

# Understanding the graduate student-supervisor relationship: A guide for graduate students in Biological Sciences

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## *Preamble*

Most graduate students have a good experience in our department and remain close colleagues and sometimes close friends with their thesis supervisor after graduation. Unfortunately, it is a reality that a small minority of students have a poor relationship with their supervisor, and this can have a major effect on their health and well-being and their ability to complete their thesis. It can also negatively affect the supervisor and, on occasion, even the smooth functioning of the entire research group. A good relationship between a supervisor and graduate student is therefore key to the success of both parties but like any professional interaction, it requires effort from both partners to ensure that it remains open, respectful and constructive.

There are unique features of the supervisor-graduate student relationship that often make it more difficult to manage than in other professions where the roles of the two parties are clearly delineated as 'employer' and 'employee'. For example, supervisors and students both have several and changing roles throughout the course of the program: supervisors can be employers (RA and TA-ships), examiners, teachers and mentors, administrators, experts but also confidantes and colleagues. Students can be just that, students, but also employees, experts, examiners/markers (as TAs), employers/supervisors (of undergraduate research assistants), and also colleagues. The constant shift from one role to another can often make it more difficult to know how to approach one another on sensitive issues. Ultimately, the supervisor does hold most of the power and in general, this makes it very difficult for a student to openly discuss problems.

The purpose of this document is to outline common problems that arise and some strategies to handle or avoid them. Because each relationship is unique, it is not possible to cover all eventualities but the general principles should be useful in negotiating rough patches in the student-supervisor relationship.

## ***Expectations - looking at graduate studies from both sides***

Whether they have consciously thought about it or not, both students and supervisors have predetermined expectations of each other. Because many problems arise from a clash of expectations ("How could it take 3 weeks to return a draft of Chapter 1?!"; " Why do they leave at 5 pm every day - I worked evenings and weekends!"), it is useful to make a list of your expectations and clearly communicate them to your supervisor. It would be best to do this at some level during the negotiation phase when considering accepting an offer from a prospective supervisor, but at the very least, it should be done within the first semester of your arrival. It is important to discuss expectations openly in person so as to encourage a frank discussion of potentially sensitive issues. A list of some of the issues that may be discussed is presented below - you may think of others.

<b>What should the grad student expect of their supervisor?</b>	<b>What should the supervisor expect of their grad student?</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Constructive feedback on writing in a timely fashion (e.g., 1-2 weeks)</li><li>• Funding to attend conferences when possible</li><li>• Salary at set departmental level</li><li>• Adequate research funding</li><li>• Transparency re source of funds and expectations for finding own funding</li><li>• Clarity regarding expectations of research</li><li>• Open discussions about the student's research project on a regular basis (at least monthly)</li><li>• The supervisor would take an interest in the student as a person, including other demands on the student's time (e.g., family)</li><li>• Time for vacation</li><li>• Respectful interactions</li><li>• Advice on future career options</li><li>• Willingness to write letters of support for scholarships, fellowships, jobs, etc.</li><li>• provide a safe and healthy working environment</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Focussed work by the student on their research project</li><li>• Regular updates about the student's progress</li><li>• Informed as to students' academic life (course grades, journal club participation, TAs, etc.)</li><li>• Meet deadlines with few reminders</li><li>• Make attempts to obtain scholarships (and/or research funding where applicable)</li><li>• Independence, but expected to ask supervisor or other colleagues for help when needed</li><li>• That the student will recognize the other demands on the supervisor's time</li><li>• Student will take relevant courses</li><li>• Attend and present at conferences and workshops where possible</li><li>• Open to constructive advice/criticism</li><li>• Be informed about student absences</li><li>• observe all health and safety regulations</li></ul>

## ***Issues that arise - what's reasonable?***

Clear communication of expectations should reduce the potential for most conflicts; nevertheless, despite our best intentions, issues can arise that can cause disagreement. Misunderstandings can arise quickly if there is little or no direct communication. Some of the major areas of friction are listed below and suggested ways to avoid/solve them are also presented.

- **Funding**

Salary - you should receive the amount per semester suggested by the current DGSC (at present, \$6000) from a combination of TA/RA/GF/scholarship. For MET students, the supervisor is expected to provide an RAship for the semester the student works on their MET project in the laboratory.

Research - This amount varies widely depending on the project. Some supervisors will expect you to contribute to research funds from independent grants - you need to find this out at the outset of your graduate program. You may be asked to apply for funding from diverse sources to support your research; nevertheless, it is reasonable to expect assistance from your supervisor in obtaining such funding such as reading drafts of proposals, suggesting agencies, etc.

The annual progress report (see Appendix 1) requires that you list sources of support for each semester in the upcoming year and this should be discussed openly with the supervisor. The supervisor is required to initial the list of projected funding on the form to indicate that they are committing to this funding formula for the next three semesters. Your supervisor should let you know as soon as possible if the plan for funding changes so you can work together to ensure continued support.

