

Guidelines for Good Practice of Joint Supervision

The PhD regulations¹ require that all PhD candidates have the following supervision arrangement in addition to the appointment of a main supervisor:

- either one or more co-supervisors, and/or
- an advisory committee or advisor.

This requirement exists over and above the increasingly common practice of having multiple supervisors for academic reasons. It has given rise to a proliferation of joint supervisions across the University without always an accompanying understanding of the implications. Yet, while joint supervision offers many advantages, it is not a panacea for all supervision ills. Indeed, it poses as many risks as it offers benefits.² Effective joint supervision depends on several good practices, some of which are outlined below.

The suggestions given here draw on the collective input of a group of Departmental Graduate Advisors, supervisors and PhD students who met for this purpose with Barbara Grant (Centre for Professional Development, now CAD) and Matthew Fitzsimons (the then-University Mediator).

The benefits of joint supervision

Benefits include:

- provides back-up for supervisors on leave or suffering illness
- broadens the range of expertise, perspectives, world-views available to the student
- broadens the range of personalities available to the student
- the supervisor develops more links with other staff on campus, extends their knowledge, may learn different skills for supervision, shares responsibility for the student
- the student can tap into more resources and networks, can share needs and demands around, may be less likely to have to move in one direction (e.g., of a particular supervisor's expertise)
- the thesis, being more broadly prepared, may be more likely to pass
- different supervisors can fill different positions of value to the student (e.g., culture, gender etc).

The risks of joint supervision

Risks include:

- the student can get caught between supervisors with different views
- it may be practically difficult to arrange times for meeting together
- in the end, no-one may manage the process overall
- the student may get no supervision
- requires good negotiation skills on part of both student and supervisors which can't be taken for granted
- complex relationships can occur e.g., in which one person plays off the others, or two people unite to pressure the other
- may be harder to agree on a direction for the project
- different expectations, such as attitudes to deadlines, in different departments or faculties could lead to difficulties
- status, cultural, gender, philosophical differences between supervisors can create tensions.

Some models for joint supervision

Joint supervision can take various forms, each of which means a different level of contribution from the supervisors or advisors involved. A good practice approach would

¹ Effective from 01 March 1999, Clause 4n of 2003 PhD Statute.

² Pole, C. (1998). Joint supervision and the PhD: Safety net or panacea? *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 23(3), 259-271.

suggest that the model to be used is deduced from the rationale for the choice of supervisors.

The model should be transparent to all concerned. It may change over time and, if so, agreements about how the joint supervision operates need to be revisited.

Possible models include:

- co-supervision (50/50) in which supervisors contribute more or less equally (although the Statue insists that one be named as the “Main Supervisor”)
- primary/secondary (30-40/70-60) in which one supervisor oversees the research and the other makes specific but substantial contributions in area of expertise
- primary/advisors (80/20) in which one supervisor oversees the research and the other/s make specific but limited contributions in area of expertise
- primary/advisory committee (90/10)
- primary/nominal secondary (100% primary unless leave, illness occurs).

Advice to supervisors

Beforehand:

- consider why you would supervise this student and what contribution you will make (See the Supervision Tool: *Getting into Supervision: A Checklist for Supervisors.*)
- begin with an initial meeting between each supervisor and the student separately to begin process of forming a working relationship
- recognise that it is your professional responsibility to raise the matters below (it is often more difficult for the student)

Have an establishment meeting of supervisors and student to talk explicitly about how the joint supervision will work:

- agree on relative contribution from supervisors
- agree on the approach to be used in the research project
- work on the student's proposal together (so you all know what you're getting into)
- agree on meetings: separate or joint, or sometimes one and sometimes the other
- agree on what the student can expect from each of you
- agree on the milestones for the period ahead
- agree on who is responsible for managing the overall process, who calls meetings, how email can be used, how feedback will be given
- talk about the likelihood that the supervision relationship will change over time
- talk about potential problems and what you will do if things go wrong
- establish that the student can talk to any other person about their work, so that student is not dependent on supervisors only.

Along the way:

- make sure all supervisors are kept up-to-date with decisions and progress
- have some, if not all, meetings all together
- occasionally meet with/contact the other supervisor/s only.

Advice to students

Beforehand:

- 'choose' supervisors who can make different contributions to your research project (See the Supervision Tool: *Getting into Supervision: A Checklist for Students.*)
- consider meeting with each supervisor separately first because each working relationship will be different – but sometimes the supervision meetings will always include all of you.

It is your main supervisor's responsibility to initiate a joint meeting for the supervision group. However, if they don't do this, take the initiative yourself and put these issues on the agenda:

- agree on relative contribution from supervisors
- agree on the approach to be used in the research project
- work on the student's proposal together (so you all know what you're getting into)
- agree on meetings: separate or joint, or sometimes one and sometimes the other
- agree on what you can expect from each of the supervisors
- agree on who is responsible for managing the overall process, who calls meetings, how email can be used, how feedback will be given

- talk about potential problems and what you might do if things go wrong. (See the Supervision Tool: *Pathways for Dealing with Problems in Supervision.*)

Along the way:

- if you do not always meet together, have occasional (mid-period for masters, annual for doctoral) meetings to revisit shared understandings
- keep both supervisors informed about what you are doing and what decisions are being made
- if things change in the supervision (e.g., relative contributions of supervisors, or need to include someone else), revisit your agreements
- meet all together for milestones e.g., completing the proposal, preparing to give a departmental seminar or conference paper, writing the annual report
- join any departmental or faculty groups for graduate students that you can (look for support and motivation outside of supervision)
- form your own reading and/or writing groups (for more of that support and motivation).