

## **A personal agreement between supervisor and student about supervision expectations.**

### **Why have an Agreement?**

Undertaking a PhD is a major time commitment by a student. Students implicitly desire quality supervision and a degree of certainty that they will receive the PhD they seek. The supervision of a PhD also requires a major time investment by an academic. Supervisors implicitly desire that their time investment is not wasted. They want a completion in an acceptable time frame, and they may also have a range of other expectations about publications, fulfillment of obligations to industry partners, etc. A good supervision process can be a win-win outcome. A bad supervision process can result in dissatisfaction for both student and supervisor, and at worse, can severely affect the life of a student and may cause embarrassment or difficulties for the supervisor in the case of meeting the requirements of industry partners and/or funding bodies.

Like any other collaborative relationship, in PhD supervision there are expectations of the other party: student of supervisor, and supervisor of student. Sometimes these expectations are shared and understood because of the participation by both supervisor and student in some shared academic (or discipline) culture. In most cases, however, these expectations are not shared, and are frequently not discussed. Students often have no idea what they can expect of their supervisors. As with many other relationships, often dissatisfaction arises because of a lack of appreciation of the other party's expectations.

It is the premise of this document that there should be a facilitated discussion about expectations of supervision at various points in the supervision process, but particularly so at the beginning. It is also the proposition of this document that, like with many other professional relationships, writing down the essence of the agreement is important – both to enable a revisiting of what was agreed at some later point; and also because the drafting of the document is a way of facilitating a discussion of issues.

The attached 'template' is an example of a possible supervision agreement. It is intended to serve as a coaching tool that prompts discussion around issues of importance, rather than being a definitive, binding document. However, it is real in that several students have signed agreements just like it. The attached example is very personal, and it is not expected that other academics and/or their students use this one – they should collaboratively devise their own. Nevertheless, it is likely that the topics will cover the sorts of issues included in this example.

Irrespective of the exact content of an agreement, what is most important is that there is one. Equally important is that there is a discussion process around the agreement so that there is learning (for supervisor as well as student) of each other's expectations in the collaborative work program that will lead to the satisfactory completion of a PhD.

### **Explanation of aspects of the example agreement**

It should be noted that the sorts of students I have, who have signed agreements similar to this example agreement, have tended to have been supported by industry-funded sources and/or have been recruited to a larger research project with the PhD topic being defined by the project they are joining. This partly explains why there is an emphasis of the contribution of the supervisor to the research, and why there is mention of the right of the supervisor to publish using the data collected. In more traditional PhD situations, where the student devises the topic and recruits a supervisor, the discussion of IP might be more to protect the prior IP of the student.

## **Suggested Process**

At first I felt a little odd about introducing the concept of an agreement to students, but I quickly found that they welcomed it – they thought it was great to have an understanding of what they could expect. Since then I have introduced the concept very early on in the supervision relationship in the way described below. The process is designed to ensure that there is no pressure on the student and that when they sign, they do so in a full understanding of the issues.

Before I accept to be a supervisor of a student and/or before I select them as the successful candidate of a scholarship I may be offering, I seek to have a general discussion about the project with the student in question. We also have a general discussion about life in general, so that we know each other.

Depending on the circumstances, and perhaps during a second or third meeting, I explain that supervision requires a major time commitment and that it is important that we have a shared understanding of what supervision entails. I ask the student to complete the *Opinions about Research Supervision Questionnaire* (on the FIRST online activities page) [or a similar document that UTAS provides]. We discuss variances in our responses if they exist, and use the Questionnaire as an opportunity to talk about supervision in general. At the end of that meeting (which takes around an hour), I indicate that I think it is a good idea to have a record of understanding about supervision and that I have a draft agreement I would like the student to consider. I present the student with the draft, which we talk about and I answer any questions they might have – but I always let them take it away to think about.

At some later date when I feel it is appropriate, usually after the student has enrolled, we revisit the draft agreement. In the meantime, the student has had a chance to think about what they want it to say, and they have been able to talk about it with their friends and colleagues – which I encourage. A typical reaction has been that their friends have wished they had one too! At a meeting specifically identified as being for the purpose, the draft template is converted to an actual agreement, with <name> replaced with the individual student's name, any items changed as necessary, and the student encouraged to make additions/changes. When that discussion is complete (having allowed about an hour for it), we both sign the document, thus declaring our commitment to the supervision relationship. The signing is a very meaningful act of commitment, a highlight and an achieved milestone to be celebrated.

