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## **Chapter 4**

### **Agreeing to supervise**

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#### **Introduction**

There is a diversity of practices across the higher education sector in the way in which supervisors and research candidates are brought together. In a longitudinal study of Australian PhD candidates and their supervisors, Ives and Rowley (2005) report that the process for assigning supervisors is 'largely informal, negotiated and based mainly on academic interests. Candidates apply and then talk with people working in their area of interest or, their applications are passed to potential supervisors who interview the applicants if they are interested in taking on the supervision' (p 538-539). A common feature of a process which heralds the potential for a unique academic-student relationship in higher education is that actually much of the process is informal, and potential supervisors have the opportunity to screen candidates prior to agreeing to supervise.

The unique aspect of this relationship is that the supervisor occupies a hybrid space between 'teacher' and 'researcher'. The supervisory relationship foregrounds an ongoing tension in professional academic life; the tension between identifying as a 'teacher' and on the one hand and a 'researcher' on the other. Candidates can make the position of the supervisor ambiguous – as a researcher the candidate should exhibit autonomy, independence of thought and originality; as learners they are dependent on guidance, feedback, and need to be prepared to take direction. Playing out this dual role is complex and demanding. It is no wonder that the relationship has the potential to be highly

emotionally charged, especially when the candidate's investment in time, energy and money, is added to the mix. It is also a relationship that is peculiarly subjected to institutional control, with most universities, and national bodies, adopting codes of

practice that specify the respective responsibilities in the relationship – such as frequency of meetings, the provision of timely feedback, the need to negotiate intellectual property and publishing arrangements and so on. Such codes of practice are also typically hybrids between research contracts and teaching contracts.

Agreeing to supervise means accepting involvement in a research project and an intense teaching responsibility that may extend for 4 or more years. It is certainly worth exploring, then, the precursors to agreeing to supervise. This chapter analyses some of the factors to consider when deciding whether to supervise a particular candidate. The factors include the candidate's background; their motives for undertaking a doctorate, capabilities, needs, expectations, resources and personal styles. Supervisors, for their part, need to be mindful of *their* motives, demands, expectations, and strengths and weaknesses in relation to particular candidates. Supervision of course does not exist in a vacuum, and so contextual factors also play a part, such as the way in which performance as a supervisor is measured in the department, the need to work with co-supervisors or supervisory panels, and the broader policy framework within which supervision occurs.

## **What makes for a successful candidature?**

In a wide ranging review of the literature Latona and Browne (2001) identified factors that had an impact on the likelihood of successful completion of a research degree. They grouped these factors into three broad categories: (1) institutional and environmental factors, (2) individual supervisory arrangements, and (3) student cohorts and characteristics.

The *institutional and environmental factors* included disciplinary differences (eg that science candidates typically work within a tightly knit group of researchers while humanities candidates tended to work solely with their supervisor), the establishment of structured milestones throughout candidature, and the critical importance of the sense of belonging to a group or a research culture.

*Individual supervisory arrangements* included the timeliness and fit for purpose feedback from supervisors, the frequency of meetings and structure of activities between meetings, the existence of negotiated supervision protocols which address expectations and needs, the quality of the relationship with the supervisor, continuity in topic and supervisor, and getting started and committing early to a project. *Candidate cohorts and characteristics* include entry qualifications (first class honours is important for science candidates but does not necessarily predict success for arts and humanities students), part or full time study, financial security, and psychological factors such as a tendency to procrastination.

Ives and Rowley (2005) comment on the importance of matching candidates and supervisors. The three most important factors in a successful match being academic area (i.e. supervisor's expertise aligns with the candidate's topic), the matching of interpersonal working patterns, and a match in research methodology. They comment:

“Some supervisors and students were willing to accept a high match in two areas and sacrifice the third. The areas that most supervisors were willing to sacrifice was the match in methodology, whereas students were more willing to sacrifice the topic. Arguments for sacrificing the match regarding topic were that you need some knowledge, but do not need to be an expert. Arguments for sacrificing the methodology match were that you can involve someone else in this part of the supervision if needed. Both groups thought the match in interpersonal working patterns was critical.” (2005, p541)

This view of the centrality of a good interpersonal working relationships is compatible with the findings of others and with the testimonies of experienced supervisors (see Fraser and Mathews, 1999). Although the above observations are not exhaustive, they provide a good general starting point for making a judgement about supervising a particular candidate. This judgement clearly needs to take into account factors relating variously to the candidate, to you as a supervisor, and to the organisational climate in which you supervise.

