

Trent University School of Graduate Studies GRADUATE SUPERVISION

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Roles and responsibilities in graduate supervision

Introduction

This document was modeled on policies and guidelines in use at many other Canadian universities, and draws heavily, in particular, on the graduate supervision policy and procedure document of Ryerson University¹. The document from Ryerson University was used as a template and further developed by the members of the Curriculum and Regulations Committee of the School of Graduate Studies at Trent University. The goal of this document is to provide a guide to the roles and responsibilities of graduate students, supervisors, program directors, and others involved in graduate supervision at Trent University. The roles and responsibilities in this document focus on graduate supervision, and do not include roles and responsibilities of other duties associated with the School of Graduate Studies.

The underlying principle is one of mutual respect for students, faculty, and staff in a university environment governed by traditional standards of research and academic integrity, without prejudice or discrimination. Within this context, the graduate student, the supervisor, and members of the supervisory committee (where appropriate) assume certain responsibilities and obligations. This document is neither exhaustive nor exclusive and should be viewed in the context of normal circumstances in each program¹.

These guidelines should be viewed as complementary to the policies that pertain to rights and responsibilities of members of the Trent community. A complete list of Policies and where they can be found on the Trent University website can be found at <https://www.trentu.ca/secretariat/policies.php>.

While it is important to acknowledge that graduate students are partners in the university enterprise, it is equally important to recognize the difference in power status, in particular with respect to their supervisors. Students may feel at risk if they complain or disagree with their supervisors. Therefore, the onus is on graduate programs and supervisors to promote an environment where expectations and concerns are discussed openly. Understanding the respective roles and responsibilities of supervisors, supervisory committees, students, and programs can be helpful in this regard; they are outlined in the pages that follow. As well, the consultation process for the resolution of disputes related specifically to issues in graduate supervision and graduate student research is described, although it is hoped that good practices will aid in anticipating and avoiding potential problems¹.

¹ See <http://www.ryerson.ca/content/dam/graduate/assets/pdf/SupervisionPolicyAug2011.pdf>

1.0 Choice of supervisor

We acknowledge that in some graduate programs a supervisor is assigned to a student before admission or soon after the start of the program while in other programs a faculty supervisor is not assigned until the topic of research is identified.

In most programs the onus is on the student to find a faculty member who agrees to supervise the graduate research work; a process that typically takes place prior to an offer of admission being made. If the student is instead assigned a faculty advisor when an offer of admission is made, it is the responsibility of both the student and the faculty advisor to find a faculty member who agrees to supervise the graduate research work.

The selection of a faculty supervisor is a critical decision that impacts the quality of the student's graduate experience and influences the student's career path. Academic competence is, of course, important, but the faculty supervisor must also be willing to provide advice, guidance, and mentorship. A healthy student-supervisor relationship is one in which there is open and effective communication and expectations are clearly laid out.

Students are advised to obtain information about potential supervisors and the environment in which they will be working. Program websites generally provide profiles of faculty members and descriptions of ongoing research and research facilities. Students who will work in a laboratory setting or as a member of a research team are encouraged to talk with current students in that environment about their experiences and interactions with a particular supervisor. It is important that whenever possible the student meet with the potential supervisor of their graduate thesis to determine compatibility and have an opportunity to discuss issues such as expectations, research project support, identifying a thesis topic and scope, student funding, and strategies to ensure timely completion and quality work.

There may be situations where students wish to change supervisors for intellectual or personal reasons. If the student chooses to change supervisor, it is the responsibility of both the student and the program director to find a faculty member who agrees to supervise the graduate research work (see sections 5.0 and 7.0).

2.0 Role and responsibilities of supervisors

The primary role of supervisors is to provide guidance to allow for the graduate student's professional development and intellectual growth. They also play an important role in providing assistance and advice during a student's program as well as plans for the next stage in his/her career. One of the key determinants of graduate student success is the quality of mentorship provided by the supervisor.

The responsibilities of supervisors are listed below. Please refer to the responsibilities of the student (Section 3.0) for the parallel role and responsibility.

