

### **3.3 Issues for Consideration by the Supervisor**

Supervisors vary greatly in their style and method of supervision. Supervision may occur as a one to one or a team approach. A team approach may mean regular meetings with people apart from supervisors, such as other students in the research group or other staff members involved in the research program. Some supervisors choose to supervise their students using a “master/apprentice” model while others leave students largely to their own devices. However, supervisors, no matter what choice of style, are expected to meet the reporting policies and the established standard of supervision outlined in the “Code of Practice for Research Studies and Supervision”. This is available on the OPR website: [www.vu.edu.au/postgrad](http://www.vu.edu.au/postgrad)

Supervisors need to be aware that different students have different ways of getting to grips with the research area and with the task in hand. It is therefore advisable to discuss supervision approaches early in the program. Such discussions ensure that each party understands the expectations of the other, and that both are committed to the mutually agreed arrangements. It may take two or three meetings for the supervisor and the student to work through different styles, approaches and preferences for working and interacting. Each party will need time to consider the relevant issues and return to discuss them in the next meeting. (See section 3.4 on initial areas for discussion between the supervisor and student).

The supervisory relationship will change as the student’s work progresses. The student will experience a shift from being largely dependant on the supervisor in the early stages of the project to being relatively independent as the research develops. More or less supervisory contact will be required at different stages in the project. Students require different types of interaction, assistance, feedback and direction from the outset of their research and during different stages of the program. Some students may be comfortable about articulating their needs and limitations from the beginning. Other students, either because of social or cultural background, are less forthcoming in communicating such needs. It will be easier for all parties if expectations and clear ground rules are developed early on and the means for open discussion are developed.

It is proposed that, under normal circumstances, staff be restricted to being the registered supervisor of research students that represents no more than six EFTSU. It is further proposed that staff be permitted to exceed this load by two EFTSU for short periods up to six months where staff have two EFTSU or more research students who are close to completion (Committee for Postgraduate Studies minute 150.4.2 refers).

### **3.4 Initial Areas for Discussion between the Supervisor and Student**

The following areas of discussion should help to clarify the supervisor and the student’s expectations of the supervisory arrangement. If there is more than one supervisor it may be appropriate to involve co-supervisors in the initial discussions. If this is not practical, the principal supervisor should ensure that the expectations are communicated to the co-supervisors. Discussing supervisory issues at the outset helps to lay foundations for a good working relationship, but it may also be necessary for aspects of the supervisory relationship to be renegotiated as the student progresses.

The overriding question at the back of both the supervisor and the student's minds during these initial discussions will be "Can I work with this person?" Different viewpoints and methods of interaction and work styles may become apparent during this process. It is important for each party to identify those differences and to determine whether workable solutions can be agreed and maintained.

### **3.4.1 Sharing of Basic Information**

In the initial meetings, the supervisor should make clear to the student information pertaining to the following issues:

- Research interests;
- Publications or current research in progress;
- Other research students being supervised;
- Other teaching and research commitments;
- Planned leave.

The student is advised to make clear to the supervisor:

- Any work, family, religious, ethnic, personal or other circumstances which the student believes the supervisor should be made aware of, and which may affect the student's work.

### **3.4.2 Questions regarding the Supervisory Process**

The student should develop a clear understanding of the following issues, and check with the supervisor that the ideas are shared:

- In your candidature, what do you believe you are setting out to do in undertaking a research degree?
- What do you see your supervisor doing to support this?
- How explicit is the supervisory relationship and supervision practice? What gets talked about and what doesn't get talked about between you and your supervisor?

### **3.4.3 Questions you might ask your Supervisor**

Some of the following questions should be asked at the beginning of the project, whilst others are more appropriately tackled a little later as the issues become more relevant:

- What kinds of knowledge are needed and what level of ability is required for work in the project? For example, the student should be clear on the level of understanding for aspects of the research process, the style of academic writing required, the types of statistical analysis that might be involved, etc;
- What resources does the supervisor know of? How much help can the student expect from the supervisor and/or the University community?
- Are research methods subjects advisable? How does a student enrol? How does a student obtain other types of help available in the University community (eg statistical design)?
- Development of the research proposal. What is involved? How much input can be expected from the supervisor?
- What are the supervisor's and student's responsibilities for the development of the research abilities of the student?
- What methods/standards of record keeping does the supervisor expect/recommend?
- Expectations of feedback. How often, how much, in what form, with how much notice? What type of feedback does the student prefer/benefit from, find helpful/unhelpful?
- Who has ownership of material arising from research, authorship of papers etc?

