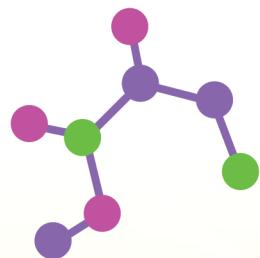
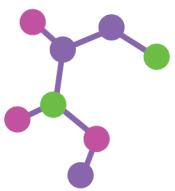


SBASSE GUIDE TO PHD SUPERVISION



SBASSE Guide to PhD Supervision

1: Introduction:

This guide provides advice and recommendations for PhD supervisors, based on international sources. Its underlying principle is that the relationship between student and supervisor should be based on mutual respect. The provision of this supervision manual is a requirement of the Higher Education Commission Graduate Education Policy 2023. If problems arise, then you should seek support from your Department or School Graduate Programme Coordinator in the first instance.

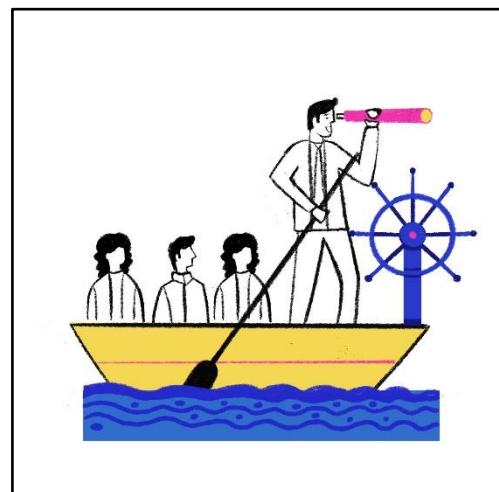
2: The many roles of a supervisor:

A good way to approach PhD supervision is to consider how you will carry out the many different and important roles of a PhD supervisor. Each requires different skills, but each is important. You are encouraged to share good supervisory practice with colleagues (and ask for feedback from your students)!

Academic guide:

A good supervisor guides the direction that the research project takes, suggesting topics, drawing attention to relevant literature, and generally providing advice based on their knowledge and experience. They ensure that students take responsibility for their own and others' safety. They also help the student to understand and maintain academic integrity.

As the research project develops, they let the student take more of a lead and assume greater responsibility. The supervisor should always encourage the student to think strategically about their research: what its applications might be, how it relates to work being done elsewhere, and where it could lead in future.



Supporter:

A supervisor should provide support on multiple levels. They should check regularly on the student's well-being. This can be as simple as asking how the student is feeling or asking them whether they are enjoying doing a PhD. If a student answers this question with a straight 'no', then there is something quite seriously wrong that needs to be followed up. It isn't the responsibility of a supervisor to be an expert on mental health or

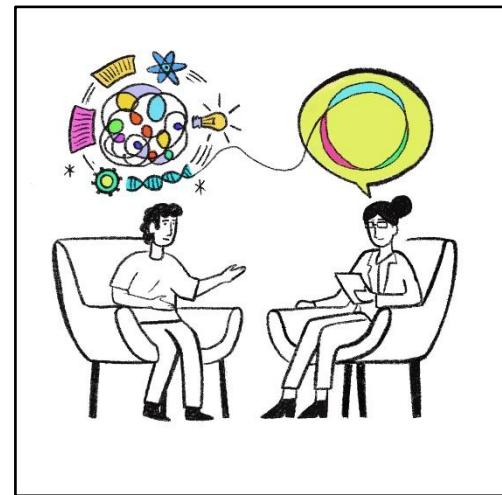
other issues, but they should be able to advise a student where to go to get the help they need.

It is also a good idea sometimes to ask if a student is experiencing any problems with, for example, their housing or (if appropriate) balancing their work and caring responsibilities. The following quote is from an appreciative LUMS student:

'As a mother, balancing PhD work with family responsibilities is challenging. My supervisor understands this and has always been supportive, allowing me the flexibility to manage my time effectively.'

If a student shares confidential information with you, you should of course maintain confidentiality. Only in the very rare case that maintaining confidentiality would lead to harm to the student or others is it permissible to share such information with appropriate professionals.

At the start of their PhD, it is important to tell students clearly that harassment or bullying of any kind is completely unacceptable. Students should know how to proceed if they experience either. Note that both gender and class can influence a student's sense of belonging and thereby also their well-being.



