Supervision Letter of Understanding
Overview and Guidelines
Faculty of Science – Fall 2022

Introduction

A Supervision Letter of Understanding is required by Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies (GPS) for all graduate students admitted to thesis[1] programs as of Fall 2017. This requirement is based on the premise that defining mutual expectations between a supervisor and graduate student supervisee plays an essential role in ensuring the student's success. The letter does not replace or supersede official McGill University policies and procedures and is not intended to be legally binding.

Format: a conversation, not a contract.

The format of the letter itself is flexible, but it should be prepared in the context of an in-person conversation between the graduate student and supervisor, rather than presented to the student as a completed "form letter" type document to sign.

The rationale behind this format is that an in-person conversation will better facilitate mutual understanding, and will help establish and maintain consistent open lines of communication that will help avoid/resolve future problems. And since supervisors are presumably already having such conversations with their students, using this conversation as a platform to generate the letter should not add considerable extra work. Additional guidance can be found on the GPS web site:
https://www.mcgill.ca/gradsupervision/supervisees/discussing-expectations

Instructions[2]

1. The student and supervisor should review the list (below) of general points and possible discussion topics. The list is long, but is meant to make it easier to think of topics that are relevant to discuss.

2. Supervisors may choose to prepare a standard template, but such a document should not replace an in-person orientation conversation and is not a contract.

3. At the meeting, discuss each point to arrive at a mutual understanding, taking notes on important points as necessary. These notes can be submitted as part of the resulting letter.

4. To generate the letter, the student can write a summary of the main points of the meeting, attaching any meeting notes or other written document. The supervisor should review the student summary, and both student and supervisor should sign the compiled document.

5. The completed letter should be uploaded to myProgress by the student, ideally within 12 weeks of the start of their program.

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[1] GPS requires Supervisory Letters of Understanding for all PhD students admitted as of Fall 2017. The Faculty of Science recommends that these letters be completed for Master's students as well, to ensure that this foundational orientation information is provided in an equivalent manner to all graduate students in the research group.
[2] Questions, concerns or feedback can be directed to gradstudies.science@mcgill.ca.

Part 1 | Mandatory: General points to discuss

In general, both supervisors and graduate supervisees should:

- Stay informed about program requirements and deadlines, and relevant University policies and procedures. See McGill University Expectations for Graduate Supervision included below.
- Organize and schedule an in-person meeting with the student's entire advisory committee at least once annually.
- Understand the meaning of [conflict of interest](#) and disclose and discuss any potential conflicts (actual or perceived) that may arise, so that they can be appropriately managed.
- Demonstrate appropriate professional judgment, collegial behavior, integrity and academic rigor and integrity at all times.
- Strive to maintain an environment of collegiality, respect and inclusion across all members of the research group.
- Strive to address conflict in a timely, honest, respectful and professional manner.

Part 2 | Ideas for additional possible discussion topics

With the above responsibilities in mind, the following are examples of topics that can be covered in the conversation.

1. How will we interact? Will we have regularly scheduled meetings and, if so, how often? How formal will these be? Can we also meet spontaneously on a drop-in basis?
2. What is the preferred mode of communication between the student and supervisor? Which queries/emails/letters sent out the by student does the supervisor want/need to be copied on?
3. What are the expectations regarding research responsibilities, e.g. hours in lab, lab etiquette, taking on outside work, safety training etc.? Do grad students normally work individually or in teams?
4. How are graduate student research projects determined? Is the proposed work fixed at the outset, or do students often take on side projects as the project evolves?
5. How do the lab and/or research group generally run? Are there lab chores, technical support, periodic group meetings, etc? What conventions should be followed for data collection, lab notebooks, storage, archiving, etc? What are basic policies regarding the lab (e.g. access for non-lab members, bringing food into the lab, taking equipment home)?
6. What are the data sharing policies of the lab or project in which the student is involved?
7. How often do graduate students in your group normally serve as teaching assistants?
8. Do new graduate students normally work closely with a more senior graduate student, who helps with training? Are graduate students normally expected to supervise undergraduate research students?
9. What are the normal expectations for submitting drafts of written work (e.g., submitting chunks or large sections; submitted electronically) and receiving supervisor feedback?
10. What are the normal practices for publishing our data? How are issues of authorship and intellectual property handled?
11. How is graduate student funding normally administered? Does the amount vary from semester to semester? Are students expected to apply for external fellowships?
12. What are the expectations regarding vacations?
13. What opportunities exist for professional development (e.g., conferences; teaching; writing courses;

techniques/skills workshops; outreach activities, etc.)?
14. What happens if problems arise, e.g. in research progress, in the student-supervisor relationship, or in personal matters? The Graduate Program Director is an important first contact who can provide guidance, but what other resources are available and how can they be accessed?
15. Other topics (add as many as necessary)

Part 3 | Additional topics to consider – Covid-19 *(from the Faculty of Science new trainee lab access form)*

1. Safety training: How will the new trainee be trained in COVID-19 safety procedures? Will the proposed work allow personnel to maintain the two-metre distance for all work areas? If not, please explain in detail. What other standard lab safety training will be required?

