# The Good Supervision Guide

A guide for new and experienced supervisors
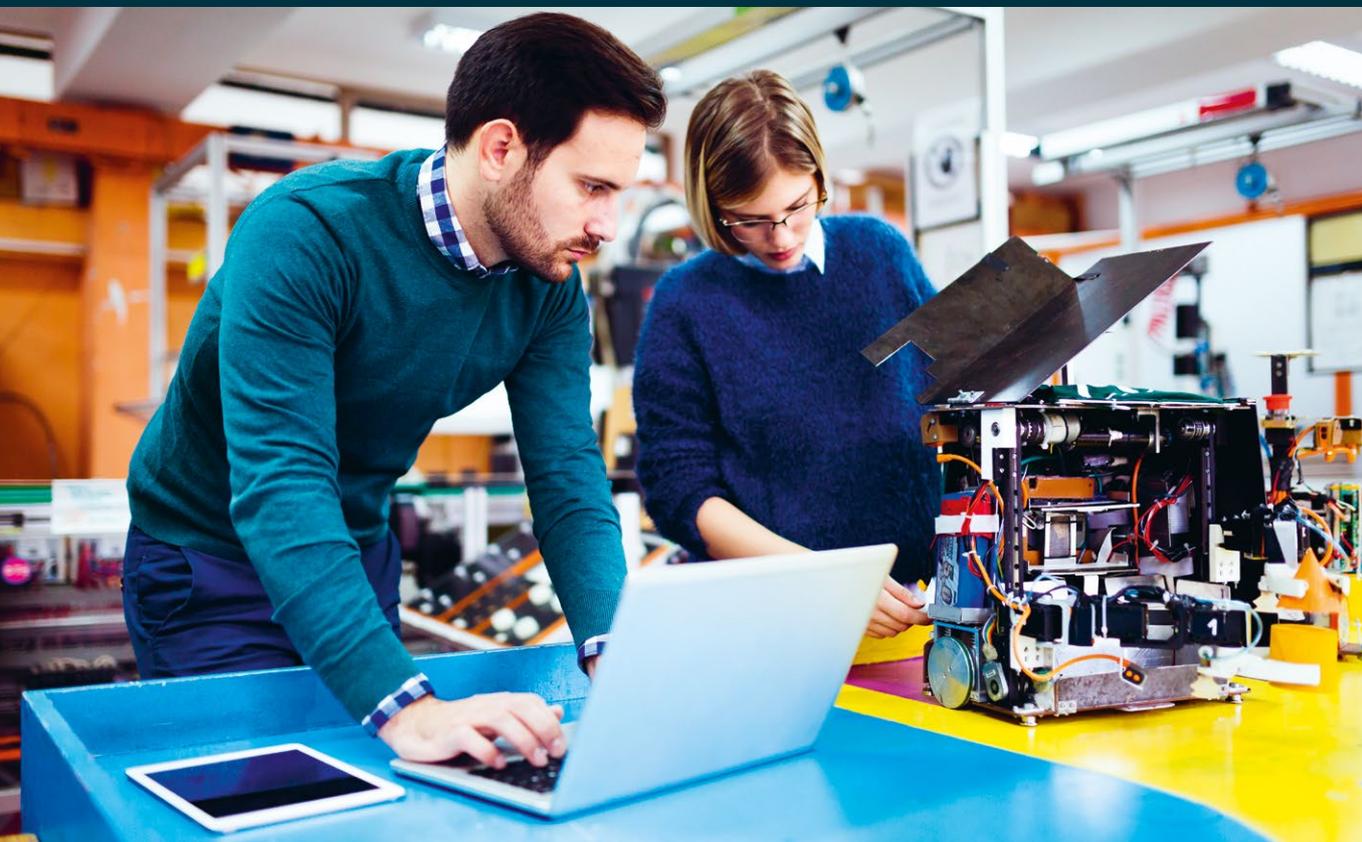
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Introduction
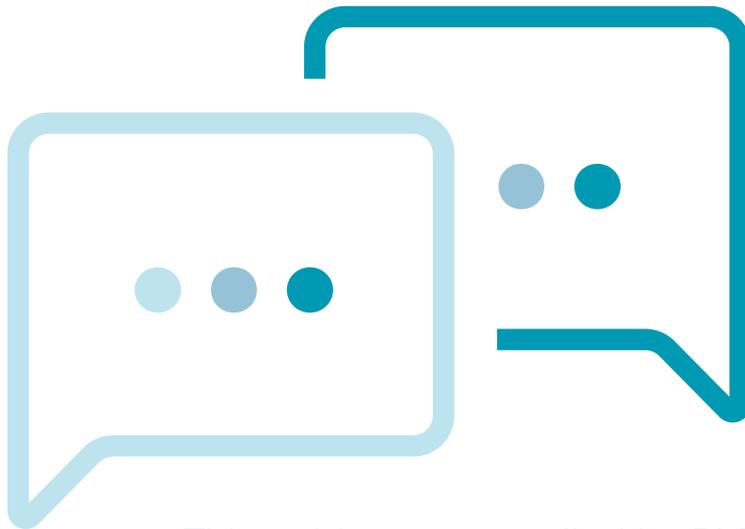
This guide was compiled by PhD candidate, Alexandra Bulat, based on her interviews with UCL Faculty Graduate Tutors (FGTs) from across the disciplines (medical sciences, arts and humanities, education, mathematical and physical sciences, life sciences, population health sciences, built environment, engineering, laws, social and historical sciences).