Professional guide:

Another part of the supervisor role is to help a student build their professional network, and to identify opportunities such as conferences, international exchanges, short certificate-type courses, or opportunities to teach undergraduates. The supervisor should ensure the student develops as wide a range of useful skills and experience as possible during their PhD and check that they are participating fully in the academic life of the department / school, by attending seminars, for example. Regular research group meetings can be very helpful.

A supervisor should also support their student's career, for example by putting them in contact with potential future employers. LUMS students were very appreciative of guidance on preparing applications and writing professional emails.

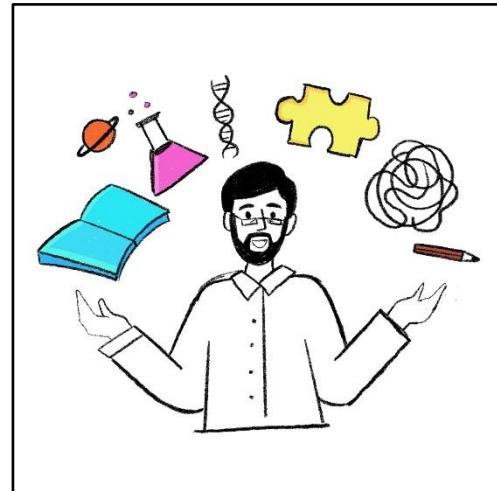
Teacher:

This role is relatively straightforward to describe. It involves helping a student to understand the key concepts that underpin their research, and checking that they do so. It further involves training the student in specific research techniques.

Facilitator:

The supervisor has a responsibility to ensure that the student is provided with everything that is needed for them to get a PhD. All PhD students require a suitable working space and a positive working environment. The latter could require the supervisor to act as a mediator in minor disputes involving the student, preferably before they escalate.

An experimental science or engineering PhD usually requires laboratory space, consumables and access to equipment. If equipment breaks, or there are no funds for specific consumable items, for example, then the supervisor should help the student to find alternatives, even if this means altering the direction of the research or carrying out part of the research elsewhere.

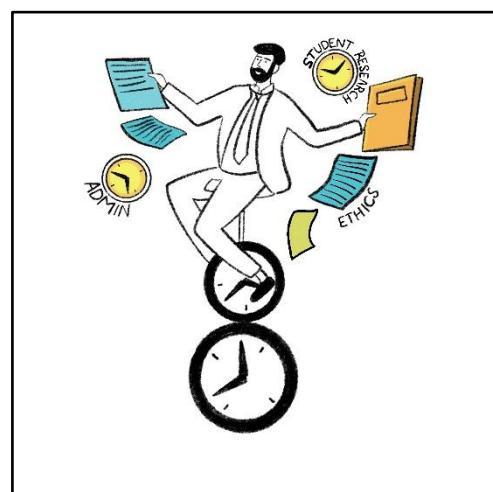


Manager:

A key responsibility of a supervisor is to monitor the student's progress, encourage them to write up their results promptly when they are ready, and keep them on track to finish their PhD research within the time allocated. This is essential, even if it means leaving some interesting lines of investigation for future work. Being a good manager includes setting appropriate targets/deadlines and providing regular feedback on the student's work. However, it also includes ensuring that the student doesn't work excessive hours but rather takes an appropriate amount of holiday. General advice on time management and how to work with maximum efficiency is particularly helpful in the early stages of a PhD.

The role of manager can be a challenging one, because it is essential to achieve the right balance between giving a student freedom and micro-managing them. As one LUMS PhD student wrote:

'My supervisor has very beautifully yet meticulously drawn a fine line where I do not at all feel unsupported while also having a safety net to ensure I can work on my own.'



Make sure that your student looks at other PhD theses from your research group or in similar areas, so they have a good idea of what they are working towards!

Critic:

Providing constructive criticism is one of the most valuable services a supervisor can provide! It can be as simple as pointing out how a task could be accomplished more efficiently or showing sympathy when pointing out possible errors in an argument. Constructive criticism is criticism that challenges and motivates a student to improve their work, rather than leaving them feeling bad about it. When a student is preparing to give a presentation, or for their thesis defence, the supervisor should also give them opportunities to practice with a friendly audience.



3: At the start of research

Starting the supervisor-student relationship in a positive way is so important that this warrants a separate section of the guide.

