

## 15 QUESTIONS SUPERVISORS SHOULD ASK THEMSELVES

### 15.1 Overview

It should be apparent to those who have read the preceding chapters of this book that supervising a research candidate is far more complex than just providing field-specific technical advice in an area of specialization. Those academics who choose to undertake research supervision carry considerable responsibilities – ethical, moral and legal.

Research supervisors have the luxury of working in an environment which has significant flexibilities and graces that are not normally accorded to professionals in the commercial environment. With flexibility, however, comes added responsibility. This is particularly important in the context of research supervision, because the process involves a supervisor exerting significant control over the work, wellbeing and future career of a junior professional.

It is therefore worthwhile to conclude this book by posing a number of questions for potential research supervisors – which each individual can only answer for themselves in the light of what they have read herein.

## 15.2 What is My Motivation for Research Supervision?

The motivation for postgraduate research supervision is particularly important. Some academics take on research students solely for the purpose of advancing a specific aspect of knowledge – in other words, as a tool to be used in the process of discovery. Other academics take on students in order to teach them the profession/craft of research in a particular field. Different motivations can lead to vastly different outcomes in the context of the research student.

A research student whose supervisor only wants research outcomes may not learn the discipline and process of research. In effect, that student may be acting merely as a research assistant or laboratory technician, and the assumption is that, in so doing, he/she will automatically pick up the discipline itself. This assumption may be ill-founded.

A research student whose supervisor only wishes to impart the discipline of research may become a highly competent research practitioner but, perhaps, one where adherence to process overshadows the challenging of established paradigms and artificial knowledge boundaries.

Research supervisors need to think long and hard about what has motivated them to supervise a student, and how the focus of the supervision can be to create both a competent research practitioner and one who can also be a free-thinking paradigm shifter.

### 15.3 How Will My Personal Ambition Impact on Supervision?

Supervisors need to understand what drives them in the academic/research context. Specifically, are they driven by:

- An ambition for academic or personal career?
- A desire for fame through international renown – by making major research breakthroughs?
- A thirst for knowledge discovery?
- The excitement of a particular field?
- A desire to educate and shape minds?

The answer to this question is particularly relevant, and it is critical that each individual addresses it honestly in his/her own mind before starting a research supervision.

There is nothing wrong with personal ambition, or a thirst for knowledge, or enthusiasm for a field. The problem is that when one is charged with the responsibility of educating another individual – in a highly specialized field – it is important that each decision is made with the best interests of that individual in mind. In other words, the research student must rank above personal career ambition, discovery and even thirst for knowledge.

## 15.4 How Do I View My Role in the Research World?

Some academics and researchers get enjoyment from the research journey – that is, exploring each pathway and reporting factually the promise that each pathway holds for future researchers. Other academics and researchers are primarily interested in the end-goal – that is, curing a disease, creating a more efficient form of energy generation, and so on.

Some academics and researchers are pragmatists – and understand that if they are not the ones serendipitous enough to make a discovery, then others eventually will anyway. Other academics are messianic, and believe that it is their role in life to achieve a particular research breakthrough.

How a supervisor views his/her role in research is important in the context of research supervision. A messianic person will exert a high level of pressure on a research student to achieve particular goals, with little interest in how they are achieved or how the pressure affects the student. Those that get enjoyment from the research journey will create a different kind of graduate altogether – one that may have a genuine interest in exploration.

The reality is that the world needs all these different kinds of researchers. Some to lay the groundwork, and others to force knowledge to cross established – but artificial – boundaries. However, each supervisor needs to understand where his/her preferences are, and how they will impact upon the research student. It is important also that they explain their preferences to the student – preferably before a research program commences – so that a student can decide whether or not they can live with the traits of the supervisor.

## 15.5 What is My View on Research Supervision?

Some supervisors like to adopt a laissez-faire approach to supervision, wherein the research student is master of his/her own destiny. The research student provides the drive and the supervisor provides only gentle background advice when asked. Some supervisors like to adopt a master-apprentice model, wherein the supervisor is the major player in the research, and the student is a research assistant who learns by watching the master at work.

There are advantages and disadvantages to both types of supervision but it is important a supervisor understands his/her own preferences and conveys them to the student so there is shared clarity in purpose.

## 15.6 What Sort of Professional Traits Do I Have?

Some academics/researchers are introverted and like to work in isolation – others like to work in a team environment and share responsibilities and information. Some academics/researchers are gregarious while others are timid and shy. Some academics/researchers are institutional builders while others are personal career builders. Some academics/researchers are bridge-builders (*out-reachers*), who like to project their work outwards to business and industry – others like to maintain strict controls in-house. Some researchers are pedantic (*details*) people and others are paradigm-shift (*big-picture*) people.

From a supervisory perspective, each academic/researcher needs to know what his/her professional traits and strengths/weaknesses are, and how these may impinge upon the research student – both in terms of the research program and future career.

If a research student is intent on pursuing a career in pure (basic) research, then they may appreciate a supervisor who is focused strictly on individual excellence and academic matters. If a research student is intent on creating a start-up company at the end of the research program, then he/she may appreciate an entrepreneurial supervisor who is an established bridge-builder with external, commercial organizations. If there is a mismatch between research student aspirations and supervisor traits, then problems and conflicts may ensue.

### 15.7 Am I Currently in a Good Position to Supervise a Student?

Research supervision is not a short-term activity. It requires several years of genuine commitment. If something happens to a supervisor, then it is difficult to substitute another academic with differing ideas on how a research program should be conducted. This can be very unfair and confusing to a research student. A potential supervisor therefore needs to undertake a situation report on their own career before agreeing to supervise a candidate.

Consider that an academic may have a career which is itself unstable. The current university position may be untenured, and a contract may expire before a research student has completed his/her degree. Perhaps there is a tempting job offer elsewhere in the university world. How would it impact upon the research student if the supervisor was to leave his/her position? Unlike most other forms of professional relationship – say, employer-employee – one cannot simply swap out the parts and attain parity. A potential supervisor needs to consider this.

If some degree of instability is inevitable or unavoidable, then a potential supervisor needs to have a contingency plan for the student. This is the minimum that one would expect of a professional supervisor, and it also behooves that supervisor to advise his/her students of possible instabilities at the earliest possible occasion in the program.

## 15.8 The Most Important Question

In order to make a postgraduate research program successful in the broadest context – that is, a high quality research outcome and a highly employable or successful graduate, there is one basic question, above all others, that supervisors need to address. Specifically,

*"Can I put to one side all my personal and research ambitions, and career aspirations, and commit myself to always acting in the best interests of the research student as a first priority?"*

If, after significant introspection, the answer to this question is *yes*, then there is a solid foundation for supervising the research and for resolving the many problems that will inevitably arise.

If the answer to the question is *no*, then one has to accept that some of the problems which will arise during the conduct of the research program will become insoluble and the likelihood of a successful program conclusion will be reduced.

George Washington once summarized profoundly the need for integrity in life and work when he wrote,

*"Labor to keep alive in your breast that little spark of celestial fire called conscience."*

Academics may benefit from this credo and consider it a sound basis for decision-making as they tackle the inherent challenges of research supervision.