1. Becoming familiar with and comply with the policies, procedures and regulations of the program, School of Graduate Studies and the university. It is the responsibility of the supervisor to discuss the relevant policies and procedures with the student, as needed.
2. Knowing the program and university regulations and standards for a dissertation, thesis or major project, and ensuring that the graduate student is aware of them. A list of the

School of Graduate Studies policies and procedures can be found at <http://www.trentu.ca/graduatestudies/forms.php>

Ensure that students are familiar with and adhering to the School of Graduate Studies guidelines on the ownership of intellectual property (<http://www.trentu.ca/graduatestudies/documents/GSCIntellectualPropertyfinalversionsept.2011.pdf>) and the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Integrity in Research and Scholarship.

Discussing and coming to agreement on the ownership of shared intellectual property.

Being informed of the regulations and procedures of their program, the School of Graduate Studies and the University and being knowledgeable about services and resources available to graduate students at Trent University.

3. Guiding and advising the student on the selection and development of a research topic that is challenging, at the appropriate level for the degree sought and can be completed within the expected time frame of the degree program.

Providing supervision for research topics that are within the supervisor's area of expertise.

In programs where there is not a program prescribed curriculum, ensuring that the student gains the necessary theoretical and substantive academic foundations for their research by counseling and approving course selections.

Making reasonable arrangements to ensure that the research resources necessary for execution of the dissertation, thesis or major project, within the norms appropriate to the graduate program and within the limits of the material and human resources of the university, are planned for or budgeted for so the graduate student can complete the project without undue delay. This includes assisting the graduate student in gaining access to facilities or research materials.

The supervisor must help define a program of study which will challenge the graduate student and allow the graduate student the satisfaction of making a contribution to the field.

4. Provide advice on the composition of the advisory and examining committee(s)
5. If approval of the research from a research ethics committee(s) is required, the supervisor will review and approve the research ethics application before it is submitted to the appropriate research ethics committee(s) and should ensure that the student understand that the research must receive approval from the Research Ethics Board(s) prior to commencement of the project.

Ensuring that the student acquires the skills and training required to conduct research in a manner consistent with the highest standards of ethical, scientific and safe practice.

Ensuring that students are familiar with the health and safety regulations of the University and the Department.

6. Communicating to the student the required levels of performance, as well as the performance indicators that are consistent with satisfactory and timely progress in the degree program.

Clearly informing the student about expectations, performance, and all issues relevant to the student's academic progress.

7. Ensuring that once a year (typically in May) a graduate student Progress Report is submitted to the graduate program director detailing its observations on the student's progress and future work and assessing whether research is progressing at a satisfactory or unsatisfactory level. A copy of the report should be given to the student and all members of the supervisory committee and the student must be given the opportunity to respond. A copy of the report and the student's response should be filed with the program and the School of Graduate Studies. Students who are judged to have unsatisfactory progress on their annual Progress Report may be withdrawn from the program.
8. Being accessible to the student to consult and discuss their progress. The frequency of such meetings depends on the field of study, the type of program, the stage of the research project and the independence of the student. Normally, at least three formal or informal meetings should be arranged in each academic term, in order to discuss and record academic performance on a Progress Report, upon which goals for the following term are outlined.
9. Thoroughly examining written material submitted by the graduate student in a timely fashion, making constructive suggestions for improvement, and informing the graduate student in writing at the time of submission when the material will be returned (usually within 2-4 weeks). Work will be returned with comments, preferably in writing, for improving and continuing the work. Supervisors must inform the student in writing if there is an unanticipated delay in returning the work (i.e., later than 4 weeks from submission).
10. Giving the student reasonable notice of extended periods of time where communication will be difficult (e.g., absences of more than 7 days without access to email) and making satisfactory arrangements for supervision and informing the graduate program director when the supervisor or members of the supervisory committee are on leave or on extended absence from the campus. Supervisors are expected to continue to provide supervision to graduate students while on sabbatical leaves.
11. Encouraging and assisting the student to disseminate the research findings through appropriate channels (e.g., conference, meetings, journal articles).
Acknowledging student contributions to scholarly activity and discussing academic ownership on an ongoing basis with a goal of protecting and supporting the academic freedom and intellectual property rights of the graduate student. The publication process, including authorship decisions, should follow norms or established guidelines for publication authorship that are established in the discipline.
12. Conforming to the principles of academic integrity in the development of a professional and objective relationship with the graduate student.
If conflicts arise between the supervisor or supervisory committee and the graduate student, attempt to try to resolve the difficulties informally, being mindful of the power differential in the relationship. If informal consultation does not lead to a resolution, then

consult with the program director and, if required, ultimately the Dean of Graduate Studies in order to seek an acceptable resolution.

