

Thesis supervision

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Based on the book: *A handbook for doctoral supervisors*. By Taylor et al. 2018



"I'm coordinating five different R&D projects,
but SURE, I can spare a minute."

Source: <https://anniebruton.files.wordpress.com/2013/09/supervisor.jpg>

Overall context

- Supervisors provide **oversight** and **guidance** to students by addressing deficits in expertise, provisioning of tutoring or research assistance, intervening to ensure timely completion, and facilitation of the completion of the study.
- Supervisors tend to be **immersed in their busy academic** and/or professional lives and seldom have time to maintain an overview of ongoing developments of the students' academic activities.

The institutional context

- Supervisors should be aware of the **institutional framework** within which they are operating in terms of **standards, expectations, eligibility, and support**.
- In few countries, eligibility to supervise doctoral students is defined by the **state**.
- In most countries, however, it is ultimately up to **institutions** who is eligible to supervise students.
- For supervising doctoral students, it is usually required that the supervisors themselves have a **doctorate** degree.

The institutional context

- In some circumstances the requirement may be to have **equivalent research experience** and to be active in research.
- Support for supervisors may include **initial professional development** at the start of their supervisory careers, opportunities for being mentored while acting as a **second supervisor**.
- Additionally, institutions may also provide support in the event of any **difficulties** in their **relationships with candidates**, of which supervisors also need to be aware.

The institutional context

- It is worth noting that higher education is itself changing and institutions are having to follow suit, with the result that frameworks are constantly being **modified** and **updated**.
- Expectations, eligibility, and support are changing as a result of new supranational and national frameworks.
- Supervisors need to **keep up to date** on current developments, and where appropriate embody them in their practices.

The disciplinary context

- Disciplines **differ** on how **research** is conducted, how the research enterprise is organised, what counts as knowledge, and how knowledge claims are made and verified.
- Different disciplines have **different paradigms** of research.

The disciplinary context

- Supervisors need to be aware of the **disciplinary context** - the criteria as to what is an appropriate research project and to their roles and responsibilities and those of the candidates.
- Increasingly studies are being undertaken across **two or more disciplines**. Hence, supervisors of such studies need not only to be aware of the context of their own discipline but also that of **other disciplines** related to the study.

The disciplinary context

- Students may belong to a **research group**. In such cases students may have frequent contact and support from their supervisors and/or other members of the research group.
- There should be a **regular contact** between the student and the supervisor - more frequent contact at the beginning of the research and during the period of writing up.
- A doctoral candidate is primarily an **autonomous** researcher.

The disciplinary context

Supervisors may be expected to:

- Assist students in preparation of a research plan which includes, theoretical framework, **objectives**, methodologies, data collection and analysis and writing of the thesis.
- Assist in keeping the thesis preparation on track.
- Provide regular academic and social support.
- Provide intense support towards the conclusion of the research project as the candidate is writing up and finalising his/her thesis.

The disciplinary context - interdisciplinary

Definition of interdisciplinary:

A mode of research by team or individuals that integrates information data, technique, tools, perspectives, concepts, and/or theories from **two or more disciplines** or bodies of specialized knowledge to advance fundamental understanding or to solve problems whose solutions are **beyond the scope of a single discipline** or area of practice (United States National Academies 2004).

Ex. Restoration of degraded forest lands.

The disciplinary context - interdisciplinary

- In recent years there has been an **expansion of interdisciplinary research** reflecting the growing realisation that the challenges faced by the world are complex and multi-layered requiring concepts and methodologies from more than one discipline to research them effectively.
- Supervision of interdisciplinary study poses **more challenges** compared to monodisciplinary ones.

The disciplinary context - interdisciplinary

Strategies for supervision of interdisciplinary study:

- Developing and maintaining a supervisory team
- Building foundations and setting boundaries
- Structuring and writing an interdisciplinary thesis and giving feedback
- Guidance on time management
- Building an interdisciplinary network
- Identifying appropriate examiners
- Developing a publication strategy

The programme context

- The expectations of supervisors depends also on the different types of degree programmes.
- In recent years, there has been a move towards establishing collaborative **degree programme**.
- Collaborative partnerships with industry and other organisations have become more common in degree programmes.
- Because they involve working with supervisors in other institutions, collaborative degree programmes can pose significant challenges.

