Selecting high quality PhD candidates
Seven tips for prospective supervisors

Taking on a PhD candidate is a big commitment for a supervisor and the University. In many respects, an application for PhD study should be treated just like a job application in terms of the care taken around the acceptance of the prospective candidate.

The following tips are provided to assist you as a prospective supervisor in your selection of high quality PhD candidates. Following these tips may help to (1) minimise the risk of selecting someone who is unlikely to succeed in their doctoral studies and (2) get the most out of your and the University's investment (e.g. time, scholarship, resources, etc) in the candidate.

1. **Familiarise yourself with Otago's PhD regulations**, particularly the entrance requirements (see http://www.otago.ac.nz/courses/qualifications/phd.html).

2. **Check the candidate out thoroughly**. Ask to see the candidate's thesis/dissertation/research project (they could send it electronically) and any other research-related projects that the candidate may have undertaken (eg publications, conference presentations, etc). This is particularly important if the candidate comes from an overseas institution/country where the scope and/or standard of the thesis work is not known to you. Carefully assess their thesis. Does the work suggest that the candidate is adequately prepared to undertake PhD study? Are you sure that there is no plagiarism in the candidate's thesis?

3. **Do not make a decision to supervise a candidate based on their paper application only**. Interview the prospective candidate, either in person or by telephone or using Skype or by asking an associate, who may be in the area in which the prospective candidate lives, to talk with the candidate (you can provide your associate with some questions to ask the candidate). See the Appendix for possible questions to ask the candidate.

4. **Ask the candidate to provide an outline of the research they propose to undertake**.

5. **Ask for names and contact details of a few academic referees and then contact these referees yourself**. You will get much better information about the candidate by doing it this way rather than merely asking the candidate to provide you with statements from referees. See the Appendix for possible topics to invite referees to comment on.

6. **Assess the likelihood of a good fit between you (and your existing team) and the prospective candidate**. In other words, get to know them a little better so that you get a good sense of whether you wish to supervise them and how good the match will be with your particular expertise and supervisory style. How well do you gel with each other? In making this assessment, be clear in your own mind about what you expect of a PhD candidate. You may like to make a list of these expectations. A good starting point is the document outlining Otago supervisors' perspectives on quality candidates available on the web at http://www.otago.ac.nz/study/phd/otago001464.pdf.

7. **Make sure that the candidate understands what a PhD at Otago (and in your Department/School) actually involves**. In other words, give them a realistic PhD preview so that they are not too surprised when they start. It is surprising how many candidates, particularly those from different educational systems, do not have a good comprehension of the actual nature of PhD study. Don't assume that they will know it all because they probably don't.

Appendix

Possible questions to ask a prospective candidate during the selection process

- Why do they want to do a PhD?
- Why do they want to study the particular topic they have chosen?
- What research methodology training have they had?
- Why do they want to come to Otago?
- What are their study habits?
- What are their expectations of a supervisor?
- How will they fund their studies?
- What do they think the responsibilities of a PhD candidate are?
- What are their career aspirations post-PhD?
- How well do they see themselves meeting your expectations of a PhD candidate? (you may wish to provide them with your list of expectations – see Tip 6 - and ask them to comment)
- What resources will be needed for the research project? (you will need to be clear about what resources the University can and cannot provide)

Possible topics for academic referees to comment on

- The candidate's academic record
- The candidate's ability to work at PhD level
- The quality, scope and nature of the candidate's research thesis
- The candidate's motivation
- The candidate's ability to work independently and in a team
- Any particular issues they'd like to bring to your attention as the prospective supervisor of the candidate
- The candidate's English ability (extremely important if English is not the candidate's first language). Be careful about evaluating their English ability by how well they talk on the phone (or similar) as they may still struggle with academic writing. If in doubt, insist on an English test and don't recommend a waiver of the University's normal English requirements lightly!