## **Candidate factors**

### *Academic capacity*

It is important to understand as much of the background of candidates prior to making a decision to supervise. The most obvious factors are prior qualifications and experience that equips the candidate for research. It is not always possible to ascertain this from the submitted paperwork, especially when making a judgement about academic equivalences from degrees earned overseas or even degrees earned at other domestic universities. Most universities source their research candidates from at least three areas: their own undergraduate and masters graduates, graduates of other domestic universities, and graduates from overseas universities. In all cases it is imperative that the supervisor sight some work of the candidate – whether this is their honours thesis, a research report, or an extended proposal for research.

A particularly sensitive case arises when a candidate is taken on after a period of supervision with another supervisor. The difficulty here is to make an assessment of the candidate's progress and potential to complete without compromising academic colleagues who may have had previous involvement in the project.

### *Research topic*

The research topic needs to be sufficiently thought through to provide a basis for making a decision to accept the candidate to be part of the project. Irrespective of whether there is a formal institutional requirement to submit a proposal with an application it is a good idea to insist on this prior to taking on a candidate – this can be done in the stage leading up to the formal application for candidature. Analysing a proposal provides a great deal of information about the candidate's theoretical and methodological perspective, writing style, their general approach to research, and even their motive for undertaking the research. It also provides information on the resources that will be needed to sustain and support the research.

### *Needs, motives and expectations*

Needs, motives and expectations can really only be explored through face-to-face or telephone contact. This discussion should include an assessment of what you can offer as a supervisor and what the institution can offer to support the project. It is always useful to ask questions about both short-term motives for undertaking the proposed research and longer term career motives for enrolling in a research degree. For example the research itself may be motivated by a personal or professional concern, or by a gap in the literature, or simply by intellectual curiosity.

This information may or may not make a difference to your decision to supervise, depending on your approach to research and what constitutes a 'legitimate' problem for investigation. For example, if the topic is motivated by a professional concern then it is more than likely to be a multidisciplinary study, but not all supervisors are comfortable supervising such projects. As far as longer term career aspirations are concerned, candidates invariably see supervisors as mentors in a broader sense and they look to them for guidance on strategies and skills needed to pursue a research career either inside or outside the academy – they may be interested in developing skills such as writing articles for publication, delivering conference papers, understanding the research commercialisation process, and so on.

### *Preferred working style*

As mentioned, matching interpersonal working styles is quite crucial for successful candidature. The best way to diagnose the candidate's preferences is to talk with them about how they worked with a previous supervisor, say the supervisor of their honours thesis if applicable. It may also be worth going systematically through an instrument such as Gurr's (2001) Student-Supervisor Alignment Tool Kit which is provided as a supervision resource on the FIRST website. In the Ives and Rowley (2005) study those initially satisfied students who became dissatisfied later in their candidature reported that the reason for their dissatisfaction was insufficient guidance, feedback and structure from their supervisors. This is an ironic finding since the need for guidance, feedback and structure should ideally diminish over the candidature. It is important therefore to

accurately describe and discuss your actual supervision practices rather than your 'preferred' practices, and any anticipated change in those practices over the span of the project. A good question to pose is to consider who is the project director. For example, Is the supervisor the director or the candidate? If it is the candidate, then is the supervisor equivalent to a chair of an advisory committee? Discussions such as these typically draw out perspectives and views that would remain unanalysed until such time as they caused tension in the candidate-supervisor relationship.

## **Supervisor factors**

### *Motives, demands, expectations*

In engaging with a potential candidate it is important to acknowledge your own motives and to ask some penetrating questions. The following eight questions may serve as a useful reminder as to the level of engagement and commitment that is required.

1. Why have I taken on the role of graduate research supervisor?
2. Do I see it as a professional obligation?
3. Am I motivated by the topic being proposed?
4. Is the candidate's work part of a research project or overall research plan that I am pursuing in the academic unit?
5. Are research candidate completions necessary for my research profile and perhaps promotion or subsequent appointment?
6. Am I interested in the process of research supervision and research training and its role in building a research culture?
7. Am I interested in the overall skills development of my candidate or is it the sole focus the production of a thesis?
8. Do I enjoy one-to-one supervision sessions as a form of teaching?

No doubt many academics will identify with more than one of the above and indeed the predominant motive for candidates may differ. Differing motives lead to subtly different expectations. For example if the candidate is on a scholarship that has been provided by a

grant that you have received from an industry source you will need to balance the

demands placed on the candidate with the demands placed on you from the project steering committee. If the project has commercial potential you will need to address the implications with the candidate prior to agreeing to supervise.

