12
Oversight of student project execution including methodology, rigor, and project management skills development	Chapter 8 Chapter 9
Oversight and input to student knowledge contribution	Chapter 11 Chapter 12
Development of collaborative/industry liaison skills	Chapter 10
Dispute management and resolution	Chapter 4 Chapter 9 Chapter 13
Support for student career planning and transition including possible start-up companies	Chapter 10 14.6
Establishment of ongoing professional relationship with student	Chapter 14

