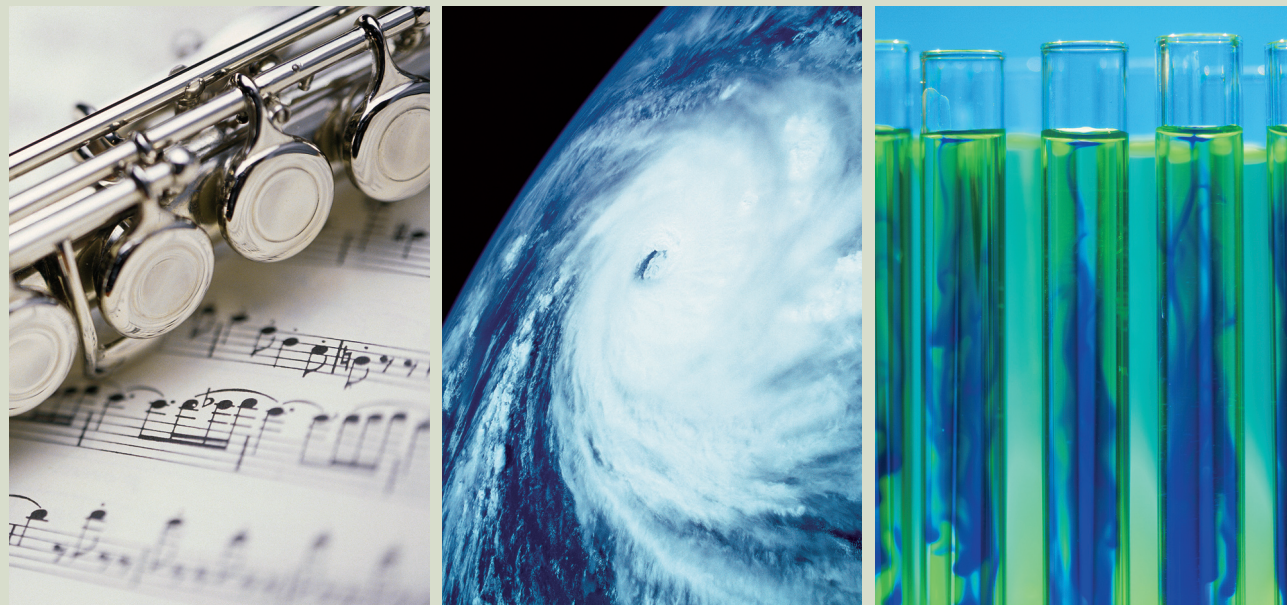


THE **10** MOST IMPORTANT QUALITIES
OF THE IDEAL GRADUATE RESEARCH SUPERVISOR



THE **10** MOST SUBSTANTIAL PROBLEMS
FACED BY STUDENTS IN GRADUATE RESEARCH SUPERVISION

This brochure comprises a summary of in-depth interviews with 40 Otago postgraduate students on their views of supervision. The research was funded by the Committee for the Advancement of Learning and Teaching (CALT) and conducted by Dr Anna Janssen, a recent PhD graduate of the University of Otago.



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THIS BROCHURE IS ALSO AVAILABLE ELECTRONICALLY AT:
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Postgraduate Research **SUPERVISION**

Otago students' perspectives on:

- quality supervision
- problems encountered in supervision



These perspectives can assist Otago's postgraduate research supervisors as well as current and prospective students in understanding what to aim for, expect and be aware of in relation to postgraduate research supervision.



THE **10** MOST IMPORTANT QUALITIES
OF THE IDEAL GRADUATE RESEARCH SUPERVISOR

SUPPORT

Supportiveness is the quality that PhD students value most highly in supervisors. This involves supervisors being encouraging, mentoring, and aware that students' lives extend beyond the PhD. Supportive supervisors make an effort to understand how the student prefers to work. In addition, such supervisors attend to the student as a whole person, rather than purely as a research student.

AVAILABILITY

Students value availability in their supervisors. This involves supervisors meeting with students regularly, setting aside adequate time for students, and being contactable through several media (e.g., email, phone) – particularly if they are not physically present.

INTEREST AND ENTHUSIASM

Students portrayed the ideal supervisor as someone who is interested and enthusiastic about the student's work. This is achieved by supervisors who are positive, empowering, motivational, and committed. Such supervisors are often in the vicinity of their students and are likely to show an interest in the student's progress.

KNOWLEDGE AND EXPERTISE IN THE FIELD SURROUNDING THE PhD

Ideal supervisors are those who have expertise in the field surrounding the student's research. Students value highly a supervisor who can use their knowledge of the area to understand and demonstrate how the student's research topic fits within the wider field. Students do not necessarily expect the supervisor to have expertise in the precise topic of their research, however. Having a supervisor with expertise in the methodologies required in their research is particularly important.

INTEREST IN THE STUDENT'S CAREER

Ideal supervisors are likely to show an interest in the student's career. They help to provide support for the establishment of the student's career in several ways. These include having good contacts and introducing students to their network of colleagues, looking out for and informing students of conferences and seminars relevant to their research and career, and encouraging and facilitating the publication of the student's research.