2. Is research training required? If yes, please describe, explaining clearly how physical distancing requirements will be maintained during training. If distancing cannot be maintained at some point, please explain the safety and security measures that you will use.

3. Personnel who are in high-risk groups must not participate in any on-site lab-based activities. Is your new trainee in a high-risk group?

4. Have you talked with the trainee to find out if they are concerned about on-site research? If there are concerns, how have you addressed them?

5. Have you instructed the trainee to read carefully the University guidelines?
   https://mcgill.ca/coronavirus/resources/campus-research-directives

6. Is the trainee aware of the actions they need to take if they become sick from the virus or come into close contact with someone who is sick? See:

   https://www.mcgill.ca/coronavirus/resources/self-declaration-forms
   https://www.quebec.ca/en/health/health-issues/a-z/2019-coronavirus/self-care-guide-covid-19-revised-edition/

7. If the trainee does not feel comfortable, or over time becomes uncomfortable, working on their project or in their research space, how will you deal with this situation?

8. Describe the steps, duration and consequences of a potential sudden rampdown of the proposed project (i.e., sudden closure of the building, labs, etc.). For undergraduates, is there a backup plan in place to ensure that they will be able to finish their Honours/independent research project? For new graduate students and postdocs, is there a backup plan in place to ensure that they will be able to continue to make progress in their research and/or toward their degree?

McGill University Expectations for Graduate Supervision

Supervising graduate students and postdocs at McGill University is a critical part of academic duties for faculty, as indicated in section 4.1 of the [Regulations Relating to the Employment of Tenure Track and Tenured Academic Staff](#), henceforth referred to as "the Regulations".

In order to supervise graduate students and postdocs, faculty must complete an [orientation](#).

Supervisors are accountable to the Chair or leader of their academic unit, who is responsible for the allocation of academic duties (section 4.3 of the Regulations). To ensure all graduate students have the opportunity to succeed in obtaining their degree, the University expects all supervisors to meet the university-wide standards delineated below.

Creating a respectful, inclusive, and professional research environment while also being present, providing regular feedback, recognizing limits, and knowing relevant policies helps faculty better support supervisees and prevent potential misunderstandings down the road.

Supervisors have a responsibility to:

1) **Build and maintain a respectful, inclusive, professional research environment for their supervisees.**

   a) McGill University expects supervisors to maintain a **research environment free from sexual violence, harassment, and discrimination.**

      Policy Resources:

      - [Policy on Harassment and Discrimination](#)
      - [Policy against Sexual Violence](#)

   b) If a supervisor observes behaviour that might constitute sexual violence, harassment, or discrimination, **they must consult the [Office for Mediation and Reporting](#) or the [Office of the Dean of Students](#) to determine how to proceed.**

      - Faculty should not assume that problems between supervisees in a lab setting will resolve on their own. Faculty and staff have a shared responsibility to ensure supervisees can learn in environments where they are respected and free from pejorative or offensive acts and comments. Trained professionals in the OMR and Office of the Dean of Students are available to support faculty and staff as well as students.

   c) Supervisors, as representatives of McGill University acting in an official capacity, **have a responsibility to uphold students' rights,** as explained in [Charter of Students' Rights, Article 3:](#)

      - "Every student has a right to the safeguard of [their] dignity and a right to be protected by the University against vexatious conduct displayed by a representative of the University acting in an official capacity".

- Supervisors have a duty to accommodate on the grounds of disability and religious belief. In some cases, there might also be a duty to accommodate on the basis of dependent care responsibilities. If you have any uncertainty about what constitutes a reasonable accommodation in a given situation you may contact the Office of the Dean of Students (in all cases) or the Office for Students with Disabilities (in situations involving students with disabilities)

Policy Resources:

- [Policy Concerning the Rights of Students with Disabilities](#)
- [Policy on Holy Days](#)

d) Supervisors' words carry weight for supervisees. Offhand comments spoken in moments of frustration can leave supervisees doubting whether they can trust a supervisor to assess work fairly and equitably support supervises' research and wellbeing. It is important for supervisors to keep the power differential in mind when speaking with supervisees and refrain from mocking, insulting, or undermining language.

e) **Supervisors, as members of the University, have the right to work in a respectful and professional research environment.** [The Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures](#) holds that no student shall in a university context:

