

# 8

## Working with your supervisor

### Chapter overview

Securing the support and guidance of your tutor or supervisor is an important part of postgraduate study. This chapter covers:

- The role of supervision.
- Selecting supervisors.
- Jointly supervised projects.
- Making contact with your supervisor.
- Supervisor responsibilities.
- Student responsibilities.
- Managing the relationship.
- Keeping in touch with your supervisor.

### The role of supervision

*A good supervisor is a critical friend. He's your mate – that is really important. You've got to get on – if you don't it's going to be a really miserable experience.*

Jeff, ESRC 1 + 3 student, University of Hull.

#### WHAT IS SUPERVISION?

You should not be expected to undertake postgraduate research without support and guidance from your host institution. That support can take many forms but

perhaps the most influential and important is that provided through your supervisor or supervisors. A supervisor's primary role is to assist your progress whilst you undertake your research journey. Most universities have clear guidance on the role and function of supervisors, often expanding the baseline requirements as set out in the Quality Assurance Agency's (QAA) Code of Practice on Postgraduate Research Programmes (Quality Assurance Agency, 1999). All research councils subscribe to this code and expect institutions in receipt of research council funding to adhere to the guidance contained within them. Specifically, for supervisors, the code states:

- Supervisors should possess recognised subject expertise.
- Supervisors should have the necessary skills and experience to monitor, support and direct research students' work.
- Research students should receive support and direction sufficient to enable them to succeed in their studies.
- The progress made by research students should be consistently monitored and regularly communicated to students. (Quality Assurance Agency, 1999: 10–11)

*There are definitely people who shouldn't supervise. When you think about it, a lot of people are not that sociable are they? Particularly academics! I mean, you do think sometimes – how on earth did they get into this game (working with others) because many of them don't appear to be good at it or like it a great deal?*  
Colin, PhD student, University of Northside.

Colin's comment about who should, and who should not, supervise is a common one, but based upon the QAA guidance and institutional convention, it is clear that supervisors should be skilled individuals with the appropriate subject expertise and experience of conducting research themselves. Postgraduate and PhD supervisors are senior members of academic staff with substantial experience of such academic mentoring and guidance work. As such, they commonly possess skills and techniques to enable the effective personal development of post-graduate supervisees.

*To be an effective supervisor, you have got to like being with people – or be good at faking it at least! And a lot of them aren't even good at that – and they are going to have to manage somebody's work for the next three years. So there are some people who are much better at it than others, some do it purely to progress their own careers. It's a feather in their cap, isn't it – to say 'I've supervised X number of PhD students'. You've just got to make sure you work with a supervisor who is, or at least looks like they are, interested in your work.*

Peter, PhD student, University of Westfield.

Supervisors can have a dramatic impact on the learning and professional development of their students, and most supervisors recognise and value the importance and responsibility attached to the role. For those of you engaged in PhD-level study, you and your supervisor will collaborate over a number of years – it is therefore advisable for you to make efforts to nurture and develop this relationship in order for you to gain the most from this element of your postgraduate experience. If carefully coordinated and managed, your collaboration can last well beyond the completion of your programme of study.

### Selecting supervisors

*I first met my supervisor during the last two years of my undergraduate course when she was teaching the psychology module. I wrote a couple of essays for her and she clearly liked what I wrote. We hit it off straight away. We have shared interests in discourse analysis, social constructionism, visual rhetoric and visual discourse and I write very much like she does.*

Nick, ESRC 1 + 3 student, Plymouth.

It's important to be able to 'get along' with your supervisor, as Nick did. After all, your supervisor's assistance and involvement with your project or research work will undoubtedly facilitate its progression and completion. Unfortunately, however, there is no clear recipe for success in selecting a supervisor. For some, this is decided for them by their host institution, or they may have managed to nurture the relationship whilst studying for their undergraduate degree (something successfully achieved by Peter, below).