She asked them to give examples of what 'good supervision practice' means for them. This guide is structured according to the themes which emerged from these conversations. Some supervision advice applies to some disciplines more than others, whereas other insights transcend disciplinary boundaries.

Key principles of good supervision

This guide is organised around three key principles, which can help supervisors to foster a culture of good supervision. Each of the three principles is divided into themes, with advice from the FGTs on how to put it into practice.

1. Set expectations, but be aware of the changing reality

This section provides advice on setting expectations early in the PhD, being flexible, planning the PhD process and managing the time you spend on supervision.

2. Listen, reflect and share

This section provides advice on listening to students, communicating with fellow supervisors, and working effectively within institutional structures and making use of resources available.

3. Think outside the (thesis) box

This section provides advice on how to think beyond the thesis as a piece of research and how to consider your students' career aspirations, which may not always be academic.
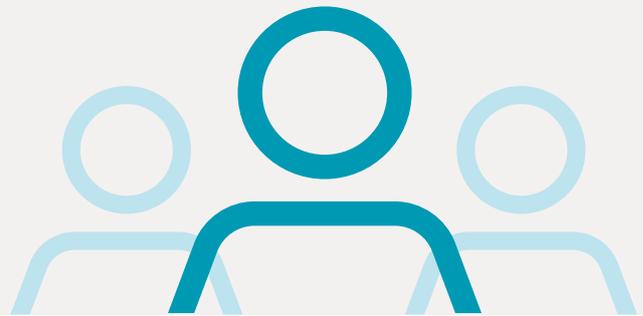
The aim of this guide is to encourage both new and experienced supervisors to reflect on their own practice. As you read through the examples, think about the following questions:

— Am I doing this in my own supervision practice? If not, would it be appropriate for me to do this?

— Would this work in my discipline(s)? If not, is there an alternative which might help?

Reflection: How we supervise often depends on how we view the PhD

All supervisors, even those with many years of experience, can struggle to define 'what is good supervision practice', as every supervisory relationship is unique and every experience different. Alongside our own experiences of being supervised, one of the main factors that FGTs identified as influencing what we see as good supervision depends on what we understand as the purpose of the PhD on the following spectrum:

PhD as specific piece of research ⟷ **PhD as comprehensive training programme**

— Where do you see the PhD on this spectrum?

— How might this influence the way you approach supervisory relationships?

