University of Dublin
Trinity College
Graduate Studies Office

POSTGRADUATE SUPERVISION*
Best Practice *Guidelines* on Research Supervision for Academic Staff and Students

The *Guidelines* deal with supervision under a number of different headings such as Regulations, Academic Standards, General Relationship of Supervisor to Student and conclude with select Literature on this issue.

Regulations: The regulations governing a postgraduate student's progress through College are detailed in the University Calendar Part 2.

Academic Standards: The University does not issue detailed specific guidelines in this area. The University Calendar Part 2 contains general statements about the different standards that Masters and Doctoral theses are expected to meet.

Relationship of Supervisor to Student: The relationship of supervisor to supervisee is probably best thought of as one of mentorship or apprenticeship. Effective mentorship depends on a secure and trusting relationship between the partners. Supervisors must be accessible to the students for consultation, advice and assistance, and should meet the student on a regular basis during the academic year and reply to any written requests within a reasonable time. They should also give the students all possible assistance regarding access to the material, equipment and other resources essential to their research. Students have the right to appeal to the Graduate Studies Committee through the Dean of Graduate Studies if they feel that the regulations have been unfairly applied. Joint supervision is permitted, if prior approval has been obtained from the Dean of Graduate Studies. In all cases of joint supervision one supervisor will be the principal supervisor and that person should be in the department in which the student is registered.

As the student is an apprentice she/he is reliant on the supervisor's experience. The supervisor will therefore to advise the student whether s/he has reached the appropriate academic standard for submission or transfer. Balanced against this is the fact that, in Trinity College, students are ultimately responsible for their own work, and its formal submission to the University. Given the potential academic closeness of the student/supervisor relationship, it is clearly inappropriate for the supervisor to act as the internal examiner.

Regulations pertaining to the procedure for examination of a research candidate are outlined in the Calendar Part 2 Section 2. The format and conduct of any *viva voce* examination is a School matter. The Director of Teaching and Learning (Postgraduate) in the School is responsible for nominating the examiners to the Dean of Graduate Studies, setting the date of and the composition of the group of persons attending the *viva voce*. Following the Irish Universities Quality Board recommendations, it is best practice to have a neutral third party chair in all *viva voce* examinations. The internal examiner is a point of contact for the external examiner to do with all issues of the viva voce examination and has an overall responsibility for organising it. The University does not allow unofficial submissions to take place. All submissions of theses to internal and external examiners are formal and must be done through the Graduate Studies Office.

With regard to specific aspects of the supervisor to student relationship four issues need to be commented on:

1) **Supervision of research:** Supervisors have responsibility for guiding their students in a choice of research topic. It is therefore necessary for the supervisor to know the background to the topic in sufficient depth to have a clear view as to the project's feasibility. This is especially vital as students may have unrealistic views of what is needed to successfully complete a piece of research and can be easily side-tracked. Equally some students are too readily canalised to realise when a side-track is more interesting than the main-line they set out to follow. It is therefore vital that the supervisor is closely involved in drawing up the research plan and in following the progress of the research. Clearly the question of resources and their provision is of relevance. Students have the reasonable expectation that their supervisor is not going to point them towards a topic that cannot be developed due to there being insufficient resources, or because the resources are unavailable. It is also vital that the supervisor is aware of the experience and competency the student brings with them and the fit that has to the research project/topic.

Monitoring of the student's progress is also vital. In the formal, non-academic, sense this involves knowing the regulations of the School and those of the University (when is the submission date, what happens if the student overruns or appeals?) Monitoring also involves commenting, constructively and promptly, on a student's oral and written work. Failure to do so should be regarded as unprofessional behaviour and can lead to serious problems and a rapid deterioration in the student/supervisor relationship at a critical time.

Critiquing any person's work is difficult. Even constructive criticism can sometimes be misinterpreted as disinterest. For example one might try to encourage a weak student by restricting comment to the positive aspects of a piece of work leaving the impression that the remaining parts, which might be substantial, and which are less worthy, were unread. It is good practice to alert students to what they may expect from their supervisor by way of a critique of their work.

Some supervisors have a policy of only reading their student's work once; others are happy to read it more often. Though it is the student and not the supervisor who is responsible for producing and writing their thesis/dissertation nevertheless some students may rightly seek a second reading of their work, notably those whose first language is not English.

All research students and their supervisors complete annual progress report which is an essential element in monitoring the progress of a research student and often highlighting unexpected problems which can then be addressed.

One of the most critical processes in terms of progress is that of transfer of a student from the Masters to the Ph.D. register. Though the procedures vary for good reason from School to School, there is now a rigorous system of student assessment in place described in the *Calendar*, Part 2, Section 2. Supervisors must know and understand the procedure which operates within their School and within College at large. Supervisors must also be aware of the regulations and guidelines relating to thesis submission.

2) **Student training and development:** At all levels of academic inquiry, it is important that supervisors (and students) realise that a thesis forms part of a training process. Supervisors have the responsibility of trying to steer students between the Scylla of adequate training, presentation and depth of scholarship and the Charybdis of over emphasis on any or all of these areas. Supervisors must ensure that they are aware of precisely what their student is doing, are sanguine that it is being undertaken safely and competently, and that the student's actions are in full concord with any relevant regulations, laws or ordinances, in particular, the Freedom of Information Act. A key, but often ignored question is if the student is safe to be let out into the working environment.