- **Guidance in day-to-day research**

Hands off versus the micro-manager: Everyone has a particular style of management and it is useful to think about how you like to operate. You may react negatively to supervisors who ask for research results daily as you feel that your independence/competence is being questioned.

The supervisor may be oblivious to this and believe they are just being curious and engaged in the project. At the other end of the spectrum are supervisors who feel that students should be left to independent discovery as part of their graduate student training and only request updates infrequently, leaving some students to feel that the supervisor isn't interested in their research. Whatever your style, it is good to discuss this with your supervisor to find a degree of interaction with which both parties are comfortable. If you are not comfortable speaking directly about this issue, you may try and address this by suggesting approaches to make your interaction more in line with your work habits, e.g., if you feel ignored, suggest that you have a weekly meeting time set aside to discuss progress and problems. If you feel micromanaged, you could give a brief update to your supervisor but promise that a more in-depth version of results will be available at a formal meeting.

- Committee composition and duties

Your supervisor will be responsible for providing financial support (see above) as well as fulfilling the administrative duties associated with your graduate program (signing forms, writing letters of reference, etc.). In general, your supervisor directs your research though in some cases, a member of supervisory committee is your de facto supervisor. Depending on the supervisor, the degree to which you direct your own research will vary.

Selection of supervisory committee members is generally done by the supervisor with input from you. Members of the supervisory committee are selected based on their expertise and it is important to consider carefully who would provide the best advice for your project. One supervisory committee member must be a regular Biology faculty member but additional members can be chosen from other departments at SFU, or from other universities, industry and government agencies. You are encouraged to consult with your supervisory committee members for feedback and constructive advice on your research.

Co-supervisors will be expected to attend committee meetings (at minimum, once per year), read and comment on your progress report and presentations, and attend the thesis defence to ask questions as a member of the examining committee. For doctoral students, supervisory

committee members are also on the examining committee for the candidacy exam (See Appendix 1).

- Setting up regular meetings

Regular meetings are a must. These should be face-to-face meetings where you and your supervisor can go over details related to your research, and any other issues related to your progress. There should be a plan for regular meetings, at the very minimum once per semester but preferably once per month or more often. Ensure that adequate time is set aside to discuss research as well as provide an opportunity to talk about other issues related to your program (e.g. course selection, funding options, etc.). You may just end up having a great conversation about science in general.

*Note: If your supervisor is planning on being away from campus for 3 months or longer, they are obliged to make an arrangement for alternative supervision according to the Graduate General Regulations (1.6.3 - "A senior supervisor who is planning to be off campus for more than three months shall arrange for proper supervision of the student during this absence. The graduate program committee and the dean of graduate studies shall be informed in writing of the arrangement.").* Talk about this with your supervisor well in advance of their departure; this is a good opportunity to rely on members of your supervisory committee. Being in touch regularly with your supervisor even if they are not on campus is much easier now with email and video-conferencing, and a plan for regular contact is important.

- Work habits

Working at home, the library or in the lab? Technology has increased our abilities to work away from the university for many projects and if you are not on campus, your supervisor might assume that you are not working on your research. Therefore, it is important that you clearly communicate to your supervisor what you are doing with your time. Some supervisors feel that it is important that students be on campus regularly while others are comfortable with students working from home - you should find out what your supervisor's opinion is on this issue. For safety reasons, you should not be working on campus alone late at night or on the weekends

(particularly if you work with hazardous materials). If you need to work alone, ensure that you have a buddy system in place. Similarly, if you work alone in your field research, a plan should be in place in case of emergency.

- Conference attendance

It is the expectation of the DGSC that you attend at least one conference during your graduate program. Your supervisor can provide assistance in identifying appropriate conferences as well as obtaining travel funding (reading drafts of abstracts, writing letters of support, for example). Other graduate students in your field are also good sources of information for useful conferences.

- Writing papers/abstracts/presentations and reviewing drafts

You will need to discuss with your supervisor what their expectations are for drafts you submit, e.g., how polished it should be (e.g., do you need to include all references?, should the figures be in their final form with statistical significance noted?, does it have to conform with the journal/thesis formatting requirements?, etc), and what is their firm deadline for submission. When you submit your work, you should ask when you should expect feedback (a week or two is generally reasonable; however, the turnaround time will depend on what other commitments your supervisor has at that time e.g., grant deadlines, heavy teaching load, personal issues, etc.)

Authorship. As far in advance of writing as possible, discuss the authorship (who and in what order) for each publication. Your supervisor may wish to include individuals as authors that you were not anticipating, e.g., colleagues who supplied reagents, or had input into model building, etc.. It is appropriate for you to request inclusion of other authors (e.g., undergraduate assistants), or to suggest changes in the order of the authors. A frank discussion as to the list of authors is important so that everyone is aware of the rationale for including or excluding certain individuals.