The agreement should be reviewed regularly. I suggest that it be reviewed shortly after the submission of the Preliminary Research Plan (or Confirmation) – when the student has clarified what they will actually do. I then suggest that the agreement be reviewed annually at some meaningful time, either at the beginning of the year as a way of starting each year, or in conjunction with the University's annual review process.

## **Why sign the Agreement?**

There has been concern by fellow academics to signing the agreement. In my view, signing signifies a strong statement of commitment. The act of signing cements the bond (trust) between student and supervisor and indicates that this is a real, serious, statement declared in good faith. It seems to me that not to sign the document would reduce the meaning associated with it. Should there ever be a need to refer to the document in discussion around a disagreement, having the signed version would be desirable so that there would be no sense that it was surreptitiously altered.

## **What the document is not**

The agreement is not meant to be a legal document, nor binding in any way. Nor is it meant to replace the myriad of policies that a university might have about supervision or graduate research. It is meant to be nothing more than a personal agreement between a specific student and their supervisor. While it is intended that it be revisited, and while a student or a supervisor might use it in the future to remind the other about what they had agreed to, it is intended to be a tool for communication rather than as an enforcement mechanism.

## **Possible variations on the process**

The example attached is designed for students who join larger research projects which have obligations to external parties. A more traditional PhD which was initiated by a student seeking a supervisor might look rather different in relation to the discussion of IP. Supervisors who are primarily in that situation should develop a somewhat different starting point for discussion.

The example attached also implies a single supervisor. An alternative version could make mention of all members of the supervisory team and indicate what they each bring in terms of skills and expectations.

## **Some caveats**

The assumption of this document is that the students who are asked to sign an agreement have the cultural and intellectual capacity to comprehend fully what signing such a document means. While the document is not intended to be a legal document, supervisors should be aware that different students may conceive of the document in ways not intended. The example was developed for use with mature age Australian students who would have a cultural understanding of the purpose of such a document and an ability to separate the personal understanding from an official agreement with the University. The document may not be appropriate for use with international students, but I still believe that a discussion of supervision expectations is still highly appropriate.

## **Endorsements**

Lain Dare, PhD student

*I have been very fortunate to be a PhD student of Professor Vanclay for the past 18 months. I was introduced to the supervisory documents in the first week of my candidature and was very thankful. I have found the MoU document to be very clear about both my role as a student and what I can realistically expect from my supervisory team. This has helped my transition from a professional employee to a PhD student in a university environment, a transition that has certainly been rewarding.*

Dr Heather Aslin, Bureau of Rural Sciences, cosupervisor

*The Student Supervision Agreement is a particularly valuable innovation and helps formalise what has often in the past been a very vague arrangement between students and supervisors, and encourages both parties to take their obligations seriously. A PhD represents a very significant commitment of time and resources on both sides, and the student may be foregoing considerable income in choosing to do the PhD rather than taking up or continuing paid employment. Also, there is often a very great power imbalance between a PhD supervisor and their student, and so it is desirable for the student to have a formal statement about what they have a right to expect from their supervisor. On the other hand, as the agreement points out, the supervisor has an increasingly significant professional stake in the student completing their PhD. So anything that encourages both parties to recognise their mutual interdependence and mutual obligations, without becoming too legalistic, is to be welcomed. I think the form of an agreement or MoU strikes just the right note to recognise these inter-relationships.*

Kevin Redd, PhD student on behalf of the Tasmania University Postgraduate Association

*The Tasmania University Postgraduate Association (TUPA) would like to comment on this document from the perspective of postgraduates at UTAS. We have gathered opinions from around the postgraduate community and offer the following feedback:*

- *This document focuses the thoughts of candidates, describes expectations, raises IP issues for discussion, and puts the topics of authorship and publication on the table very early in the PhD process. These subjects are incredibly valuable and very often are not covered by supervisors or candidates in the early stages of a PhD.*
- *These and other issues which otherwise might (and often do) become contentious are up for discussion very early in candidature. The preemptive discussions that are likely to arise when drafting the MoU are something that many candidates wish they had done with their supervisors, but often it is too late once a problem has arisen.*
- *This document provides a clear statement of intention and shows commitment from both candidate and supervisor. The expectations which are outlined for both candidate and supervisor are an excellent checklist and concise action plan to inform both parties.*
- *Although a signed MoU document may not be legally binding as far as the University is concerned, the addition of candidate and supervisor signatures acts as a symbol of commitment and prevents later disputes over issues mentioned in the MoU.*

*TUPA supports the use of this document and any other similar material to improve the dialogue between candidates and supervisors. From the postgraduate perspective, Frank Vanclay demonstrates an exemplary attitude towards supervision and should be commended for drafting and sharing this document via fIRST.*

# PhD Student Supervision Agreement (MoU) <example only>

Disclaimer: This is not intended to be a legal document nor binding in any way, nor is it intended to replace any University policy – it is a personal agreement about the act of supervision made in good faith between student and supervisor.

