

PhD supervision: roles and responsibilities



Image: 'Community' <https://flic.kr/p/akHupi> CC BY 2.0

This guidance is designed to support your developing practice in PhD supervision within the LSE context.

If you would like to discuss any aspect of this guidance further or if you have any suggestions for other resources that would be helpful, please email the Teaching and Learning Centre (tlc@lse.ac.uk) or contact your [Teaching and Learning Centre \(TLC\) departmental adviser](#).

This guidance includes:

1. An overview of the respective responsibilities of the key players in the PhD process at the LSE, with links to relevant online resources.
2. An overview of some key issues explored in pedagogical research literature.
3. A series of resources that can help you think through, develop and improve supervisory relationships.

If you would like to discuss these issues or resources with colleagues you will find it useful to attend TLC workshops organised in collaboration with [the PhD Academy](#). [The Academic Development Programme calendar](#) contains details of these workshops and booking links.

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Respective roles and responsibilities



Image: LSE Image Bank PT2 2593

Image: LSE PhD Academy

Doctoral programme directors

Within each department, it is the responsibility of the Doctoral Programme Director to ensure that supervisors have the support and resources they require to undertake effective supervision, for example:

- providing supervisors with access to training and development, conferences and seminars;
- arranging teaching relief and adjustment of other departmental responsibilities to take account of the supervisory load;
- ensuring that no supervisor is overloaded with supervisory responsibilities; and,
- ensuring that academics do not have sole supervisory responsibility for research students until they have passed their major review.

In addition, Directors must ensure that doctoral students have the support and resources they require to complete their research degree, for example:

- ensuring that all students have a lead supervisor who is a current full-time member of the academic staff of the School;
- ensuring the orientation of new research students is effectively implemented;
- developing appropriate research training and ensuring that supervisors are monitoring progress effectively; and,
- acting as an advocate for doctoral students in the department.

Students and supervisors

The [PhD process year by year webpages](#) provide further details including links to relevant documentation.

See the table below for more details and useful links.

Roles and responsibilities	Resources
<p>Students and supervisors should familiarise themselves with, and abide by, the relevant School regulations and any additional regulations that may affect the student’s registration (e.g. Research Council Funding).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Regulations for Research Degrees * Conditions of registration * General Academic Regulation
<p>Students and supervisors should meet regularly to discuss training and development needs and academic progress. They should use the PhD log to record meetings, submission deadlines and post and comment on written work.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * PhD log via LSE for you * LSE events and courses * ESRC doctoral training centre * National Centre for Research Methods training and events * Statement on editorial help * Regulations on assessment offences: plagiarism * Regulations on assessment offences other than plagiarism * LSE Research Ethics Policy
<p>Students and supervisors should work together to sustain a supportive and collegial environment.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Student charter * Anti-bullying and anti-harassment policy * Support and well-being of PhD students

Modelling supervisory relationships



Image: Structure <https://flic.kr/p/8RxQTM>

The table in the previous section provides you with an overview of what tasks you are expected to complete as a PhD supervisor, and the links to School resources will help you with the processes that surround doing these tasks.

Traditionally regarded as an adjunct of research, now supervision is seen as a specialised branch of teaching, albeit ‘...the most complex and subtle form of teaching in which we engage’ (Brown and Atkins, 1988, p115). In this section we focus on summarising insights from two strands of pedagogical research that explore the PhD supervisory relationship - supervision as management and supervision as community. These two strands do not represent either/or choices, rather we suggest you will find it useful to draw on each at different stages of the supervision process, and in the final section of these guidance notes we provide resources to support that engagement.

Supervision as management

Often drawing on business and project management literature, the focus of this strand is on providing frameworks for thinking through, developing and improving various relationships that impact on the supervision process.