1. Set expectations, but be aware of the changing reality

All FGTs mentioned that setting expectations is crucial to creating a good relationship between the PhD researcher and supervisor. However, it is important to be flexible: a lot can change in 3 years. The likelihood is that your student will encounter at least one major life event during their PhD cycle (marriage, having a child, death of a relative, etc.), which can change the goals and timelines. Be prepared to be flexible but encourage your student to stay as close as possible to the timeframe of the PhD.

Start early

A good way to avoid confusion or mismatch of goals later on is to set clear expectations early in the process. Depending on the discipline and whether the student's PhD project is a lone project or part of a team, this 'expectations meeting' is recommended to take place at some point during the first three months. Although this may seem common sense, FGTs agreed that not enough supervisors discuss expectations openly and clearly with their students. This can sometimes lead to problems building up, which are then escalated to Departmental, Faculty and even institutional level.

What do FGTs say?

● ● ● We advise students to have their first meeting and discuss very specific things with the supervisor, to look at the Code of Practice and work out mutual expectations at the beginning: how funding is going to work, how training is going to work, etc.

● ● ● An ideal supervisor should sit down at the beginning and actually talk to the student and work out the coming months, to say, "this is where you are, this is where you want to be in six months' time, these are the types of training courses available."

● ● ● If you want to get through the three or four years, at the beginning, it is very important to get to know each other in the sense of: what is your knowledge base, what do you actually know, and trying to work out what is it they need training in. This could be around ethics, integrity, but there are other things, they might need some further training in mathematics, for example.

● ● ● These are obvious things, but it may well be good for everyone here to be reminded that we should all set the expectations together with the students and be clear about what we expect from the students and what they ask from us and be there and support them as they develop their projects.

Be flexible

It's ideal to set clear expectations at the beginning, and give an opportunity to PhD students to set their own expectations in terms of supervision. Nevertheless, keep in mind that some expectations have to be revisited periodically, some are difficult to pin down in the first place, and some need to be adapted as situations change.

It is also important to acknowledge that the typical PhD student is not likely to be a 21-year-old freshly graduated from their Masters, without any caring or work responsibilities. In reality, and disproportionately in fields such as education and social sciences, PhD students' profiles include vast work experience, family, sometimes children and other responsibilities. International students can have particular needs, so too students with disabilities. Flexibility and adapting to students' specific needs is central to a good supervisory relationship. The discipline may also influence the type of supervisory relationship one has.

Setting expectations isn't a one-off event, but a process.

● ● ● It's difficult to specify whether it should be monthly meetings or weekly meetings, because it does depend very much on the student and supervisor and also on the stage of research. I think it does need to be flexible, it's the sort of thing that does need to be discussed and agreed between the supervisor and student and reviewed as the research progresses, because there are times when you need much more support and much more feedback and other times when you're going away and actually researching something when you don't perhaps need such frequent meetings.

● ● ● Given the distinctive profile of our students, a general principle of good supervision here is flexibility, so it's about responsiveness of the programme to our students' varying needs. For example, when we did the research training, we tried the training in different formats, so we had some which was during office hours, some on weekends, we have some which is offered in an intensive format so people, if they are going to come to the campus, they come for a week and then go back again, we have some that's offered online. And the idea is that no one method of training can work for all our students, so we have to offer all of these things in as many different formats as we can make viable. So that diversity is important.

● ● ● In a sense, every PhD is different. As a theorist you can function with a very intense relation with one person, as a lab person you need to be in a group where everyone is, the dynamics are completely different.

● ● ● I think you need to remind them every year what is required of a student in order to get a PhD, that should be repeated at the end of every year, so we got this far, this is where we need to go next.

Getting the upgrade right

There is one thing all UCL PhDs have in common, in their diversity of disciplines and topics, and that is the key milestones – the first being the upgrade. Being flexible with students does not mean that the key milestones cannot be planned in an effective way. To ensure success, the purpose of the upgrade needs to be clearly communicated with the student early on, possibly even during the initial expectations meeting. Again, this may seem straight forward, yet a majority of FGTs said that the upgrade is not always as clear a process as it should be. This advice extends to other milestones as well, such as entering writing up and thesis submission.