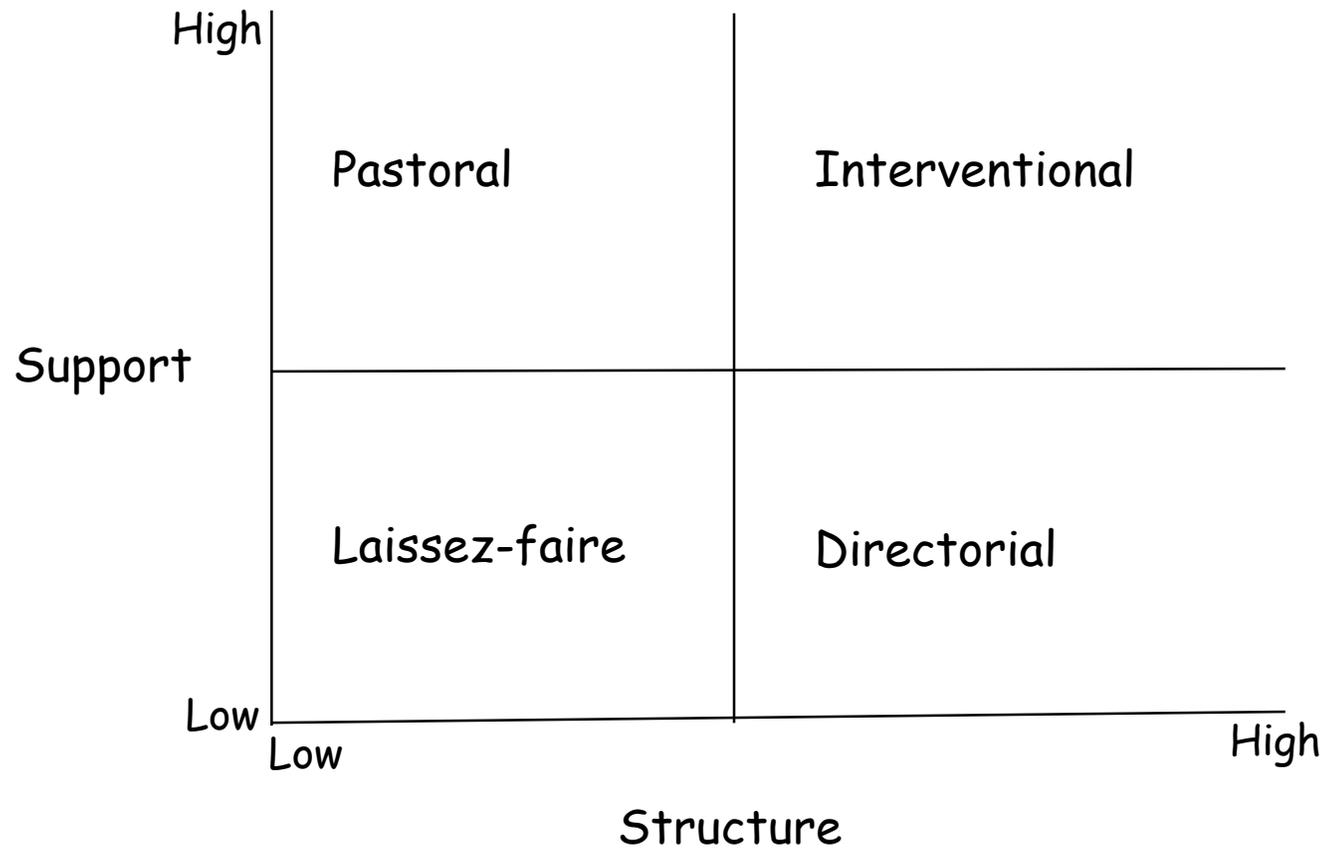
Working relationships

- There is a need right from the start for all parties to have a clear understanding of the **institutional requirements** of supervisors and students and the first task is to discuss these and negotiate how they are going to be met.
- Signing of a **formal agreement** between the supervisor and the student is a good practice.
- Because each grouping of individuals is, by definition, **unique**, then each relationship will be different depending up on the supervisor's style and the students characteristics.