*I think, if I am honest, a part of the reason I applied for a 1 + 3 was that I already had this relationship with my supervisor and I knew that here was somebody I could get along with and do some research with. For others, trying to find someone whom they can work with (whom they don't know) must be quite difficult. You need to know how people work and operate to make sure that you effectively get your message across about your intended research. This takes time – you need to read up around potential supervisors, possibly go and see them, and establish whether or not they would be willing/interested in supervising you.*

Peter, ESRC 1 + 3 student, University of Leeds.

In some of these cases it is the luck of the draw – some are successful and some are not. However, for many prospective postgraduate research students there is the opportunity to influence or even select a supervisor or supervisors. ESRC 1 + 3 students are encouraged to develop their applications for the scheme with their actual or prospective supervisor: part of the application is assessed on the supervisor's contribution, comment and guidance indicates that whilst your proposed research should be your own, the ESRC strongly suggests that you talk with your prospective supervisor before outlining in your application your proposed research (ESRC, 2005a: 31).

What useful criteria might you apply to aid your selection of supervisor? A key selection criterion for supervisors might be how well known they are in the field – this is usually determined and measured by the number of research outputs (for example, journal articles, research papers, chapters in books, etc.) they have. In your reading around the subject of your intended research, have you come across

any of their work? Is their work referred to (or cited) by others? If so, in what context is it cited? Occasionally, authors can secure high citation rates through the production and publication of low quality material. Such 'negative' citations can easily distort mechanisms which measure the impact (citations divided by the number of sources or articles) of journals and other outputs.

*Don't do what I did and become blinded solely by an academic's success in the field – demonstrated by their prolific research output. Instead, try to work out if you'll actually get along with them. What types and kinds of research methodology do they use – are they similar or the same as the methods you wish to use? What's their educational and academic background – are there any similarities to your own? What 'common ground' in experiences and understandings do you share?*

Professor Smith, University of Northfield.

Experiences and expertise in conducting research are useful considerations when exploring supervision possibilities. In-depth knowledge and experience of qualitative research and the technological tools to support and enhance it might be particularly relevant considerations for the budding ethnographic researcher. Indicators of expertise in this area might be displayed through the potential supervisor's teaching commitments and duties. For example, are they involved in teaching the particular research methods you are interested in using for your work? Do they publish material drawing upon/utilising certain methodological approaches?

Recommendation by others can be an effective way to determine suitable supervisory assistance for your postgraduate work. It is often helpful to seek advice from current or recent tutors on the matter – given what they know of you and your work, who would they recommend? Do you have peers who are currently engaged in postgraduate work – who would they recommend? Many University departments have postgraduate research tutors – who would they recommend? It might be useful here to provide the postgraduate tutors with an outline of what you intend to explore in your research, so they can effectively match up your research with relevant potential supervisors.

It might be worthwhile considering and approaching someone who is new to supervision to become involved in offering guidance and related support to your work. Whilst for some dealing with the unknown like this is a high-risk strategy, it does have its benefits. For example, an academic who is new to supervision may, understandably, wish to make a good impression (both on you and the academic hierarchy within the school or department). He or she may therefore be prepared to offer you more time and support than their more experienced counterparts. They may have innovative and more accessible approaches to supervision and perhaps, given their relative junior status, they may be more compassionate and understanding of the postgraduate's lot (after all, it might not have been so long ago that they were in your position).

### Jointly supervised projects

Research or project work that is jointly supervised requires clear and professional management by you as the student. Careful and reasoned consideration should be given to the viewpoints and expertise of your co-supervisors. As part of their guidance for postgraduate research, the ESRC recognise the benefits of such supervisory arrangements. Specifically, they encourage: 'dual supervision, or supervisory panels, particularly where the student is engaged in cross-disciplinary research or research involving collaboration between an academic department and an outside organisation, where meetings of all the parties concerned may be necessary from time to time' (ESRC, 2005b: 16).

*A lot of people I know have two supervisors and that's a great strength – you can always go to the other supervisor for a second opinion on things etc. It really helps strengthen your work and your arguments.*

Kelly, ESRC 1 + 3 student, University of Manchester.

