



SUPERVISING DISTANCE HDR STUDENTS

Communication

It is important to think carefully about the frequency of communication between the supervisor and student. Too much contact can become intrusive. Making email or telephone contact each fortnight is usually sufficient. The role of who initiates this contact also needs to be carefully considered. Some people find that a formal contract outlining the roles & responsibilities from each side is helpful. Whenever possible, plan to meet face-to-face at least once per year.

Record Keeping

It is valuable for meetings to be prefaced with an agenda and followed by a written summary. It is recommended that students take responsibility for initiating and maintaining these documents. A timeframe on the sending of these documents also needs to be determined.

Planning

Assisting students to 'plan & schedule' the tasks ahead is very important. Scaffolding the required tasks into short-term steps can help the process seem more manageable: for example - assigning specific writing tasks. Establishing a schedule of supervision for the year ahead can also be beneficial in assisting the student build an effective study pattern. The prioritising of these sessions by the supervisor can help build student confidence and establish trust within the student/supervisor relationship.

Ideas adapted in part from:

Watts, J. H. (2008). Challenges of supervising part-time PhD students: towards student-centred practice. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 13(3), 369-373. doi: 10.1080/13562510802045402

Empathy

While supervisors must be careful not to allow their role to devolve into a 'counselling role', the ability to be a listening ear and to be aware of aspects of the student's life that impact their study - is valuable. In some circumstances this may assist the supervisor to adjust the pace of the research schedule (even temporarily) allowing the student to feel they can regain control. It is important for the supervisor to recognise that distance students have a range of needs that are often complex and that these needs are interwoven with contexts other than that of being a student.

Supervisor/Supervisee Relationships with other Academic Staff

In situations where the supervisor & supervisee are both academic staff within the same institution, it is important to agree on boundaries that will assist in maintaining a healthy working relationship.

Timesaving Devices

It can be valuable to consider the use of timesaving devices such as desktop sharing software or Skype. These technologies can assist in reinforcing explanations in a more cohesive and understandable manner.

Communication options

Supervisors can contact distance students via telephone, email or other methods such as video conference (e.g. Skype, Lync). It is recommended that some form of video conference occurs at various times, to engage students and improve communication. Desktop sharing applications are available to work on specific issues together e.g. demonstrating analysis in SPSS.