



Interview with PhD Supervisors

The following is a transcript of a brief video published in Module 3.3: Good Research Supervision (<http://unistudentwellbeing.edu.au/teaching-practice/supervision/>). The video includes quotes and comments from five experienced postgraduate supervisors about their experiences of supervision and managing student mental health. In some places, this transcript includes longer responses than included in the video. These extra comments were excluded from the video to avoid repetition but are included here for context. Interviewees are:

- Professor Sandra Kentish (SK), Chemical & Biomolecular Engineering, the University of Melbourne
- Professor Kate Darian-Smith (KDS), Historical and Philosophical Studies, the University of Melbourne
- Professor Phil Batterham (PB), Bio21 Institute, the University of Melbourne
- Professor Helen Lee (HL), Department of Social Inquiry, La Trobe University
- Professor Howard Nicholas (HN), School of Education, La Trobe University

Part 1: *Getting off to a Good Start: Establishing a good supervision relationship*

- KDS I'm a great believer in clear boundaries, reviewing those boundaries, and encouraging very open communication about those expectations. I do think that setting up that open understanding of expectation, timelines, is very important because it removes some of those forms of stress and misunderstanding.
- HN One of the things that you need to do is to be clear about your expectations, to be able to talk about what your role is and what your students roles are and to talk about the way in which those roles will change.
- PB I think if we just go back to the very beginning of your relationship with the student, you need to have some shared goals. You need to think about their professional development. You need to define a path – what they're study will look like, the skills they will pick up, and how that might take them to where they want to be. And that becomes a road map that you should really be following together.
- HL One of the things that I do with students is get them to think the thesis as a set of tasks that need to be done so they break it into chunks and deal with each chunk at a time, and one of the things that I do with students is get them to think the thesis as a set of tasks that need to be done so they break it into chunks and deal with each chunk at a time.
- HN For most people its providing a regular and predictable context for what they are doing, regular appointments; even though people have regular appointments, knowing that they don't have to do the same thing all the time, and sometimes doing totally unexpected things just to break the mould.

Part 2: *When things go wrong: Knowing when graduate students are struggling*

- HL You can be having a conversation about something you know a chapter that they've given you and they will break down in tears and you realise its not about the chapter, its the general stress that they are under.
- KDS I think sometimes its is important to see how you pick up [that] students are in some stress in their work. That can be seen through not meeting deadlines, cancelling meetings, not producing work, some times giving explanations of personal issues or work issues.
- SK Certainly in my experience when a student is stressed, they tend to disengage, they tend to slow down the rate at which they are working, they tend to isolate themselves so that they don't tend to be as engaged and focussed on their work or research.

- HN Some people go quiet, some people don't make appointments, other people come along to appointments convinced that they have to show you the complete thesis. Other people worry that they haven't got it right, and so they spend all their time trying to work out the exact right thing to say or apologise for all the things they haven't yet done. Other people approach it as if they have to work out what they have done wrong so that they can do exactly the opposite, and the time after the exact opposite of that. For some people, you see it in very slow and incremental changes and for yet other people, dramatic volcanic throwing away of everything that they have been doing in the belief that they have to start all over again.
- SK Again, if it's the perfectionist person then you see that the work is just not progressing, that the student is just stuck and not moving on. So those types of behaviours, you'll see.
- KDS That is not to say there aren't always signs. Sometimes you can find out that a student has been under some extreme personal stress for months before they reveal it.
- PB It's not really rocket science. It's really just being observant. You're looking at a person, and you need to really keep a bit of check on how they're going.

Part 3: Supporting PhD students: Fostering positive relationships

- PB I meet the students formally once a week, but I think often the informal, the fact that you are willing to spend time with them, outside the formal, is important.
- KDS Life in universities and doing research and a PhD is incredibly rewarding intellectually but it also needs to be rewarding socially and collegially to be fully rounded.
- SK Mainly it's about peer support, so ensuring that you have a strong network around the students so that the students form their own social networks, so I believe a shared office with about 4 or 5 students in it, or in my case I think I've got about 10 in one office, is better than them working from a study carrel where they are on their own.
- PB There is a level of mentorship in the relationship that goes beyond - I'm a geneticist - goes beyond me telling people how to do genetics research. They've got to learn a lot more about life in science beyond that: about writing papers, about communicating, about building networks, about getting themselves employment.
- And the other thing is, just getting in beside them when they are applying for jobs. Nothing but nothing sparks a student up if they are bit down, than actually having a job. So, with about 12 months to go with a PhD, we actively begin a process together of job search. Developing the CVs, developing letters, thinking about where they want to go and to help them.
- There is a contract here, and the contract is that the student is going to come along and give you, to some extent, some years of their life, and there has to be some reciprocal part of the contract where you invest yourself in them.
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