Setting the context:

It is very important for the supervisor to understand what the student wants to achieve by doing a research degree, because otherwise they will find it hard to guide the student to make the most of the experience. The supervisor should ask what the student's motivations are for doing a PhD. For a student wanting to become a professor, maximizing their number of publications might be their highest priority, whereas a student wanting a career in industrial research might prioritize rapid completion of the PhD. A supervisor should also explain their reasons for doing the research. Research can be curiosity driven or aimed at solving a specific problem, and if it forms part of a project for which external funding has been received, the funder's requirements may also influence the progress of the PhD.

Setting expectations:

The supervisor should give the student an indication of what resources are available for the project and what the likely challenges will be. They and the student should agree on reasonable working hours that allow the student to balance their PhD work with any other responsibilities they may have. Supervisor and the student together need to agree on responsibility for project management and reporting. For example, they should discuss how often to hold formal project meetings and what form these should take.

The student should also be clear that in addition to their supervisor, they can expect support from the other members of their PhD Committee, the Department Graduate Programme Coordinator, the Department Chair, the School Graduate Programme

Committee Convener, the Dean and key staff. The key point is that although a PhD student should learn independence, when problems arise, they should **ask for help, not suffer in silence.**

4: Communication and feedback

It is good practice to hold individual formal meetings with your student at least once a month. This provides a regular opportunity to review progress. The supervisor and student should keep records of what was agreed at these meetings. Of course, most students and supervisors meet informally much more frequently than monthly, and such frequent meetings can greatly benefit communication between PhD student and supervisor. Meetings are also an opportunity for supervisors to check their students' work and ensure that they are applying methods correctly.

Good communication is an essential part of PhD supervision. In fact, a survey of US PhD students showed that communication skills and honest feedback were the two qualities that were most valued in a mentor (G. L. Rose, *Res. High. Educ.* **44**, (4), 473 (2003)). When PhD students at LUMS were asked about good supervisory practice in 2024, they also highlighted the importance of detailed, critical, yet appreciative feedback.

Good communication means that both student and supervisor will be fully informed of what is happening in the project and in the broader research environment. This means the student reporting the results of their investigations faithfully, including things that 'didn't work'. It also means the supervisor informing the student about potential problems (such as a shortage of reagents or the breakdown of a key facility).

If the supervisor plans to be away for an extended period, they should make sure that the student will still receive sufficient support, for example through regular video calls and meetings with other members of the student's PhD Committee. The student should always know whom they can approach if problems arise.

Good feedback takes many forms. It includes correcting any errors the student may make, but also praising innovations or other things the student does well. It also means providing prompt and constructive criticism of any reports, draft publications, thesis chapters or other written material the student submits, and discussing it with them.

5: Key issues:

Academic integrity

Every student should understand the importance of academic integrity, be committed to upholding it, and know how to do so. A supervisor must be a role model in this respect.

[20019_ICAI-Fundamental-Values_R12.pdf \(academicintegrity.org\)](https://www.academicintegrity.org/20019_ICAI-Fundamental-Values_R12.pdf) A good introduction to the principles of academic integrity.

[Understanding and Avoiding Plagiarism - Google Docs](#) LUMS guidance, primarily aimed at undergraduates but highly relevant to graduate students as well.

Well-being and mental health

Postgraduate students face serious mental health challenges, with studies showing that 'graduate students are more than six times as likely to experience depression and anxiety as compared to the general population' (T. M. Evans et al., *Nature Biotech.* **36**, (3), 282 (2018)). Perfectionism and impostor syndrome are also common issues. The book 'Managing Your Mental Health During Your PhD – A Survival Guide' by Zoë J. Ayres (Springer 2022) is strongly recommended reading for both students and supervisors: [Managing your Mental Health during your PhD: A Survival Guide | SpringerLink](#)

The supervisor has a key role in ensuring a positive and healthy working environment. Here are some relevant quotes from LIIMS PhD students:

‘My supervisor taught me to face my fears, remain calm amidst storms, and embrace the power of resilience.’

‘My supervisor’s approach ensured that I felt comfortable and encouraged, even when mistakes were made’

‘My supervisor knows what it is like being in my position’.

Gestures such as organizing a dinner to welcome a new student, providing baked treats at a group meeting, or supporting students to engage in sports and other extra-curricular activities are also appreciated!

For advice on the support available at LUMS, see [Resources for Faculty | Welcome to LUMS](#)