*I've been very happy with my supervisors but part of the problem for PhD students is that you can't always choose who your supervisor is. Also, I've found it very*

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*beneficial to have two because you get different perspectives and so on, but I understand it's more common to have just one. I've found the mix very helpful: one of my supervisors is much older and more experienced, the other much younger. Obviously it's important to be able to get on personally as well as sharing research interests or approaches.*

Alexej, ESRC 1 + 3 student, Aberystwyth University.

On a practical level, it may be difficult to arrange meetings between yourself and supervisors who have demanding teaching and/or research duties. Because university research managers anticipate that these and other problems or issues may arise, they often assign a lead supervisor role to one of your supervisory team. It is the commonly accepted duty of your lead supervisor to then liaise with others to suggest and arrange suitable and convenient times for meetings. Your lead supervisor will also coordinate and manage your progress on your programme of study. In some departments and institutions the lead supervisor has the final say when contradictory advice or guidance is received in respect to, say, your progression through the stages of your degree programme. Most co-supervisor issues can be resolved, however, through discussion and negotiation between the parties involved, but if problems or concerns remain you should approach your school or departmental postgraduate tutor or head of postgraduate studies indicating your concerns. It is fair to say, however, that in most cases the benefit of receiving two separate supervisory inputs on your work far outweigh any difficulties or issues you may encounter.

Communication is crucial when you have more than one supervisor, everyone should be aware of what you are doing, and when. Make sure that all relevant documentation, plans, interim results, reports, are copied to all supervisors. Keep them informed of your fieldwork activities and any changes or amendments to your work. Doing all of this will help you to avoid a situation as described by Maureen below.

*The politics of working with two supervisors might be difficult for some postgraduates to get to grips with. I know of some situations where a postgraduate has shown draft*  
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*material to one supervisor without copying the joint-supervisor into the communication. This caused some difficulty, for some time afterwards, between the postgraduate and the supervisor concerned. The other supervisor thought he was being side-lined and therefore not consulted on the postgraduate's progress. Always keep joint supervisors equally informed about your work – it avoids confusion and keeps them both on your side.*

Maureen, ESRC/CASE student, University of Leeds.

### **Initial contact**

The initial formal meeting with your tutor or supervisor can be an intimidating experience for you. This is probably the first time you've enjoyed one-to-one support for the duration of your programme of study. Many students will have benefited from the experience of support for undergraduate dissertation work, but this will rarely have required more than one or two meetings with a dissertation or project tutor. At postgraduate level (and particularly PhD level), the guidance you receive from tutors or supervisors, and the influence they have on your work, is (and should be) considerable. This being the case, it is important to get things off to a good start. At your first meeting you should think about discussing and clarifying the following with your tutor or supervisor.

- **Meeting times** How often, and for how long, will you meet each other? For some, agreement is reached that meetings will take place informally throughout the academic year. This doesn't suit everyone, so ensure that your supervisor is aware of the way you would like to approach this. Be prepared to negotiate and compromise – supervisors will have other calls on their time and they may not be able to meet you as frequently as you wish, or at the times of day you suggest.
- **Agenda-setting and preparing work** Some supervisors prefer to set agendas for meetings with supervisees, whereas others believe it is the responsibility of the student to structure their format and coverage. It may be a useful demonstration of your control of your own work to set the agenda for meetings held between yourself and your supervisor. Some postgraduates fit in with the timetables of their tutors or supervisors; others (such as Gareth below), proactively seek regular, focused support.

*You should be proactive in seeking an appointment with your supervisor. I need mine to look at my work and make some comments so that I can move on to look at other things, or carry out some more work on it if she feels it needs it.*

Gareth, ESRC 1 + 3 student, University of Edinburgh.

## Responsibilities

### RESPONSIBILITIES OF STUDENT AND SUPERVISORS

All higher education institutions have procedural notes, Codes of Practice or other similar guidance documents designed to clarify the duties, roles and responsibilities of students and supervisors. Information can vary by discipline, department and institution, but this guidance can usefully be employed as a starting point for discussions relating to roles and responsibilities between you and your supervisor. Ian, below, drew upon this institutional guidance to clarify further the expectations he had of his supervisor.