**Agreed between <name of student> and Prof Frank Vanclay: 21 August 2008**

## **WHAT EACH STUDENT CAN EXPECT FROM FRANK VANCLAY AS A SUPERVISOR:**

- I will assist your reading by pointing you to appropriate references.
- I will look out for opportunities (grants, jobs, publication opportunities, partnerships, etc) for you.
- I will try to locate extra resources for you.
- I will assist you to navigate the various administrative tasks and institutional issues that may arise, but I ask you to appreciate that my role is primarily academic support and that there are some things that may be better addressed by one of the School's Administrative Staff.
- I will assist you in determining the appropriate methodology, in undertaking the appropriate statistical tests if applicable, and I will contribute ideas about the project throughout your PhD. Responsibility for the PhD, however, rests with you – it is your PhD.
- I will assist your professional development by mentoring, and suggesting opportunities for training.
- I will assist you in learning and meeting the formal and informal expectations of academia and the discipline.
- I will try to be as accessible to you (in person and by phone and email) as I can be, and I will respond to your queries as soon as I can, but be aware that I may not always be immediately available due to other commitments. I will read your work (papers, draft chapters etc) and return them to you with comments as soon as is possible. It is useful to let me know when you might be giving me material to comment on so that I can plan my time effectively.

## **EXTRA ITEMS <name> EXPECTS FROM FRANK VANCLAY AS A SUPERVISOR:**

(nothing added 21 August 2008)

## **WHAT FRANK VANCLAY EXPECTS FROM <name>:**

### *General*

- That you appreciate that I am a significant stakeholder in your PhD and that I also invest energy, time and intellectual property (IP) in your PhD.
- That the PhD will be an important priority in your life and that you will make real effort to make regular progress on it.
- That you have a strong commitment to finishing the PhD and that you will make every reasonable effort to complete the thesis within a reasonable timeframe.

### *Data Management*

- That you make regular backups of your data and maintain a responsible approach to data management.
- That you look after any computer issued to you and protect it from theft and accidental damage.
- That you will provide me with an update on your work on a regular basis, and by way of backup protection that you provide me with electronic copies of all materials on a monthly basis.

### ***Supervision Process***

- That you prepare an agenda for each meeting with me, and that you take notes from each meeting which you email back to me.
- That you will develop a *Thesis Outline and Overview* (see separate document) and update it regularly so that it is a current statement of what your PhD is about.
- That you will do all research in an ethical way, and that you will not knowingly plagiarise.
- That you will comply with all reasonable administrative requests and processes by their due date.

### ***Publication and Authorship***

- That you will confer with me about possible coauthorship of any (and all) papers that may arise as a result of your PhD research in advance of writing them, and that you will include me as a coauthor unless we have mutually explicitly agreed that should not be the case. In general terms, we shall agree to abide with the Vancouver Protocol on authorship.
- That you make reasonable attempts to develop publications from your research which I will assist you to do with you as first author (and I as coauthor). However, should you not complete any publications from your research within a reasonable time, that you accept that I may develop publications based on your work (especially if your work forms part of a larger project I am managing). Depending on the extent of contribution, I may be first author of such publications.
- That any published work that arises from your PhD (even after graduation) must indicate the University as your affiliation.

### ***Approval processes, IP and confidentiality***

- That you do not submit any material for publication to any outlet (journal, media or conference) nor any abstract to a conference without my approval.
- That you will abide by any confidentiality agreement and Intellectual Property (IP) policy that you enter into with any industry partners or the University, and that you are respectful of industry expectations about your work.
- That we have explicit discussions about intellectual property at various stages during the candidature where our personal IP agreement can be (re)negotiated. The starting understanding of our personal IP agreement is that any IP that is developed during the candidature is shared equally between student and supervisor and that we both bring background IP into the relationship. Note that I am using IP in a general sense here, and that IP rights (in a formal legal sense) may need to be transferred to the University and/or industry partner depending on whatever formal IP assignments may have been made.

### ***Potential Future Cooperation***

- That you consider potential future partnerships and collaborations with me post PhD.

### ***Reviewing and modifying this agreement***

- That this agreement (memorandum of understanding) will be reviewed annually in conjunction with the University's annual review process, and on submission of the Preliminary Research Proposal.

Signed on the \_\_\_\_\_ day of \_\_\_\_\_ in the year \_\_\_\_\_

Prof Frank Vanclay (Supervisor)

(student)