● ● ● I think students sometimes don't have a clear sense of the milestones they need to reach, and I think when supervisors are quite clear with their students about how to prepare in their first year, it helps them get started and stay on track. I am often worried about students finding the first year very challenging if they are not being given clear objectives of what to achieve in that first year.

● ● ● What is the upgrade for? As I understand it, whoever does the upgrade assesses whether or not the student is capable and that there is a project that will make a PhD. But for many supervisors, it's a reflection on them, and they do not want their student to upgrade until there is a whole lot of data. And so it's about changing people's perception of what that's about. So, I think it is very good practice to set a year, so they have a bit of drift, I even know there are some Departments and Divisions that are setting nine months. So I think actually a clear upgrade date is probably better. It's a good milestone to have.

Don't overcommit

Common student complaints heard by FGTs mention infrequent supervision meetings or absences of supervision for extended periods of time. With research, teaching and admin responsibilities on top of supervision and personal commitments, it is crucial that supervisors think carefully about the time needed to allocate to supervision itself, and reflect this in the number of PhD students they supervise. This entails good time management on the part of the supervisor, as well as the student.

● ● ● We have a workload management system within the faculty, so if a supervisor has a doctoral student, there is a given time for that student, it's not an infinite amount of time, they are given time in order to do that supervisory work and that scales with the number of students. We monitor who is at or over capacity, the ones who are over capacity will have to be signed off by the head of department, given extra time so that they are not disadvantaging their students.

Start by planning to finish

Setting clear expectations, allocating sufficient time for supervision meetings, but staying flexible at the same time, will improve your supervisory relationships. 'Starting by planning to finish' is a common piece of advice given by FGTs: setting expectations at the very beginning will enable a smoother PhD process for the student and will increase the likelihood of timely completion.

● ● ● I would encourage supervisors to start by planning to finish, from very early on, talking about the thesis as a complete document, talking about moving even from the first year to the final submission of the thesis, so the end is always in sight, students know how they are progressing towards it. That shapes the doctoral journey.

2. Listen, reflect and share

The second key principle of good supervisory practice, which all FGTs agreed upon, was the importance of not acting in isolation. They emphasised the need to communicate well with students, to make the most of opportunities to work with peers and colleagues, and to have a good understanding of the institutional resources available to support supervision.

Listening to the student voice

Listening to what students have to say about supervision is central to improving supervision practice. The Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES) offers a good overview of students' satisfaction with supervision, but often it is the conversations you have with your own students, other students or peers in your department that make you reflect the most about how to improve your practice or adapt it to particular student needs.

Moreover, having appropriate spaces and structures in the department for students to share feedback, including about supervision, can help host a constructive dialogue. Although formalised structures such as graduate student representatives tended to return feedback related to pressing issues, such as the provision of work spaces, more informal groups can prove useful in creating a culture where students share their experiences of supervision.

What do FGTs say?

● ● ● I remember my PhD supervisor, he asked me, "do you like to have deadlines?" I said yes, so we were setting deadlines all the time. With my PhD students, one of them told me at some point, "I would like to see you more often if possible," I said of course, but I hadn't realised that until he told me. But some students don't communicate so well or directly with their supervisors. Some students may be shy, some supervisors don't realise what their issues or needs are unless they tell us, so it's complicated, but it's the most important thing in a PhD, in supervision.

● ● ● One good practice is creating space for students to talk to one another. And space for students who interact with each other. If you are always stuck in the library, how are you going to talk to other students?

Good practice may be difficult to explain or measure, but creating an environment where students feel comfortable in expressing their concerns is key.