*I expect a supervisor who you can go and speak to about your research work. You can knock on his door and see him there and then or arrange to meet with him at a later time. Also, if you have a problem of any kind, your supervisor should be there for you to assist with this where they can. I think a lot of PhD students suffer in their relationship with their supervisor because they (the supervisor) aren't on campus a lot. I've always been aware of my supervisor's 'office hours' and that's helped me plan my time and study.*

*My supervisor provides useful pointers towards reading I should be taking a look at. After all, he is a key author in the field and he can get hold of a lot of forthcoming work – stuff that hasn't even been published yet. So I can have the inside track*

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*on a lot of material. His website is very useful for this. He keeps it up to date and I can see some of what's new in my area by accessing his, and other experts' websites.*

*Because my supervisor is seasoned at academic work and styles, etc, he can provide me with invaluable advice as to how I frame some of my arguments or present aspects of my work for an academic audience.*

Ian, ESRC 1 + 3 student, University of Manchester.

#### SUPERVISOR RESPONSIBILITIES

As noted above, supervisor responsibilities may differ within institutions and across subject or discipline boundaries. However, there are a number of core duties or responsibilities of postgraduate supervisor. These might usefully include providing support, help and assistance with:

- induction to the university – including information on its structure, history and research strengths;
- the standard and amount of work required of postgraduate students within your discipline area;
- searching for appropriate literature;
- planning and managing the project/research work;
- preparing a thesis for submission including, university conventions and requirements;
- assisting with networking opportunities;
- accessing university training and development events;
- arranging for tailored instruction to support the student's research or project work (such as advanced statistical modelling courses for highly statistical research projects); and
- development of material suitable for publication.

(Adapted from Finn, 2005)

It is clear that a good supervisory relationship provides support and guidance for the postgraduate student, as Nick suggests below. However, as Gareth moves on to also explain, supervision includes support not only in relation to a variety of formal mechanisms, but also with the subtleties of operating within an academic environment.

*When I started, my supervisor quite often checked how the research training was going and gave me reading to do which would prepare me for later on with my Masters dissertation. So he started as a guide and then turned into a kind of critical evaluator, asking me to justify the decisions I had taken in my research. After my Masters he put the brakes on me and gave me a term of reading and asked me to take stock. At the moment, because I'm on fieldwork, I don't really see him at all, but I can phone him if I have a problem. That was something we discussed and it works fine.*

Nick, ESRC 1 + 3 student, University of Oxford.

*Key areas where supervisors can assist include: agreeing to regular meetings, reading and commenting on work, pointing out mistakes, suggesting new literature to look at, and warning me about the implicit rules of the research and academic game. For example, whether I should email a person, give them a phone call, or ask my supervisor to make the first approach.*

Gareth, ESRC 1 + 3 student, University of Edinburgh.

There are a growing number of textbooks detailing the general and specific duties of postgraduate study supervisors. In their work exploring the PhD process, Phillips and Pugh (2003) devote a chapter to supervision considerations, and they outline the main expectations of students when being supervised:

- Students expect to be supervised.
- Students expect supervisors to read their work well in advance.
- Students expect their supervisors to be available when needed.
- Students expect their supervisors to be friendly, open and supportive.
- Students expect their supervisors to be constructively critical.
- Students expect their supervisors to have a good knowledge of the research area.
- Students expect their supervisors to structure the tutorial so that it is relatively easy to exchange ideas.
- Students expect their supervisors to have sufficient interest in their research to put more information in the student's path.
- Students expect supervisors to be sufficiently involved in their success to help them to get a good job at the end of it all! (Phillips and Pugh, 2003: 110–19)

To assist institutions and students in fully exploring their roles and responsibilities, the National Postgraduate Committee has developed guidance designed to support both student and supervisor – details are available through their website (<http://www.npc.org.uk>). In addition, the UK Grad Programme (a collaborating partnership of organisations interested in postgraduate education and training) provides useful suggestions on getting the most out of the student-supervisor relationship (<http://www.grad.ac.uk>).

In Rita Brause's useful and informative text on the subject of doctoral study, she presents a list of questions for supervisors (Brause, 2000). Asking these (and others like them) of your potential and actual supervisors might facilitate a clearer definition and understanding of what both of you expect from the supervision process.