Working relationships

- There are two key dimensions of **supervisor styles**; namely **structure** and **support**.
- Structure refers primarily to the way in which supervisors perceive their roles in the **organisation** and **management** of the student's research/research project.
- Support refers to the way supervisors perceive their roles in personally supporting the student through research process.

Working relationships

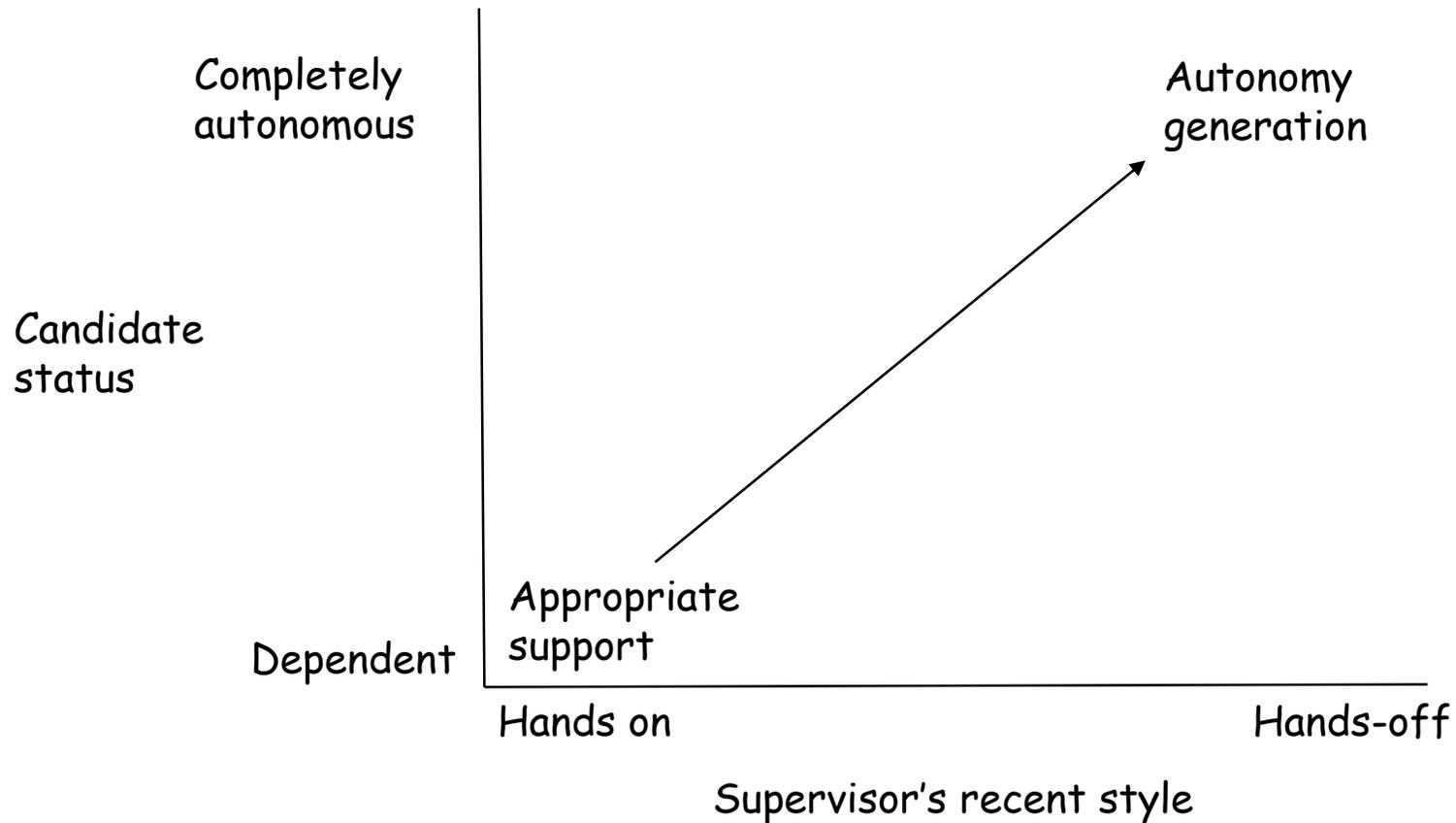


A paradigm of supervisory styles (Gatfield 2005).