Intellectual property. Over the past two decades, disagreements over intellectual property have become a more prominent cause of friction between students and their supervisors. As soon as it is clear that an idea or process has the potential for commercialization, all parties should be included in discussions facilitated by the University-Industry Liaison office personnel. In addition, it is important to read the SFU policy on Intellectual Property, R30.03 - it pertains to all University members who create intellectual property, not just faculty.

- Socializing - a must...

Time for social interactions is necessary for a balanced perspective on life. Other than your own area of research, most of what you learn during grad school, you learn from your peer group. Socializing with other grads is good for morale and it is a useful reality check, e.g., you aren't the only one whose experiments aren't working! It also alerts you to professional opportunities, scholarship deadlines, how to cope with a TAsip and research; the list goes on and on. Consider volunteering with the graduate caucus or sitting on departmental committees. Not only do you meet new people, you will learn about how the department and university work.

Socializing with your supervisor will depend on how much their social life revolves around the lab. If you do socialize with your supervisor, remember to keep your relationship a professional one; avoid conversations of a highly personal nature. If you find yourself in an intimate personal relationship with your supervisor, you must request a change of supervisor as soon as possible.

### ***What if....?***

#### I never see my supervisor

Email them or phone them to request a meeting. In the meeting, discuss your expectations and request that regular meetings be held at mutually-agreed upon times. Discuss the agenda for the next meeting. Send a follow-up email to get a confirmation from the supervisor that they agree to the schedule. If you are still unable to arrange regular meetings with your supervisor, turn to your supervisory committee members for advice and feedback on your research.

### My experiments aren't working

Don't be afraid of telling your supervisor about experiments that didn't work or results that are unexpected. If you do not confront difficult issues (and most students have problems with their research or courses at some point), you will miss out on the opportunity to get constructive advice from your supervisor, and you may become demoralized. Keep track of your progress and check with your supervisor if you are unsure as to how to proceed. For your committee meeting report for the Annual Progress Report, make sure that the minutes specifically outline what your plans are for the upcoming semesters, including a timeline.

When your progress is slower than expected, it is important to rely not only on your supervisor but also on members of the supervisory committee for feedback and advice. If necessary, an extra meeting of the supervisory committee meeting can be convened to discuss specific issues (e.g., changing study sites). An extra meeting may be requested by the committee members, the supervisor, or the student.

### My supervisor is difficult to work with

Healthy disagreement is expected in academic life; however, if the supervisor uses disrespectful or demeaning language, or yells at you, this is not acceptable. Remain professional and use respectful and non-personal language with your supervisor. If they do not do likewise, it is appropriate to tell the supervisor that you cannot discuss the issue further until you are both calm. If necessary, ask for a facilitator (e.g., the DGSC chair). If you believe that there are serious harassment issues, contact the SFU Human Rights Office Director.

### I need to go on leave due to illness/family reasons

If you know about the need for a leave in advance, you can make plans for continued regular communication; however, as an on-leave student, you do not continue any aspect of your thesis work. Consult with funding agencies in advance if possible to determine whether leave has any impact on scholarship funding or contractual obligations. Maternity/Paternity provisions are available for some scholarships.

Some students need an on-leave semester because of illness/surgery; don't be afraid to ask for one. If you are unsure, talk to your peers and/or to the DGSC chair about going on leave if you think that this



may be beneficial. Once you have taken a decision, discuss this with your supervisor as far in advance as possible so that they can plan. Be aware that on leave semesters do not count towards your semester total for MSc students (12 semesters maximum); however, the 6-year maximum still applies.

### My supervisor runs out of funding

Depending on the circumstances, it may be possible to obtain funding for your salary through TAships from the department so that you can complete your degree. You and your supervisor will need to speak to the DGSC chair and the department chair.

### ***What can I do if there is a problem?***

Talk about the problems in a frank and professional manner as soon as they arise. **Ignoring small problems can lead to really big problems later on.** Some tips:

- **"Memo wars"** – avoid these. Use face-to-face meetings rather than email whenever possible. Ask for a facilitator (grad chair, departmental chair) if you believe that this would help. You may also request that a graduate student representative from the DGSC be present. Your supervisor may also request the presence of the DGSC chair. Having an objective person in the room usually decreases the tension and helps both parties express their opinions in a constructive way without resorting to personal comments.
- **Strategies for face-to-face meetings:**
  - Before the meeting*** - Write out what you'd like to say. Use 'I' or 'me' statements (e.g., "I feel that we don't have enough opportunities to discuss my work face to face".) Don't be personal (don't say, "I think that you neglect your grad students.") and focus on the issues; state the facts as you understand them. Listen well and take notes.
  - After*** - Write down what your understanding of the consensus and send it to the supervisor in writing (usually email). For example, "Thanks for meeting with me today. I look forward to discussing my work with you every second Tuesday at 9:30, starting January 27th." Ask them to confirm that this is what you agreed to.