#### *QUESTIONS FOR SUPERVISORS*

- How do you usually work with your doctoral students?
- What do you think are my responsibilities?
- In what ways can I expect that you will help me?
- Will you give me assignments each week?
- Are there other students who are working with you on a similar topic, whom I might work with?
- Do you have a research group that meets periodically to talk about projects?
- Do you have preferences for one research methodology, one theory, or one topic over others? Why do you prefer these?
- Is there a way in which I might work on one of your research projects for my dissertation?

- Will we be able to meet during the summer and during semester breaks?
- Will you meet with me if I have nothing written?
- How will I get feedback?
- What progress do I need to make each semester?
- What happens if I don't finish in two years?
- How do I know if I am making good progress?
- Can you provide me with guidelines for how long this will take based on your experiences with other doctoral students?
- Can we establish a schedule to organise my work?
- Who has to evaluate my work?
- What are the characteristics of an acceptable dissertation proposal?
- What problems can I expect to encounter? (Brause, 2000: 63–4).

*In the first term of my PhD I went away and read a series of papers and my supervisor and I would meet to discuss those papers so she could grapple with what I was really getting at. I'm very systematic and I think my supervisor is less systematic, so I suggested I did a work plan to cover each chapter and we'd meet to discuss each chapter in turn. That worked very well. Now she's very busy but I can always book in to see her. She's less strong on methodology but passionate about the subject matter.*

Lorraine, PhD student, University of Eastfield.

As Lorraine suggests above, building a good working relationship is an important aspect of many postgraduate programmes. Other crucial roles and responsibilities of a supervisor include giving advice and guidance on realistic and achievable completion dates for the various stages of the project or research work. Your supervisor will probably be more aware than you of the time and effort required to develop and write-up substantive research-based work.

At a more formal level, it is the responsibility of your supervisor to formally and regularly (usually once or twice per year), inform the university of your progress. In addition, it is often the duty of your supervisor to ensure you receive information in relation to university requirements concerning the examination

processes and procedures that relate specifically to your programme of study. In many larger departments or faculties this information is often issued to postgraduate students by the department or faculty research office.

### *STUDENT RESPONSIBILITIES*

As part of the research for this text, we asked a number of supervisors, across a range of disciplines, to provide typical questions they might ask potential research students. Some of the questions that follow might appear obvious, but many of the supervisors indicated that a good number of their own research students might have difficulty in adequately or competently responding to such queries. It may be worthwhile, then, for the novice postgraduate research student, to develop answers to these questions in order to prepare for any initial supervisory meetings.

- Who do you consider to be the key authors in the field?
- Have you read my work in the area?
- What do you think of my work in the area?
- Why select me as a supervisor?
- Have you sought funding for your studies?
- How is your study likely to contribute to the body of knowledge?
- How is your study likely to contribute to our department/university research strengths?
- What difficulties do you anticipate with your intended research? How will you deal with these?
- Are you prepared to teach through your studies?
- What would you like to teach?
- How long will you take to complete your research?
- Do you intend to publish throughout your studies?
- Where do you intend to publish?
- Where else have you applied?

Not all researchers or supervisors work in the same way. It is important for students and supervisors to agree on the format and type of feedback that will best assist the development of the research student. Postgraduate students can often provide useful guidance on the approach to feedback that would best suit them. As Stephen highlights below, a clear articulation of the feedback required enables focused development and progression to take place on the part of the postgraduate learner.

*I'm very used to being criticised and I work best when people really have a go at me and put me under pressure and tear apart my work. I don't really need support, whereas my supervisor is more interested in confidence-building, encouragement and support. So I'm always pushing him to be much more critical, to really tear my work apart. He's doing that much more now. Partly that's because as my work has progressed and become more substantive it's become more important to criticise it. We both recognise that it's a professional relationship and therefore nothing of what we say should be taken personally.*

Stephen, PhD student, University of Southside.