13. In cases where financial assistance is to be provided from research grants or contracts under their direction, communicating clearly and in writing to their students the terms (e.g. amounts, length of time, conditions). The School of Graduate Studies will work with the supervisor to include this information in the letter of offer, if so desired. Note, that when available, GTA and RF/RFA funding will be included in the student's offer of admission.
14. Providing guidance to the student on career options and opportunities for professional development.
15. Providing timely reference letters that are a fair representation of the student and meet internal or external deadlines or informing the student in a timely fashion that you are not able to provide a letter of reference.

3.0 Role and responsibilities of graduate students

When a student registers in a graduate program, the student makes a commitment to strive for the highest levels of academic achievement and contribute fully to the intellectual life of the University. The primary responsibility of the student is to devote the time and energy required to complete all academic requirements including the thesis within the expected time frame. It is also the responsibility of the graduate student to follow program, the Trent University School of Graduate Studies and University policies, procedures and regulations and to adhere to the principles of academic integrity.

By agreeing to work with a supervisor, students enter a partnership that will succeed if it is built on mutual trust and respect. Students should acknowledge the senior role that is played by their supervisors who are experienced researchers and academics. It is expected that students should seek their supervisor's advice and give it serious consideration. Students should also seek advice and guidance from their supervisory committee members (if applicable) and from their graduate program director as needed.

The responsibilities of students are listed below. Please refer to the responsibilities of the supervisor (Section 2.0) for the parallel role and responsibility.

1. Becoming familiar with and comply with the policies, procedures and regulations of the program, School of Graduate Studies and the university.
2. Knowing the program and university regulations and standards for a dissertation, thesis or major project and following them. A list of the School of Graduate Studies policies and procedures can be found at <http://www.trentu.ca/graduatestudies/forms.php> Adhere to the School of Graduate Studies guidelines on the ownership of intellectual property (<http://www.trentu.ca/graduatestudies/documents/GSCIntellectualPropertyfinalversionsept.2011.pdf>) and the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Integrity in Research and Scholarship
3. Meeting program requirements and conducting research that will contribute to, and reflect a capacity of independent scholarship in the chosen field of study.

Defining, in conjunction with the supervisor, a program of study which fits within the scope of the program and for which human, physical and financial resources exist.

Preparing a research plan and timeline in consultation with the supervisor as a basis for monitoring progress and completing all stages of the research.

Conforming to all appropriate deadlines and policies as specified by the graduate calendar, with respect to enrollment, fees, award applications, and degree requirements.

4. Maintaining regular communication with the supervisor and supervisory committee (where appropriate) regarding progress and research findings.
5. Conducting research with the highest standard of ethical and scientific practice and acquiring Research Ethics Board or Animal Care Committee for approval if required. Familiarizing themselves with the health and safety regulations of the University and the Department.
6. Providing reasonable evidence of satisfactory research progress, as requested by the supervisor; informing the supervisor immediately of any changes that might affect progress.
7. Maintaining regular communication with the supervisor and supervisory committee (where appropriate) regarding progress and research findings. At a minimum, three formal or informal meetings should be arranged in each academic term, in order to discuss and record academic performance on a Progress Report, in which goals for the following term are established. Students who are judged to have unsatisfactory progress on their annual Progress Report may be withdrawn from the program.
8. Meeting and communicating with supervisor regularly (i.e., at least once a month) and seeking advice and support from university services and resources as needed. Setting goals for the following terms with the supervisor.
9. Providing supervisor with written work for comment as agreed upon (see #7).
Informing supervisor in writing if there is an unanticipated delay in submitting work.
Ensuring that raw data is available to the supervisor at all times.
Providing copies of the thesis, major research paper or dissertation to the examining committee members.
10. Informing supervisor and/or program director of extended periods of time where communication will be difficult (e.g., absences of more than 7 days without access to email). Full-time students who are taking an extended leave for a period of more than 4 weeks to conduct research activities/studies off campus are required to complete a "request for extended leave for full-time students" form.
11. Upon completion of the research work ensuring that all records, files, documents are stored appropriately and a plan for dissemination has been agreed upon by all collaborators.
Making drafts of the dissertation, thesis, major paper or materials available, with a copy of the raw data if requested, to the supervisor prior to submission for publication. The

publication process, including authorship decisions, should follow norms or established guidelines for publication authorship that are established in the discipline.