GOOD COMMUNICATION

Ideal supervisors have good communication skills. In particular: good listening skills; the tendency to maintain an open dialogue about the project, its progress and problems; the ability to communicate in an open, honest, and fair manner about issues that arise as they arise; and making expectations clear with regard to matters such as the process of completing a PhD or Master's thesis, budget considerations, and the role each party must play in performing the project research.

CONSTRUCTIVE FEEDBACK

Students see an ideal supervisor as one who provides feedback and criticism of their work that is constructive and prompt. In addition, students value consistency in the feedback given. Some valued consistency across time. This is often a sign that the supervisor and student share the same focus regarding the project. In addition, where more than one supervisor is responsible for providing feedback, consistency between supervisors is important.

PROVIDES DIRECTION AND STRUCTURE

The ideal supervisor is perceived to be one who provides an appropriate amount of direction and structure to the student's research project. She or he is prepared to create deadlines, challenge, and push the student a little when required. Such a supervisor is informative and helpful when it comes to areas of uncertainty. Further, the ideal supervisor helps to encourage good work habits in the student, thereby helping the student to help her or himself achieve the desired outcomes from their research.

APPROACHABILITY AND RAPPORT

The ideal supervisor is approachable and works to establish a good rapport with their students.

EXPERIENCE AND INTEREST IN SUPERVISION

Part of being experienced and interested in supervision, a key quality of an ideal supervisor, is having a complete understanding of the requirements and process of completing a thesis. In addition, students value supervisors who consider the needs of particular subgroups of the student population (e.g., international students, those with children, those with disabilities, and those with cultural differences). It is important that supervisors recognise the individual supervisory needs of each student. These vary between students and between different stages of their studies.

THE **10** MOST SUBSTANTIAL PROBLEMS
FACED BY STUDENTS IN GRADUATE RESEARCH SUPERVISION

THE SUPERVISOR IS TOO BUSY TO BE EFFECTIVE IN THEIR ROLE

The most common supervisor-related problem that PhD students face is having a supervisor whose extensive commitments make them too difficult to get hold of. This comes as a result of supervisors having too many other students and commitments. The consequences arising from this are numerous. Students see this as the main barrier to receiving optimal supervision. It is also a likely cause of many of the additional problems students emphasise (see below).

POOR FEEDBACK

Feedback which conflicts with previous feedback given, too little feedback, delayed and infrequent feedback, illegible feedback, and too much negative feedback relative to encouraging and positive comments are all problematic issues for students.

THE SUPERVISOR LACKS COMMITMENT AND INTEREST

A supervisor who lacks commitment to, or interest in, research poses problems for graduate research students. Such supervisors fail to show an interest by their lack of presence and their lack of enquiry into the progress of the work. They tend to make little or no effort to encourage or motivate the student, fail to give guidance and direction on issues and questions raised, and don't cooperate well with the student or help the student to develop skills to help her or himself.

TENSIONS OR CONFLICTING PERSPECTIVES FROM WITHIN THE SUPERVISORY PANEL

Having to manage the relationship between co-supervisors who do not get along with each other is a substantial problem for students. Similarly, students find it problematic when they receive conflicting advice and opinions from each supervisor.

POOR COMMUNICATION AND DISAGREEMENTS ABOUT THE PROJECT

Problems arise for students when they feel unclear or in disagreement with their supervisors about what the aims of the project are or how to best use and interpret their findings. A failure to discuss the direction and progress of the research poses problems for the student and their research.

CONFLICTING OR UNREALISTIC EXPECTATIONS OF EACH OTHER

Students face problems where there is poor communication with their supervisors about what each person expects of the other. Consequences include misunderstandings between parties, wasting time, and one or more parties getting frustrated. Another serious consequence is the student possibly being faced with a project that is too large to be completed in reasonable timeframe.

SELFISHNESS AND DISRESPECTFULNESS

Some supervisors display selfishness and a lack of respect for their students. Students find it difficult to work with supervisors who only look at their own gains from the student's research, push the research down paths that interest them but not necessarily the student, treat the student as "their property", and expect students to do work that extends beyond the realms of their PhD or Master's research. Students also find it concerning when they are not treated as colleagues, despite being at the final stages of their studies. Students struggle when their supervisors fail to recognise and respect that they have lives that extend beyond their thesis work.

THE SUPERVISOR IS NOT UP-TO-DATE WITH THE FIELD

The problem of a supervisor who is not up to date with the field means supervisors are unable to help problem-solve and advise. This is particularly problematic for students who also lack access to those who do maintain a current knowledge of the literature. In some areas, being out-of-date with the field means supervisors are ignorant of the optimal techniques and theories that exist. This has implications for the quality of research that can be performed.

THE SUPERVISOR LACKS EXPERIENCE IN RESEARCH AND / OR SUPERVISION

A lack of experience in research or supervision results in problems for students. Students commented that an inexperienced supervisor is unclear about the amount and quality of research that is sufficient for a PhD or Master's. Such supervisors are more likely to allow the student to do far too much research or to submit the thesis despite it failing to meet the required standards. In addition, a supervisor who lacks research experience is likely to allow the conduct of research that is badly-planned.

PERSONALITY CLASHES

Students find clashes of personality with their supervisors to be problematic for all concerned. The majority of students saw a personality clash as the reason most likely to drive them to abandon their studies or to change supervisors.