### STUDENT RESPONSIBILITIES

It is important to accept that students also have expected roles and responsibilities in the supervision process. In order to gain the most from meetings and exchanges between you and your supervisor, it might be worthwhile considering the following:

- During the initial stages of your relationship, outline clearly with tutors/supervisor(s) the scope and remit of the project or research work (thereby highlighting your interest in the subject, your level of understanding, and enabling you to take a lead on the direction and shape of your work).
- Exploring with the supervisor the type of guidance and feedback that is most helpful (some students prefer to receive informal and regular feedback on work submitted, whereas others prefer written comments on their draft work).

- Determining what other support is available within your university to complement that offered by your supervisor (for example, advanced literature review training and guidance may be available through your university library; support on using and applying advanced statistical techniques may be available through your IT or Computing department).
- Agreeing the format and length of supervision meetings (for example a short 20-minute meeting every two weeks and an hour-long review meeting every two months).
- Agreeing a timeline for your research or project work with your supervisor, clearly stating when the various stages of your work will be completed and outlining when your supervisor's input will be required.
- Preparing and circulating agendas, minutes and themes for discussion well in advance of supervision meetings.
- Providing regular reports of work completed and work-in-progress to enable your supervisor to provide focused and appropriate support and guidance.

(Adapted from Finn, 2005)

### Managing the relationship

*I think that what all postgraduates need to consider is that their supervisor's world does not revolve around them. [Supervisors] have many, many calls on their time – some more calls than others! In my experience I really had to fight (almost literally) to see my supervisor. He would not return my calls or emails and often wasn't in his office when his timetable indicated he was.*

Sean, PhD student, University of Eastshire.

Sean's experience is not uncommon and relationships can be difficult to nurture and develop if students and supervisors do not, or rarely, meet. In addition, the

transfer from undergraduate to independent postgraduate work can be difficult for some, as can the requirement to develop a professional working relationship with a supervisor – a typical situation described by Helen, below.

*Throughout my undergraduate degree I had a fairly relaxed, informal, relationship with my tutors, but Pauline (my PhD supervisor) was much more formal from the beginning of our relationship. I am naturally a great worrier, so I prepared absolutely everything for our meetings – what we would discuss, how Pauline would assist, time frames for me giving her draft materials, feedback dates, etc. This wasn't how Pauline worked at all. So there was a bit of grappling to begin with, with us both establishing what we wanted and working out how this relationship was going to work. For the first two or three months I felt quite down about it. We'd have meetings but it would feel as though she was just saying 'go off and do this and come back and we'll talk about it.' It left me feeling that I wasn't going to get anywhere with my PhD. Plus she wasn't around much in the first term because she does a lot of consultancy work.*

*Then, after Christmas at the beginning of the second term, we had a cards-on-the-table meeting in which she said lots of nice things about me and I think the major issue is you want it all to be structured and that's the way you work but, I don't, so let's find a middle ground.' So we have done. She urged me to be more independent and have the confidence to go and do things to talk about at our set meetings. Since then it's got dramatically better. I feel we get on much better now.*

Helen, PhD student, University of Westside.

Sometimes, and for the unfortunate few, the supervisor–supervisee relationship does not work. For some (academics and students alike), it is seen as a test of your resolve to continue studying despite the lack of any structured supervisory support. However, this is not a satisfactory state of affairs. When you as a postgraduate begin your studies, you should be made aware of practices or procedures used by your department, school or faculty to monitor and supervise the progress of postgraduates registered with them. Often, guidance or codes of practice are centrally determined by the university – departments, schools or faculties ‘sign up’ to these agreements. At the University of Leeds, many departments, schools and faculties produce detailed additional guidelines indicating appropriate treatment of registered postgraduate students. The Department of Statistics clearly specifies the number of meetings that should take place between supervisor and postgraduate research student.

It is the joint responsibility of the supervisor(s) and student to agree a supervisory programme setting out the pattern, timing and style of supervision. The student will meet his/her supervisor on a regular basis to discuss progress and future plans. Usually there will be a minimum of twelve supervision meetings per year. Notes should be kept of all formal supervision meetings, with copies retained by the supervisor and student.