12. If problems or conflicts associated with a supervisor or supervisory committee arise, the graduate student should attempt first to resolve any difficulties informally. If informal discussion does not lead to a resolution then advice should be sought from the program director and, if required, ultimately from the Dean of Graduate Studies in order to seek an acceptable resolution.
13. Ensuring that contact information is up to date with the supervisor, program, and the School of Graduate Studies.
14. Requests for reference letters will be made in a timely fashion (i.e., well in advance of deadlines) and will include all documentation needed (e.g., description of scholarship or position, unofficial transcripts, letter of intent or application).

4.0 Role and responsibilities of supervisory committees

The role of the supervisory committee, if a supervisory committee is required by the program, is to assist supervisors in providing guidance, consultation and advice on the students' research. If the program does not require a supervisory committee these responsibilities are transferred to the program director. The composition of the supervisory committee may vary by program; however, the members' areas of expertise generally complement that of the supervisor. The supervisory committee may also be called upon to take a more active role in cases where supervisors are absent for an extended period of time or no longer employed by the institution, or in cases of disputes between supervisors and students.

Specific responsibilities of supervisory committees include:

1. Meeting with the student, as a committee, as required but not less than once per year to assess the student's progress in the program and advise on future work required for completion of the degree requirements.
2. Being reasonably accessible to students when called upon for discussion of academic progress, for consultation on issues related to the research project and for general guidance.
3. Thoroughly examining written material submitted by the graduate student in a timely fashion, making constructive suggestions for improvement, and informing the graduate student in writing at the time of submission when the material will be returned (usually within 2-4 weeks). Work will be returned with comments, preferably in writing, for improving and continuing the work. Supervisory committee members must inform the student in writing if there is an unanticipated delay in returning the work.
4. If problems or conflicts associated with student arise, the members of the supervisory committee should attempt first attempt to resolve any difficulties informally. If informal discussion does not lead to a resolution then advice should be sought from the program director and, if required, ultimately from the Dean of Graduate Studies in order to seek an acceptable resolution.

5.0 Role and responsibilities of the graduate program director

The graduate program director plays a central role in creating a positive environment in which graduate students can pursue their scholarly work and intellectual growth. Students should become acquainted with both the graduate program director and administrator(s) and stay informed about activities and events. The responsibilities of the program directors also go beyond the individual student and include responsibilities, not listed here, that go beyond those associated with student supervision.

Specific responsibilities of the graduate program director include:

1. Providing current information to all graduate students, both incoming and continuing, on all aspects of the graduate program, admission requirements, financial support, procedures and deadlines. The departments should ensure that their information materials convey a welcoming and inclusive message and are readily accessible to all students.
2. Ensuring that all graduate administrative procedures are followed.
3. Ensuring that policies relevant to the graduate program such the appointment of supervisors, dispute resolution, and monitoring progress are current and published (e.g. on program or School of Graduate Studies websites or in student guides) so students can be familiar with them.
4. Informing students of University and department health and safety regulations as appropriate to the discipline and field.
5. Being reasonably accessible to students when called upon for discussion and consultation of their academic progress and research.
6. Establishing a means of communicating with graduate students about matters of importance to their program (e.g. events, seminars, funding opportunities)
7. Ensuring that a supervisor is appointed for each student registered in a graduate degree program with a research component. It is recognized that in some programs it is desirable to appoint a supervisor as early as possible while in others it is preferable to wait for the student to be involved in the research component of his/her program. In the latter case, it is assumed that the graduate program director or delegate (i.e., faculty advisor) will take on the role of academic adviser until a supervisor has been appointed.
8. Ensuring that a supervisory committee is appointed for each student, as needed. If the program does not require a supervisory committee the responsibilities of the supervisory committee (see Section 4.0) are transferred to the program director.
9. Ensuring that a progress report is submitted by the supervisor and student once year (typically in May) and ensuring that the progress report is submitted to the School of Graduate Studies by June 1 every year. With the assistance of the School of Graduate Studies reviewing time to completion rates and addressing individual and programmatic concerns as needed.
10. Providing guidance for resolving problems which may arise between graduate students, instructors, supervisors and/or members of the supervisory committee. See also section 7.0