- Will the supervisor comment on drafts of research papers?
- Are there issues regarding intellectual property that may need to be addressed? How?
- What is the role of the co-supervisor? How does this differ from that of the principal supervisor, eg different theoretical and training inputs?
- What happens if there is conflicting feedback between supervisors?

#### **3.4.4 Questions regarding the Thesis**

Issues to discuss may include:

- What does “thesis” mean?
- What is the appropriate structure, length, presentation?
- What referencing conventions should be used?
- What is meant by “originality”?
- Titles of good examples in this field?
- What is the difference between a pass thesis and a first class thesis?

#### **3.4.5 Questions regarding Meetings**

Issues to discuss might include:

- Frequency and duration of meetings;
- Structure of meetings;
- How often should meetings with co-supervisors occur? How often should student and supervisors meet as a group?
- Access to the supervisor outside of scheduled meeting times?
- If meetings aren’t regularly planned, whose responsibility is it to schedule meetings?
- If one person can’t make the meeting, what should be done?

#### **3.4.6 Questions regarding Time Frames**

Issues to discuss might include:

- A rough guide to how long each stage of the research process should take to complete;
- What would be a realistic completion date in view of separate commitments and university policy?

#### **3.4.7 Faculty Resources and Expectations**

A student should establish, with the supervisor, answers to the following questions on housing, resources and periodical reporting expectations:

- Is there an available study place, and what resources are available there (desk, chair, bookshelf, filing cabinet, lamp etc)?
- What technical support and equipment are available to support the project?
- Is there a pigeon hole or other message taking facilities?
- What computing and printing facilities are available?
- Is there an email address available?
- What telephone and facsimile services are available for research student use?
- What paid work, eg tutoring is available for students and what other external work is permitted?
- How do you become aware of funding opportunities such as scholarships, research grants, travel grants, conference grants?
- What School or Faculty facilities exist for student/staff interaction?

- What expectations does the Faculty have in relation to your progress and participation in the academic life of the Faculty (for example, seminar and conference presentations)?

### **3.4.8 Questions regarding University Requirements/Issues**

Issues to discuss could include the following:

- What University regulations govern research students and general student issues? How does the student gain access to these documents?
- How is progress assessment of a thesis conducted?
- Is there insurance cover while attending conferences, field trips etc?
- What ethical issues need to be considered? Are there aspects of the research that will require University Ethics approval? How does the student make an application for ethics clearance?
- Are there any occupational health and safety requirements associated with the research?
- What grievance procedures are available for research students?

Your Faculty may require you to give at least one seminar presentation per year. These can be organised as a part of the regular School meeting schedule or may be organised as part of a formal function in which to exchange ideas and socialise within the School. An extension of this idea is two or three supervisors within a Faculty choosing to set up a group for the students they supervise. One or all of the supervisors may regularly attend the group to provide advice and assistance. Guests might be invited to attend to cover an area of particular interest to the group.

Where students spend significant time off campus conducting their research within industry based settings, it may be appropriate for these students to form a supervisory group to exchange ideas, and experiences. Such groups might include University based students with related topics, and their supervisors from both industry and the University.

There are a number of circumstances that are appropriate for the formation of a peer support/supervisory group. Whatever the structure, the following may assist in maximising the group's effectiveness:

- It is preferable that all students are working in a similar or related area;
- There needs to be a strong commitment to attend meetings on a regular basis. This ensures that each member receives support and has an appropriate audience when it is their turn to present work;
- Meetings need some structure, even if it is relatively loose, in order to maintain focus;
- Members usually take turns in presenting work or discussing ideas;
- If all members attend regularly, the ideal size is probably four to six members. This number, with weekly meetings, ensures that members only have to wait approximately a month to present work to the group;
- There should be group agreement regarding confidentiality of sensitive material;
- Guests might be invited to talk to the group about an area of particular interest or a common problem for the whole group;
- A more social gathering of the group should occur either before or after the main meeting. The social and work aspects of the groups functioning should be separate;
- Individual member's successes should be celebrated.