Supervisors should also be aware that they are one of the most vital links in the development of a research student and of his/her educational profile. The development of a research student often depends on an array of stimuli ranging from undertaking didactic elements, through involvement in teaching and interaction with their peers. As part of the training process, supervisors may therefore wish their students to attend some formal instruction and to take part in some form of undergraduate teaching. Both are legitimate aspirations; however whilst the former may be made mandatory; the latter is usually optional. One of the most notable deficiencies of students in general terms is, even in science, a lack of numeracy and knowledge of how to plan and design research. This applies both to qualitative and quantitative research methodologies. The College offers formal programmes in some of these areas. Supervisors should encourage their research students to attend relevant taught courses and to set up such taught courses themselves where there is an obvious need. There is no reason at all not to introduce taught elements into research degrees, though this may cause strains of various types in some areas.

3) Monitoring student welfare: This is an important area of supervision which however, on occasion, may become somewhat problematic as it is dependent on strong yet open communication by both student and supervisor. As a starting point it is clear that supervisors must be aware of their student's rights and inform them appropriately. Supervisors should also attempt to identify any areas of concern for their students which may affect their performance. Naturally such problems may not necessarily be grounded in the academic arena and so, to some extent, supervisors have to perform a delicate balancing act avoiding unwanted intrusion but demonstrating legitimate interest.

Supervisors must be aware of their own personal limitations. For example in the case of a student having severe emotional or personal difficulties supervisors must not take over the role of professional counsellors but should be able to suggest appropriate resources to the student. The College is fortunate in having quite a good student support structure (e.g. student counselling service, health service etc) and supervisors have a responsibility to be aware of the existence of these bodies in College. The Graduate Students' Union offers free and confidential advice, advocacy and assistance (extension 1169 or 1006, email: president@gsu.tcd.ie or vicepresident@gsu.tcd.ie).

4) Supervisory competence: Supervisors have a multifaceted role in terms of competence and attention should be drawn in particular to five basic skills. Time management is important to ensure that the supervisor's students always feel that the supervisor wants to see them and not that they are a waste of the supervisor's time or an unwelcome intrusion. Indeed it is vital that students feel that their requests to see the supervisor will be honoured. Equally it is important to make sure that students are aware that the supervisor has other tasks than to chat to them and that the supervisor is not a mind reader. It is necessary therefore to ensure that meetings with students are focused, and that they are enticed to clear exposition in order to enable the supervisor to understand what they need to know.

Second, it must be clear to the student that the supervisor can help them academically. Students are attempting to do what the supervisor has already done i.e., is to develop their information management and data-management skills, whilst also developing their intellectual repertoire. Obviously supervisors must be academically competent in supervising their students' theses and should not undertake to supervise well outside their own area of competence.

Thirdly, many students find it difficult to stick to any sort of timetable. The project or problem under study must be defined with sufficient clarity for the supervisor and student to be able to see how the quality of their work relates to previous, successful, submissions. As the student has little or no experience in this regard it is up to the supervisor to assess whether the student has reached, or is capable of reaching, the appropriate academic standard (Masters, Doctoral). In this regard the process of academic transfer from the Masters to the Ph.D. registers is all-important and should, as previously stated, be rigorous. Such transfers offer the formal opportunity of making clear to your student their successes and failings. The annual progress report forms, which research students and their supervisors must fill in serve a similar purpose.

Fourthly, it must be clear to the student who is in charge and to whom they should turn in the event of a problem. In the case of joint supervision, who is the principal supervisor must be agreed between the supervisors and approved by the Dean of Graduate Studies *a priori* not *a posteriori*.

In a more general context it is vital that supervisors realise that students usually perceive themselves to be at the power-receiving end of the supervisor-student relationship. This can lead to over-reliance on the supervisor and an inhibition of communication. It is vital to acknowledge that this difficulty exists and try to overcome it. Students must be forced to take the initiative. **Whilst it is the supervisor's prerogative to say if a thesis/dissertation is suitable for submission it is the student's responsibility to take the decision as to whether to submit it or not.**

None of the above advice is of any practical use if the supervisor (or student) has poor communication and/or interpersonal skills. It is vital that supervisors talk to their students not only about the progress of their research but also about the process of their research - inhibition or problems of process inhibit progress.

Though challenging, supervising is one of the most satisfying, though occasionally frustrating, elements of an academic's role in College.

Literature:
There is a number of books published on the topic of supervision with the four best references to recommend (all available in the Trinity Library):

1. Sara Delamont, Paul Atkinson and Odette Parry, *Supervising the PhD: a guide to success*; Buckingham: Society for Research into Higher Education, 1997

2. Yoni Ryan and Ortrun Zuber-Skerritt (eds), *Supervising postgraduates from non-English speaking backgrounds*; Buckingham: Society for Research into Higher Education: Open University Press, 1999

3. Estelle M. Phillips and D.S. Pugh, *How to get a Ph.D.: a handbook for students and their supervisors*; Buckingham: Open University Press, 1994

4. Estelle M. Phillips and D.S. Pugh: *How to get a Ph.D.: managing the peaks and troughs of research*; Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1987

Worth of consideration are also references written from the research students' perspective
1. Loraine Blaxter, Christina Hughes and Malcolm Tight, *How to research*; Buckingham: Open University Press, 2001, 1996, 1982
2. Pat Cryer, *The research students guide to success*; Buckingham: Open University Press, 200, 1996.

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*These *Guidelines* are also intended for supervisors of postgraduate students who work on dissertations on taught programmes.