11. Responding promptly to requests for the replacement of a supervisor or supervisory committee member. Reviewing the case in order to secure alternative supervision where appropriate. If the program director has reason to believe that adequate supervision is not being provided, he/she should investigate the situation and take appropriate action.
12. If problems or conflicts associated with student, supervisors, or supervisory committees arise, the program director should attempt first to resolve any difficulties informally. If informal discussion does not lead to a resolution then advice should be sought from the Dean of Graduate Studies in order to seek an acceptable resolution.
13. Ensuring that recommended members of an examining committee have a sufficiently “arms length” relationship to the student.
14. Informing students of resources and services available to them for assistance, consultation and advice on academic and non-academic matters.
15. Working with the School of Graduate Studies to maximize student recruitment and retention efforts (including discipline specific recruitment efforts).
16. Overseeing curriculum development and review, including the development of program level goals (aka learning outcomes).
17. Overseeing the scheduling of the thesis/dissertation defence including, but not limited to, ensuring that recommended members of an examining committee have a sufficiently “arms length” relationship to the student.
18. Participation as a member of GSC (as per Senate requirements), Graduate Studies sub-committees, faculty board, and, when assigned, Senate.
19. Recommending reoccurring and new faculty appointments as needed or required.
20. Developing program policies for approval at GSC.
21. Overseeing the development and scheduling of comprehensive and conversion exams. Ensuring that these exam results are communicated in a timely fashion to the student, the supervisor, and the School of Graduate Studies.
22. Confirming that degree requirements are met
23. Specific duties as outlined by the program. Some programs may require more of their program directors due to their program requirements or policies.

6.0 Role and responsibilities of the School of Graduate Studies

The School of Graduate Studies oversees the conduct of all graduate programs within the university and supports the achievement of the highest possible academic standards in graduate degree programs. The School works closely with students and graduate programs to promote excellence and foster an enriched and collegial environment for the pursuit of graduate education. Specific responsibilities in relation to graduate supervision include:

1. Ensuring that University and Graduate policies and procedures are followed.
2. Providing support for new and continuing faculty on graduate supervision.

3. Providing professional development courses and opportunities for graduate students.
4. Advising students on academic issues and facilitating informal solutions in consultation with the Program Director.
5. Tracking financial packages provided to students and communicating the terms clearly and in writing to the students (amounts, length of time, and conditions).
6. Liaising with graduate programs on all matters relevant to graduate education.

7.0 Conflict resolution guidelines

In resolving a conflict that involves a graduate student, parties must in all cases be mindful of the power differential in the student/supervisor relationship. Furthermore, it must be acknowledged that research by nature requires that ideas, assumptions and interpretations are challenged – this can inadvertently create an environment that is perceived as threatening or adverse. Sensitivity to the power differential, recognition of differences in cultural experiences, and clear understanding of expectations can help maintain a healthy and productive relationship that fosters intellectual growth.

In cases where conflict arises, the procedure below is recommended. Note that academic issues should be dealt with following the procedures in the Appeals Policy of the School of Graduate Studies (http://www.trentu.ca/graduatestudies/documents/AppealsProcedureFinal-approvedbySenate_Apr2009.pdf)

Resolution of an issue should initially be sought first through informal program channels. Discussion of the problem should occur first between the student and supervisor or supervisory committee. If the issue cannot be resolved here, one or both parties should consult the program director to seek possible resolution. If the supervisor is the program director, then both parties should consult with the Dean of Graduate Studies. If a satisfactory resolution is not reached, assistance can be requested of the Dean of the School of Graduate Studies. In consultation with the person(s) seeking advice, the Dean may elect to appoint an advisory committee to help resolve the issue. All consultations in the Program and School of Graduate Studies should be kept confidential and no direct action should be taken without the prior consent of the person(s) seeking advice. Wherever possible, formal communications should be limited to those parties directly concerned in dealing with problems.

A change in supervisor should be made only for strong and compelling reasons such as a mutually agreed major shift in academic direction of the research, major academic disagreements and/or irreconcilable interpersonal conflicts.