

# Student/Supervisor Relationships

## From the beginning

Reflecting on what you want from the supervisor as well as what you believe is your responsibility in this working relationship is important preparation for success in your doctorate.

### Self reflection

“being prepared to become my own expert – accept my own decisions”

Ask yourself about:

- The **nature** of support and guidance you want from your supervisor.
- How you feel about asking for support
- In Australia it is expected that you can ask directly and clearly for what you want from supervisors

Ask yourself about your supervisor

- What do you expect from your supervisor? (your dream relationship)
  - As a person relating to you
  - As an expert contributing to your understanding

## Setting up the relationship

Topics that need to be discussed include:

- Housekeeping – How often you will meet – when and where
- Your initial understanding about the supervisor role (personal and academic)
- How you like to receive feedback, useful approaches
- When to use email, phone or to meet.

## How to get the best from your supervisors

“My supervisor is an idiot/My supervisor is God” – My supervisor is ... ????

Supervisors, like yourself are blessed with unique personalities. They are also interesting, intense and independent people. They have to be to maintain their focus and succeed in an intensely competitive field that rewards single-mindedness and excellence.

- Learn to understand the strengths and weaknesses of your supervisors. Work with their strengths and around their weaknesses. Find the gold they have to offer.
- Know your own strengths and weaknesses. Use your own strengths to assist the relationship and don't expect your supervisor to compensate for your weaknesses. This is the time for you to develop more capability in these areas.

- What role will each of your supervisors fulfil for you?
- You want the best advice in each area of your doctorate – that may not always come from your supervisor. How will you get the gaps filled? *Eg my supervisor is good at but hopeless at how to write an ethics proposal*
- Find out what your supervisor expects of you. Is this realistic? Is it important? (eg learning a whole new statistical approach before you can proceed) How will you bridge this difference?
- If you foresee irrevocable problems in the relationship – get help as early as possible. Hoping things will improve can use up years of your doctoral time. Negotiate where these two are different. Eg You want assistance with method, supervisor is good at overall theoretical editing.

### **Managing your supervisor**

- Know your strengths
- Contribute your personal strengths towards a constructive relationship. Eg If you are a good communicator, use your skills to help the session flow.
- Be prepared for your meetings. Bring along outlines of ideas, useful references, material you have written.
- Take control of what you can control:
  - be punctual
  - clearly articulate your ideas and needs
  - keep to the point
  - list of the most important things you would like to know from the session
  - make sure you talk bring up the scary bits.

### **Interpreting feedback**

“The ability to listen is an inside job”

This may come as a surprise but EVERYONE has difficulty with feedback.

Some aspects that impact our ability to listen are:

#### **Defences**

- Be prepared to let go of your brilliant ideas – there are more where they came from
- Learn the ways you are defensive and do not want to hear what your supervisors say
- Practice humility:
  - “I am clever, creative and capable. I can respect other people’s opinions and let go of ideas and approaches that are not useful”
- Learn to compromise with your supervisor in the dance of intellectual debate (this is as important in your development as your thesis!)

**Negative comments:**

Respond to the supervisors' style if it is stopping you from concentrating on the information

- "I am having difficulty concentrating on the point you are making because of the strong way you are expressing it."

**Inner critical voices**

- Challenge your critical voice to become the critical analyst
  - "I know what I have done is not good enough – that's why I have supervisors – I am still learning"
  - "I am a good person doing my best and my work is getting better"
  - "I will only listen to you (critic) if you have something constructive to say" (critical analysis)

**Online resources**

[Supervising International and intercultural research students – workshop](#)

[Negotiating candidate and supervisor expectations](#)

[Responsibilities, roles and Relationships](#)