

## GUIDES TO UNDERTAKING RESEARCH

### 2.5 Choosing a Research Supervisor

The project supervisor is central to a successful project. His or her roles include mentoring and guiding the student, teaching good research practice, ensuring the student makes proper progress, helping resolve issues and guiding report writing. The supervisor also deals with large piles of official paperwork and assessments. If that sounds like a lot, it is; a supervisor has many things to do for a project to be successfully completed, which is why a good choice of supervisor is so important. Indeed, having a bad supervisor is almost as disastrous as being a bad student. The supervisor's interests need to align with the proposed project and with the interests of the student, but beyond that it is often not clear how to choose a supervisor. Here are some thoughts and considerations that may help.

#### *Supervisors for degree subjects undergo University accreditation*

In the bad old days supervisors just had to be experts in the field, but over the decades Universities and colleges recognised the need for proper oversight and training to avoid commonly recurring problems. Thus, supervisors need appropriate higher degrees and experience, and undertake short training courses to become accredited. While this training is not extensive (arguably it doesn't need to be), supervisors are well aware of standards and demands expected by the system and, more importantly, have been through it themselves as students or trainees.

#### *Supervisors may come in multiples*

A project may have two or more supervisors, and as long as they work well together this can be a good option, particularly if one supervisor is often absent. A second, senior supervisor often has to be approved to provide oversight when a more junior supervisor does not have a long track record in supervision, and that is always a good thing if they work together well. If they don't then it isn't.

#### *Don't choose a very busy person as a sole supervisor*

One of the worst supervision problems is having a supervisor who is too occupied with other things to provide input or to read drafts in a timely manner. This can happen due to teaching, administration or

surgical work overload. If this is the case it is best to have a second supervisor to help, or failing that have some other mentor who is available and willing to assist.

#### *Clarify how the project deadlines suit the supervisor*

This is particularly important for time-delimited projects where the supervisor needs to be available prior to key milestone dates. Time-delimited projects, such as Honours projects, revolve around milestones and submission deadlines so this is important. If the supervisor cannot do this well the student must act quickly to get the relevant institutional committee to initiate provisions to help with this. Degrees such as PhDs that end when a benchmark standard (rather than a deadline) is attained are less prone to such problems but even these must be carefully handled to avoid delays.

#### *Be clear that the supervisor has expertise in all the areas of the project*

If not, make sure there is support in the areas outside the supervisor expertise, or an additional supervisor/mentor. This may include getting access to expert statistical support.

#### *Work on the project aims and research questions with the supervisor*

These need to be very carefully thought through, but can be quite treacherous territory. It must be

clear that a supervisor-to-be can do this and takes this task seriously. Make sure the project aims are non-trivial, and easy to describe. Ask other (uninvolved) experts what they think about the project aims and project questions.

*Make sure the project is feasible, and actively explore how to ensure this with the supervisor*  
Without an engaged mentor the feasibility of a project is difficult for a student assess, but good feasibility is critical. At issue is how well the work can be done with the time and resources available. There are many possible issues: are the clinical data already available, with HREC approval? Is the equipment available? Funding? What could cause critical delays? The list is often long, but a good supervisor should easily deal with this.

*Make sure the project includes at least some work where results are guaranteed in the short term*  
Obtaining data (or other objectives) early in the project is a great way to ensure project feasibility and is an important point to discuss with a prospective supervisor. Obtaining project outcomes will also give a breathing space that can allow for training. While these early results may be a dull part

of the project it is very valuable to have some progress to write about early on. The project should (of course) include other more difficult parts, which are usually the interesting bits.

*If things are not working out*

Either the supervision or the project may not work out well. Either way, once a problem has become evident it is important to resolve this with the supervisor(s) themselves. If this resolution is not forthcoming then getting informal advice from other mentors, tutors, colleagues and University research offices is usually the next best step.

Beyond that the student needs to take things to the relevant overseeing committee, usually termed a Higher Degrees by Research (HDR) committee at the hosting institution. If the matter is serious it will be necessary to consult the formal codes of the institution to determine the procedures and actions relevant to the situation. It is a given that that student/trainee problems are taken very seriously and there is always available support and advice from individuals, committees and administrative processes.

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