● ● ● Where I see happy students, who are positive about their supervisors, it tends to come down to the supervisor having a clear knowledge of what the project is and where the student is at, and what are they doing next. A supportive environment is where the student feels that if they have an issue with their research or something else, but primarily with their academic work, they can go to their supervisor and discuss it, and have that addressed in a way that they feel they've made progress as a result of the meeting, rather than them keeping going back and not getting anywhere.

Finally, yet importantly, supervisors are encouraged to communicate well through a variety of media. This is particularly important for students with specific needs, such as distance learners, international students, students with disabilities or students who are also in work.

● ● ● Even in a face to face meeting, supervisors ought to be providing written feedback to their students, whether it is annotations on drafts, or through emails or written stuff as well, so immediately there is not just one method of communication. We are not really doing something that's that radical, all we are doing is saying there are already multiple ways in which students interact with their supervisors, here is another one, and if everyone is fluent in that bit of communication, great, and if they are not we can support them or they can find an alternative that works better for them. It's not something that is radical, it's something that is just sensible.

Peer dialogue and the institutional structures

In addition to listening to the student voice, a dialogue with colleagues in the department (or across disciplines) can prove useful in reflecting on and improving one's supervision practices. This is facilitated where 'thesis committees' exist: students are exposed to different supervision styles, and the committee can also learn from each other. Thesis committees are seen as a positive structure by FGTs.

Apart from the structures of supervision, FGTs encouraged better use of the systems in place at University level to support supervision practice, such as the UCL research log, through which supervisors can track students' progress, including seeing the training and courses they attended, their progress reports and key milestones.

● ● ● Supervisors are quite reluctant to raise concerns, because somehow that's perceived to be a failure, that you haven't managed your students. This is where thesis committees may be helpful in hopefully not being perceived to undermine the supervisor, but to be a kind of sounding board where the primary supervisor could say, "I am really worried about this student, they are not making progress," and that can be explored with the student, rather than being just the primary supervisor and the student.

● ● ● If supervisory arrangements are primarily principal supervisor and student, they are not visible to anybody else. Even if it's co-supervision with principal and subsidiary present, if the principal and subsidiary relationships are fairly stable, going with the same kind of pairings for all the students, it's still a very small circle of people that get to see what happens. Where there are cross-supervisions in a lab or beyond the lab, across the whole department or between departments, or between faculties, this is where you start to see the kinds of conversations where people are like "oh, you do it that way, I never thought of doing that!" and suddenly people are exposed to new approaches to supervision they might otherwise not have thought of. I think that kind of exposure builds the repertoire of approaches supervisors can use, giving us really a more robust approach to doing supervisory work.

● ● ● I think one thing that I try to push is a more systematic use of the research log, on the part of supervisors and students. I don't think we use it enough, and it is a useful tool to record meetings. When I see this used systematically, I think that is a good sign, but it is rare, I don't think people are using it systematically enough. Keeping good records of meetings and the goals set between supervisory meetings is particularly good practice.

3. Think outside the (thesis) box

The last theme emerging from the conversations with FGTs was thinking about the PhD in a broader way. Although crucial, the thesis itself (and the potential publications based on the thesis) is not the only 'output' the student has at the end of their programme.

Think beyond the thesis

The majority of FGTs tended to see the PhD more as a 'comprehensive training programme' end of the spectrum, rather than the 'specific piece of science' only. They broadly encouraged supervisors to play an active part in discussing career options with students and identifying opportunities which will work towards their career goals.
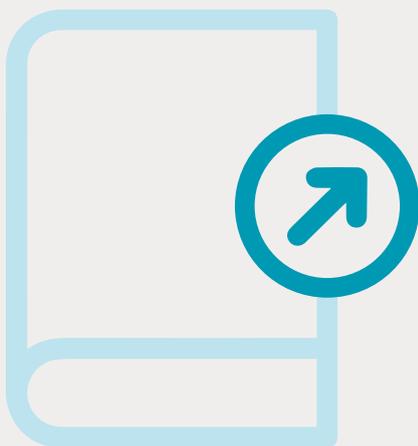
What do FGTs say?