Working relationships

- A **laissez-faire** supervisor may be ill-matched to a student who needs academic support to organise and manage the studies and personal support to cope with the demands of a research or a **directive** supervisor may be ill-matched to a student who wants **autonomy**.
- As long as there is a **congruence** between the supervisory style, the associated assumptions about the needs of the students and their actual needs, there should be no difficulties.
- If there is a breakdown of relationship the supervisor should be able to direct the student towards an **independent** source of advice and, potentially of mediation.

Working relationships



Gurr's tool for monitoring the alignment of supervisory styles and student needs.

Working relationships - Co-supervisors

The benefits of co-supervision:

- Providing the student with broader range intellectual perspective and expertise
- Enabling a division of labour with each supervisor in relation to their expertise
- Reducing the risk of reliance upon a single supervisor
- Possibly extending the repertoire of supervisory styles
- Offering opportunities for new supervisors to act as associate supervisors

Working relationships - Co-supervisors

Drawbacks of co-supervision

- Intellectual conflicts
- Mismatches of expectations
- Conflict over roles
- Supervisors not fulfilling their responsibilities
- Supervisors not liaising with each other
- Clashes of supervisory styles

Working relationships - Co-supervisors

The negative consequences of co-supervision can be avoided

- Co-supervisors approach to the task with an open mind
- Identifying formal roles and responsibilities
- Develop shared expectations of the study
- Regular reviews of co-supervision

Working relationships - authorship

- ❑ Supervisors need to discuss with their students the **order of authorship** in the context of joint publication.
- ❑ The order of authorship should be based on the degree of importance of **each author's contribution** to the project.
- ❑ Where the major contribution has been by the supervisor, his/her name should go on the paper in pole position.
- ❑ If the supervisor has made little or no contribution his/her name **should not be** on the paper.

Academic advice and support - approaching research

- One of the key responsibilities of supervisors is to support students to develop appropriate understanding of **research itself**, what it involves and good practice of undertaking it.
- Supervisors may advise students about
 - Conceptions of research
 - The process of research
 - Academic integrity
 - Intellectual property rights
 - Authorship of publications

Academic advice and support - the research project

Supervisors should advise students:

- To select a research topic (if it is not predetermined)
- Framing the process
- Discussing potential topics with students
- Encouraging them to investigate further
- Assisting them to self evaluate their suitability
- Asking them to produce written reports
- Giving feedback

Academic advice and support - the research project

- Supporting students to produce a formal research proposal
 - Usually after several **iterations** students should be able to produce an acceptable research proposal.
 - The research plan is not a final document - it needs to be revised and updated.
- Advising on ethical approval.
- Supporting the development of skills related to the study.
 - Relevant literature review, methodology, information literacy, etc.
- Advising on academic problems encountered by students.

Encouraging writing and giving feedback

- Writing has been generally regarded as something that was done at the end of a study, where it is now seen as an **integral part** of the research/study process and as an activity to be undertaken throughout the study.
- Encouraging students to write **early** and **often** and developing academic writing have become parts of the responsibilities of supervisors. For instance, writing group reports, diaries, allowing students to present their studies (in early stage) in seminars, etc.

Encouraging writing and giving feedback

- Supervisors need to give feedback on students writings - it is crucial in **motivating** them to continue with their research.
- Feedback gives students a feeling for the **standards** against which they will be judged.
 - The timeliness of feedback
 - Conduct a feedback session
 - Recording of the outcome

Keeping the research on track and monitoring progress

- Supervisors have an important role to play in **supporting** and **monitoring** students to finish their studies on time.
- Reasons for lagging behind in students' academic performance
 - Inadequate time management skills
 - Lack of motivation
 - Social isolation
- Supervisors have responsibilities in terms of **monitoring** students progress and reporting to progress panels. Monitoring of students progress by **supervision meetings** and **formal progress review**.

Drafting and thesis submission

- Students require a considerable **support** from their supervisors at the drafting stage of their thesis.
- Supervisors can help students draft the thesis by spending time at the **outset** discussing the key issues in writing an acceptable thesis and adhere to the **timetable**.
- As supervisors read and evaluate **successive drafts** they need to determine if the thesis meets the standard and is ready for submission. If not ready indicate what can be done to **improve** it.

Thank you!