(University of Leeds, Department of Statistics, Code of Practice for Research Degree Candidature, p. 1)

In addition to institutional and research council codes and guidance covering duties and responsibilities for students and supervisors, a growing number of other organisations, which typically fund postgraduate training, are producing their own guidance and procedural notes. The Wellcome Trust outline their interpretation of terms of good supervisory practice, thus:

- Institutions should ensure that appropriate direction of research and supervision of researchers is provided. Training in supervisory skills should be provided where appropriate.
- A code of responsibilities should be available for supervisors indicating, for example, the frequency of contact, responsibilities regarding scrutiny of primary data, and the broader development needs of research trainees.
- The need should be stressed for supervisors to supervise all stages of the research process, including outlining or drawing up a hypothesis, preparing applications for funding, protocol design, data recording and data analysis. (Wellcome Trust, 2002: 1)

Guidance notes are produced by institutions and funders to enable students and supervisors alike to clarify roles and responsibilities in their specific student-supervisor relationship. It is therefore very useful, in the early stages of the supervisory relationship, for students and supervisors to acquaint themselves with the relevant institutional or research-funder guidance.

#### KEEPING IN TOUCH WITH YOUR SUPERVISOR

Effective and regular communication or contact with supervisors is frequently advised in postgraduate research guidance. How often 'regular' means, however, is not always dictated. In most cases, it is left to you and your supervisor to determine the level and frequency of contact needed. For some, this may be a 20-minute meeting every month, and for others it may be less frequent face-to-face meetings but regular email communications. The crucial element here is to maintain communication throughout your whole programme of study. Your supervisor has the task of guiding you through your postgraduate journey – he or she cannot do that if you do not see them or communicate with them. To gain the most from your efforts, it might be helpful to structure your meetings in order to make the communication process more effective for you. This is an approach that has been successfully adopted by Charlotte.

*I get on well with my supervisor as he works in a similar area to the one I'm interested in. He is also in charge of the directed reading for my Masters degree, so we see each other quite regularly (every week). It's important wherever possible to structure our meetings so that they can usefully inform the work I'm required to do for my dissertation.*

Charlotte, ESRC 1 + 3 student, University College London.

To facilitate and encourage effective, worthwhile communication between you and your supervisor depends upon the personalities, backgrounds, interests, and

approaches of both student and supervisor. Unfortunately, no one size fits all, but informative work has been published which indicates that the relationship and resulting communication is influenced by the roles adopted by both parties (Hockey, 1995; Hockey, 1996; Deem and Brehony, 2000; Delamont et al., 2004). While it is, therefore, inappropriate to suggest the same advice for managing each collaborative venture, Peter summarises some key issues and provides a number of reasonable expectations of the relationship.

*To be good! To be supportive. It's when they are not supportive that they get criticised. They can demonstrate their support by listening and remembering what was said in previous meetings. And I suppose if they are going to be critical they have got to be positive at the same time. If you have a supervisor who is just talking about the problems of the research all the time, the student is going to feel de-motivated and won't move forward – you'll never get anywhere. There's no research that doesn't have problems.*

*A friendly approach is also useful. Sometimes they can be a bit too aloof. Asking a few questions about your personal life shows an interest and can help the supervisor and student bond a little. It can also enable you as a postgraduate to become less intimidated by your supervisor – getting to know them a little helps break down barriers.*

*I'd also expect a good supervisor to introduce you to relevant people in your area of study – that's how I got involved with the Interdisciplinary Centre here at the university. My supervisor chairs seminars and talks there and he said that it would be a good place for me to go and network.*

*Regular meetings are also important. With my supervisor, we have agreed to meet once a month. Sometimes, when we meet, I have certain action points and we agree to meet again to review*

*(Continued)*

*these once I have completed them. Sometimes, I also give him something I've written and we then set a date to meet up once he has had a chance to read through it and develop some comments. Roughly though, we meet once a month. When we meet, I usually set the agenda for what we discuss – that's the way I said that I wanted to do it and he seems quite happy with that.*

Peter, ESRC 1 + 3 student, University of Leeds.

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