### *Conception of research and model of supervision*

It is important to analyse and articulate the conception of research that you hold and the model of supervision that drives your demands and expectations of candidates. Recent articles on research supervision have explored different possible supervisor-candidate relationships other than the historically dominant master-apprentice model. For example Johnson, Lee and Green (2000) analyse and challenge the ideas of autonomy and the independent scholar that underpin the traditional practices of postgraduate pedagogy. They quotation from one of their interviewees (a person who had been supervised at Oxford University and was modelling her supervisory practices on her experiences at Oxford), is illuminating:

“There was no student whose thesis I read in full. And I told them at the beginning. And I said I'm not going to be reading more than half of this and if you are uneasy about that, I won't supervise you. I will recommend someone else. Because it is more than about ... it is more than just writing a thesis. It's about learning to be independent. And I think that's one of the great things in scholarship, learning ... but it's tough, you've got to learn to rely on your own judgement and not to run to the supervisor for every problem that you have. And that's the test in the end. And you can fail it.” (2000 p 137)

They report the interviewee as indicating that it was an Oxford rule that no supervisor was to read more than half the thesis. Her own supervisor explained the rule as: 'the reason is that we want to be quite clear in our own minds and we want the student to be quite clear that it is their work' (ibid)

This approach is at the other end of the spectrum to the model being advocated by the contemporary concern for outputs, with a corresponding emphasis on 'time to complete', 'retention to completion' and indicators of quality supervision. McCormack (2004)

observes that such concerns lead to a linear model of supervision as structured and progressing in a step like manner – a kind of project management approach to supervision. The point she makes is that whatever your model of supervision, addressing any discrepancies with candidates is important at the beginning of candidature – preferably as part of the process of agreeing to supervise.

### *Strengths and weaknesses*

An honest appraisal of your own strengths and weaknesses, mapped against the needs of the potential candidate and the skills of any co-supervisor, will greatly assist the process of agreeing to supervise. The strengths and weaknesses may relate to academic matters such as theoretical knowledge of the area, practical knowledge of research techniques and methodologies, a knowledge of the relevant literature, the ability to supervise across disciplinary areas; or to non academic matters such as taking the initiative in making appointments with candidates, providing written feedback on all submitted work, arranging for candidates to give conference or seminar papers, or arranging the purchase of necessary equipment and so on. The question really is ‘how can I help this candidate as a supervisor with the knowledge, skills and predispositions that I know I have?’ This of course needs to be asked in the context of co-supervisors and any willingness you may have to develop new skills and dispositions as a matter for your own professional development.

An important area to consider is your capacity to work with others in the supervision of a particular candidate. Where the co-supervisor has already been appointed or supervisory panel has already been formed then an assessment of your capacity to collaborate with the team is crucial.

## **Organisational factors**

As argued elsewhere (McCormack, 2004), the contemporary circumstances of higher education have led to policy shifts in research and research training that have found their

way into university policies and procedures. There is a concern with timely completions

and the reduction of waste in the system. One common institutional response has been a renewed emphasis on improving the quality of the graduate research experience.

Three particular aspects of quality are the monitoring of supervisor performance, the provision of opportunities for candidates to develop broad based skills that will stand them in good stead in seeking employment, and the provision of sufficient resources and supports so that candidates are retained and complete on time. All these points have implications for the decision to supervise particular candidates. For example, if supervisor performance is measured by the number of on-time completions then this would drive supervisors to only take on the very best candidates. On the other hand if supervisor performance were measured by client satisfaction or by some measure of 'value add' then supervisors would be motivated to take on more 'non-traditional' candidates. This is not to deny the social justice motives of supervisors, only to point out the consequences of misplaced policies.

On the issue of developing broad based professional skills, if the candidate is seeking to increase their capacity in other related areas of research education and training then you should be mindful of the university provision for this. If there is little institutional provision then the burden of provision will fall on your shoulders, so an assessment of required and optional professional skills becomes important. Finally with respect to general supports, you should be aware that across the sector this has been an area of student dissatisfaction, a dissatisfaction that will have an impact on your supervisory relationship. Apart from financial and physical resources a valuable resource is the research climate in the academic unit. This is a great source of potential support for you as a supervisor. Prior to agreeing to supervise a candidate you should be satisfied that the supports candidates expect and/or require are available. If not then you will need to address their unrealistic expectations or decline to supervise.

## **Concluding comment**

This chapter has highlighted a range of aspects to consider in the quest to make a productive match between you and your research candidates. Agreeing to supervise a graduate research candidate means making a long term and sustained commitment to the candidate and to the particular research project. It is a decision which should not be made lightly. It is clear that there are a number of things to consider in making such a decision, an assessment of your skills, knowledge and preferences, and to consider how you work within the policy, procedural and research environment of the academic unit. Just as there is no single way of supervising, there is no single protocol to follow in screening graduate research candidates.

## **Questions**

1. What qualities do you look for in candidates when screening them for supervision?
2. What do you feel you achieve from supervising research candidates and how would you describe your approach to supervision and research to a prospective candidate?
3. What is more important for you: a match in expertise, working relationship or methodological approach?

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