● ● ● We have quite an extensive research training programme in the faculty. We have one compulsory induction course for all our PhD students; for our professional doctorate they have three taught modules which are more extensive than the induction for PhD, they are much more structured. All our students have had some mandatory training and development early on in their studies. Beyond that it's all negotiated between students and supervisors, we ask about this annually and supervisors are expected to do this work.

● ● ● Supervisors should be at least reasonably familiar with what training is available from the Doctoral School. The ideal supervisor should be having regular meetings with the student, tracking their progress that way, giving good feedback, engaging with the secondary supervisor as well, as a team, and encouraging the student to take advantage of all of the student training that is available at UCL. And some are very proactive in that, for example, getting them funding to go to conferences quite early on, and writing papers and so on, and some are actually the opposite, actually discourage that. But encouraging the students to engage with other students at student led events, that's very important.

Seeing the PhD student as an independent researcher

The message from FGTs was clear; if you want a PhD student to become a world-class researcher or pursue another satisfying career, then treat them as an independent researcher, not as a lab technician! Some ways to build this relationship with your PhD students are to discuss your own research with them, give detailed feedback on the work submitted and encourage critical discussion, and allow the student to take ownership of their work.

● ● ● One of the things we are now encouraging the supervisors to do is to share their own research with their students so that it's not separate from the doctoral journey but it's sort of visible in the doctoral journey, so students can see what their supervisors have been doing as researchers, effectively modelling research practice for the student. That can be done remotely, most people for example could share drafts of papers and you often read those alone anyway, individually. Sometimes we have reading groups as well, we have done some of those online, we can support that kind of organisation. Encouraging more of that distributive practice is something which is currently a challenge for us, but which we are working on.

● ● ● The importance of supervision is the ability to have a really rich and critical discussion about the work that is being undertaken, where the student feels that they have academic ownership. It concerns me when I hear students say things such as, "my supervisor is going away for a conference a couple of weeks, and so I cannot do anything, because I need to be told what to do." The student needs to have much more ownership of their work than that, but occasionally that is fed by supervisors saying, "this is my project, and you are working on it," and I think it needs to be the other way around.

● ● ● The PhD is a qualification the student is going to get, they are going to produce the thesis and they need to own that, so they need to have sufficient amount of input in that direction, but that needs to be within reason. The students do need to accept that sometimes the experience of academics needs to trump their own desire to either reinvent the wheel, or pursue a path that's potentially not going to go anywhere.

● ● ● Where it works, it's about that relationship and the discussion, rather than just simply supervisors saying "you must do this," or students feeling left out in the cold. The expression that you hear a lot is, "just lab monkeys," people there just to turn handles, and that's not what its about, and not what it should be about. And you want people to go out from here being ambassadors for UCL and being able not only to do what they are told and do it technically very well, but also to contribute to the wider academic debate, and have some original ideas, and we have to incorporate that into PhDs.

Reflection: One supervisor's approach

Read the following testimony from a Faculty Graduate Tutor regarding her own supervision practice. Reflect on the questions asked in the introduction:

— Would the strategies presented in this text be appropriate for my students? Would this work in my discipline(s)? If not, is there an alternative which might help?

● ● ● ● I meet with each of my PhD students once a week and I have an open-door policy. So, if there is a crisis, a problem, come and see me because I don't want to know about it a week later. Other people say, "I have a meeting once a week and I am not accessible the rest of the time". So, I think in a way **it's even just about saying to the student – this is how I work**. It might even be just about the practicalities of it – we meet once a week, and this is what I'd like to see. But **get them to think about it**. Maybe students haven't thought about what would work for them. It might be a difficult conversation to have, but **later on you can say to the student, remember, we discussed this**, and it's clearly not been happening. Whereas if you haven't told them what to expect, and then you somehow tell them that they haven't delivered, it's quite hard because they did not know that was what you would expect. I don't know whether that would make a huge difference, but I think it might clarify something quite early on in the project for students, that **this is what is expected**, as long as it's realistic.

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