- "Knowingly create a condition that unnecessarily endangers or threatens or undermines the health, safety, well-being, or dignity of another person or persons, threatens to cause humiliation, or threatens the damage or destruction of property"

Resources:

- **Office of the Dean of Students:** Supervisors are encouraged to talk to the Dean of Students' office when a student or supervisee [exhibits worrisome behaviour](#), including dangerous, threatening, disruptive, or uncharacteristic behaviour. See the [Red File](#) for guidance.

f) **Supervisors and supervisees must avoid conflicts of interest**, and if one should arise, speak to a department chair or director to implement measures to properly address the conflict of interest. For supervisors, this means ensuring that supervisees are equitably treated (i.e., avoid steps or measures that might be perceived as partiality, favoritism, or bias) and that relationships with supervisees are professional and centred on academic wellness.

g) Following major conflicts, the best resolution may be to dissolve the supervisory relationship and have the graduate student continue under the supervision of another faculty member. It is critical for faculty to speak to both the Graduate Program Director and the Department Chair when considering whether this presents the best solution for all parties. When approached with a request for a transfer, faculty are expected to collaborate to ensure as smooth a transition as possible, clarifying what will happen to ongoing research, lab access, etc.

2) Be present for and accountable to supervisees by maintaining clear communication channels.

a) Supervisors should meet regularly with supervisees, honouring the schedules agreed to in Letters of Understanding.

b) Supervisors and supervisees should keep shared written records when it comes to important decisions about research projects, funding, authorship, graduation timelines, etc.

- Annual Progress reports provide a framework to give feedback on a student's progress in writing and objectives for the following year in writing and represent a critical opportunity to indicate to students if their work is unsatisfactory.

c) Supervisors must plan to ensure that graduate supervisees have appropriate supervision during prolonged absences (e.g., sabbatical leaves).

- Supervisors who are not planning to maintain regular communication with supervised students during a sabbatical or other leave should ensure supervisees have an appropriate interim supervisor (e.g., a committee member) who will stay in regular communication with the supervisee and ensure they progress.

3) Provide supervisees with regular, timely feedback that clearly indicates how to meet their program requirements for graduation.

a) Uphold the commitments made in Letters of Understanding regarding how long it will take to return student work with feedback. Providing regular updates for students on when to expect feedback is also helpful for ensuring accountability and on-time degree completion.

b) Clarify expectations ahead of major milestones (e.g., proposals, qualifying examinations, thesis submission, oral defences). **Supervisees should understand how they will be assessed, what is required to pass major milestones**, and the departmental standards for thesis research and other evaluated graduate work.

- Feedback on submitted work should be clear, substantial, and provide specific, actionable recommendations for improvement. Evaluations of student work must be made principally on the basis of the demonstrated quality of the student's research, and not comparisons with other students or supervisor opinions of the student's readiness to graduate or ability to succeed in a specific subsequent profession.

- Supervisors must not prevent students from seeking to graduate if they have completed all the degree requirements and their work meets departmental standards.

4) Respect their limits in supporting supervisee wellbeing.

a) Supervisors are often among the first to notice when a graduate student or postdoc is unwell. **Supervisors should offer a supportive ear while respecting their limits when it comes to addressing student mental health**. The [Student Wellness Hub](#) connects students with help from trained clinicians.

Resource:

- [Tips for talking to a student in difficulty](#)

b) **Supervisors and supervisees alike benefit from flexibility and understanding** when it comes to balancing work responsibilities and personal wellbeing.

- Supervisors should encourage supervisees to maintain reasonable working hours and clarify expectations that supervisees will take time to rest, recharge, and connect with friends and family.

- Supervisors and supervisees should communicate their availability limits in Letters of Understanding (e.g., unavailable to meet after 3pm, will respond to emails within 48 hours, etc.). Supervisees should respect these limits and make use of available supports to maintain their wellbeing (e.g., Local Wellness Advisors, the Student Wellness Hub, etc.).

c) **Supervisors must respect their supervisee's autonomy when it comes decisions that impact the supervisee's future**. Supervisees should be able to freely choose to pursue a particular career path, take advantage of professional development opportunities, start a family, take a leave of absence, etc., without fear that their supervisor will withdraw support.

Policy Resources:

- Parental Leave:
  https://www.mcgill.ca/gps/students/policies-and-guidelines/parental-leave
- Leave of Absence and Vacation Policy:
  https://www.mcgill.ca/gps/students/registration/progress/leave-vacation

5) Know policies relevant to graduate studies well enough to advise supervisees. If unsure, ask for clarification.

Resources:

- [Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies](#)
- [Secretariat](#)
- A Graduate Program Director or Department Chair

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