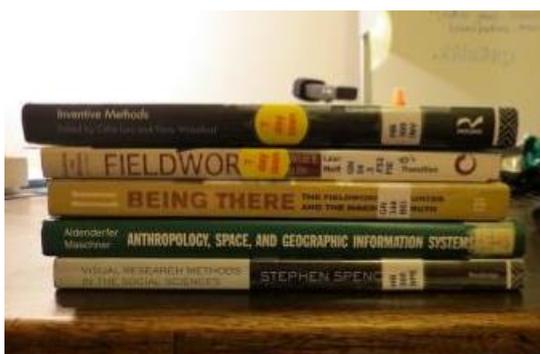


Image: And so it goes <https://flic.kr/p/gtLj9Q>

Brown and Atkins (1988) identified a set of roles that supervisors might adopt and suggest that these roles might form a basis for discussing what supervision should be. They also suggested that the framework provides a stimulus for a discussion of which roles should be fulfilled by the supervisor

themselves and which might be better delivered by other services. You would find this resource useful for planning PhD supervision at departmental level, not only to clarify expectations of the supervisory role, but to explore what roles might be best fulfilled by the PhD Academy, LSE Life, student peers or other support services within the School.

Another relationship that can complicate, but also enrich, the supervision process is co-supervision. [The Oxford Learning Institute has produced a set of questions](#) designed to help co-supervisors to clarify how they will provide support.

Moses (1985) developed a tool for ascertaining expectations of supervision based on a series of contrasting statements, each representing one extreme of a continuum e.g. “It is the advisor’s responsibility to select a promising dissertation research topic” and “The student is solely responsible for selecting the dissertation topic”. This resource would be useful as a stimulus for discussion during the induction of new supervisors. It will help clarify any areas where the expectations of the Department and the supervisor differ, and may also highlight areas where School regulations allow for less personal discretion with regards to actions to be taken. It would also be possible to use this resource as the basis for a discussion with students at key stages of the PhD process.

The supervisor/student alignment model (Gurr, 2001) focuses on the notion that the aim of any supervisory relationship should be the development of competent autonomy for the student. Gurr argues, however, that the process of achieving competent autonomy differs for each student. These differences may reflect past experiences of study and/or the progress, or otherwise, of their current project. Gurr suggests that regular discussions between the supervisor and the student about the student’s progress towards competent autonomy are useful, and suggests a model (reproduced on page 9 of this document) that could be used to facilitate those discussions.

Supervision as community

Kiley (2009) argues that in terms of supporting doctoral students it is useful to think of them as performing a ‘rite of passage’ throughout their research education rather than focusing on the final crossing of a symbolic boundary represented by the completed thesis and the viva. Doctoral students, she argues, practice as ‘legitimate peripheral participants’ in communities of practice and therefore successful



supervisory relationships should support this participation. One way in which this can be achieved is to ensure that doctoral students are included in formal/informal departmental groups/committees, but other strategies involve a broader interpretation of what it means to ‘become’ an academic.

Image: Dinner Party <https://flic.kr/p/6xwdwr>

Drawing on data collected at workshops conducted in Australia, South Africa, Norway, Canada and the UK Kamler and Thomson (2006) argue that the scholarly practice of writing should be put centre stage in the supervision relationship. They argue all writing that students are required to do during their studentship, rather than just the process of 'writing up', is not only discursive work, but social practice which involves identity work. As such, they argue, we need to provide students with suitable spaces in which to explore their emerging identities as scholars.

For example:

- ***Supervisor-initiated reading groups***

Reading groups can be used to support 'reading like a writer' practices that support students in unpacking different practices of scholarship. They might focus either on issues of choreography (e.g. how an argument is being built up through sections of an article, the ways in which paragraph sentences beginnings/endings carry an argument forward) or issues of language use (e.g. identifying uses of metaphor, trope and simile, debating the wording of titles and headings).

- ***Writing-for-publication groups***

Disciplinary communities play a significant role in shaping the discourses surrounding what is considered 'fit for publication', and yet it is often the case that students do not encounter these discursive practices until after they have completed their doctorates. An expectation that students publish throughout their studentships, accompanied by structured support in doing so, can ensure that students have a progressive engagement with their disciplinary community.