### ***What if the meetings don't solve the problem?***

#### Consult with (usually in this order):

- Another graduate student who is familiar with your situation. They can provide a useful reality check and suggest strategies that may have worked for them or their colleagues. The graduate students who sit on the DGSC are useful resources for student-supervisor issues.
- DGSC chair
- The department chair
- The Dean of Graduate Studies

**In closing, the graduate student-supervisor relationship can be very rewarding and can lead to long-term collaborations and sometimes life-long friendships. Reciprocal trust and respect is the basis of all successful partnerships - doing your best, communicating regularly with your supervisor and supervisory committee, and talking about problems as soon as they arise will help you to keep on track.**

## Appendix 1: Hurdles to jump during your graduate program in Biological Sciences

This list contains most of the major administrative items you will be faced with during your graduate program. Items requiring specific forms are noted by a \*, these can usually be obtained online and/or from the graduate secretary. Not listed are the many deadlines for internal and external scholarship/fellowship/travel awards, or on-leave information.

**Important:** You will receive email reminders from the Grad Secretary but YOU are ultimately responsible for ensuring that all forms and accompanying documents are complete and submitted on time.

Hurdle	Details	Deadlines
*Selecting your committee	Committees must consist of your supervisor plus at minimum, one regular faculty member in Biological Sciences Dept. Additional members may be selected from within Biology, SFU or from external agencies. Committee composition is approved by DGSC chair.	By the end of the 3rd semester after enrollment MET by the end of the 4 <sup>th</sup> semester after enrollment
*Changing your supervisory committee composition	You may add committee members at any time. Removal of a committee member is possible (as long as the committee conforms to regulations).	Anytime until submission of the Approval of Examining Committee form (see below)
Supervisory committee meeting	These must be held at least once per calendar year. Try and ensure that the meeting includes all committee members.	Once or more per calendar year, but before your annual progress report is due (see below)
*Annual Progress Report	This form summarizes your progress and plans. It is a university requirement to submit an annual progress report.	Depends on your start date: Sept start - Oct 15 Jan start - Feb 15 May start - Jun 15
Courses	MSc students are required to take 12 credits (all graduate credits) whereas PhD students must take 6 credits. Students transferring from the MSc to PhD programs must complete 12 credit hours. All students must maintain a 3.0 GPA to remain in the graduate program.	Completing your courses earlier than later is desirable but not required
*Directed Readings	These are 800-level courses in which a student and faculty member meet regularly to discuss a specific area of research. Students must submit a course outline to the DGSC chair along with registration forms.	Anytime during registration period
*Switching from MSc to PhD	The department has specific guidelines for switching; please see the graduate secretary	Preferably within the first two years
*Candidacy exam (PhD students only)	All doctoral students write a proposal and defend it at an oral examination with their supervisory committee plus one external examiner. The candidacy exam is chaired by a member of the DGSC; the graduate secretary will provide you with names of potential chairs.	By the end of the 4th semester or by the end of the 2 <sup>nd</sup> semester after transfer from MSc to PhD

<p>Choosing your examiners</p>	<p>MSc defences involve the supervisory committee, a public examiner and a chairperson. The chairperson is selected by the department. You and your supervisor should choose an appropriate public examiner, who is someone knowledgeable about your research area. The public examiner can be from SFU or elsewhere, but is not on your committee. You or your supervisor may approach potential public examiners to request their participation in your thesis defence.</p> <p>PhD defences involve the supervisory committee, an internal examiner (i.e., from SFU, with general knowledge of your study area) and an external examiner (i.e., not from SFU), as well as a chairperson. The chairperson is selected by the department. The external examiner should be a person with demonstrated international recognition in their field, which is closely allied to yours. The external examiner must be approved by the DGSC chair and the Dean of Graduate Studies. The student does not contact the external examiner.</p>	<p>Do this well in advance of submitting your penultimate version so you have confirmed the willingness and availability of your public and external examiners.</p>
<p>Thesis draft submission/ *Approval of Examining Committee</p>	<p>For you to be allowed to submit, your supervisory committee must read a penultimate (essentially complete) version of your thesis, and indicate that they approve by signing an 'Approval of Examining Committee' form (public/external examiners don't sign). You should ensure that you give this thesis version to them ~2 weeks before you want to submit the 'Approval of Examining Committee' form so they have time to review it.</p> <p>Your final thesis copy must be delivered to all examiners 2 weeks prior to an MSc defence, and 4 weeks prior to a PhD defence.</p>	<p>Once the 'Approval of Examining Committee' form is submitted, MSc defences can take place a minimum of 6 weeks hence, and PhD defences a minimum of 8 weeks hence.</p>