- ***Collaborative work with learner academic support services***

Kamler and Thomson do not dismiss 'traditional' style writing skills workshops but they do argue that these need to be articulated in a more positive manner – they should not be 'remedial' in nature or construct the student as deficient. One suggestion they may make is that these skills workshops should be student-led and structured as peer writing groups, with those working in learner academic support and those with disciplinary expertise acting as facilitators. To discuss this approach and the resources available supervisors can contact [the PhD Academy](#).

Resources

Roles of the supervisor

Director	determining topic and method, providing ideas
Facilitator	providing access to resources or expertise, arranging field-work
Advisor	helping to resolve technical problems, suggesting alternatives
Teacher	of research techniques
Guide	suggesting timetable for writing up, giving feedback on progress, identifying critical path for data collection
Critic	of design of enquiry, of draft chapters, of interpretations or data
Freedom giver	authorises student to make decisions, supports student's decisions
Supporter	gives encouragement, shows interest, discusses student's ideas
Friend	extends interest and concern to non-academic aspects of student's life
Manager	checks progress regularly, monitors study, gives systematic feedback, plans work
Examiner	internal examiner, mock vivas, interim progress reports, supervisory board member

Supervision expectation scales

Stanford University have made available [a recent version of this tool](#) and instructions for how it might be used with students, supervisors and doctoral programme directors.

Supervisor/student alignment

Working at first independently, both parties plot on a copy of the two-dimensional representation shown below their perception of the current state of the relationship. A supervisory meeting is then arranged to discuss the outcomes, and in particular any differences between the student's and supervisor's perceptions.

Below is Gurr's two dimensional representation of the "Supervisor/Student Alignment Model" showing outcomes for four combinations of student's state and supervisor's approach, and hypothetical line of alignment over the course of candidature (Figure 2)

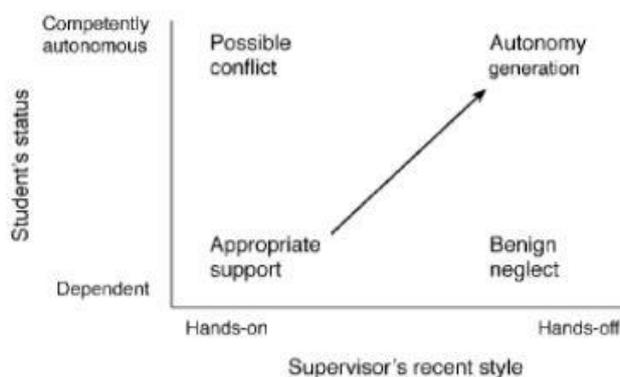


Figure 2

Co-supervision

[The Oxford Learning Institute](#) has produced a set of questions designed to help co-supervisors to clarify the how they will work with the student. A written record of responses to these questions could be used throughout the supervision to revisit the issues in light of any changing circumstances.

Thinking Writing

The [Thinking Writing project](#) is not aimed specifically at PhD students/supervisors, but the writing activities highlighted on their website could be used as stimuli for group/collaborative writing activities.

Patter blog

Pat Thomson, co-author of *Helping doctoral students write: Pedagogies for supervision* runs [this blog, which contains helpful writing resources both for students and supervisors.](#)

Social media/networking

Social media have provided the impetus for the development of a number of support networks for doctoral students, in many cases as part of the wider academic community. Focusing specifically on writing, '[Shut up and Write Tuesdays](#)' runs on the first and third Tuesday of the month across three time zones, sharing writing goals, achievements during the session and peer encouragement via Twitter.

There are also a number of Twitter hashtags that bring together resources specifically for PhD students or for the wider academic community e.g. #AcWri, #PhDChat.

The LSE Impact Blog provides [a list of favourite academic tweeters by discipline](#) and [an introduction to using Twitter in an academic context.](#)

References

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