

# FACULTY MATTERS

## Meaningful Supervision at a Distance

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# Agenda

- **What challenges are we facing as a research community?**
- **What existing tools and resources can we use to meet the challenge of supervising at a distance during a crisis?**
- **What new tools and new practices can we develop to adapt to the realities of long-term physical distancing?**



What challenges  
are grad students  
facing?

**Structural** : Students are cut off from the resources they need to make progress in their studies

- Lab access, field work, archival materials, performance space, library resources, research materials on campus.
- When students *can* make progress, they do so with new risks to their health, their family's health, their privacy, etc.

**Societal** : Students are often experiencing **increased stress** at a time when they are **less able to access their support networks**

- bereavement, illness, financial insecurity, increased caregiving responsibilities, isolation, living abroad, etc.
- **high levels of uncertainty about the future**
  - When/how they will graduate
  - Expectations about productivity
  - Career prospects in 2020-2021 and beyond

**\*\* Meaningful supervision needs to address societal challenges as well as the structural challenges \*\***



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What resources do we have to support students during this crisis?

Supervisors are a crucial first contact for students, but **supervisors aren't alone in supporting students** – McGill services are ready to work with students remotely

- **Funding & Financial need:** McGill Student Aid
- **Stress, Grief, Mental Health:** The Wellness Hub
- **Student professional development :** Skillsets, myPath, CaPS
- **Isolation:** Graphos Virtual Write-Ins, Student Associations
- **Remote learning resources:** Teaching and Learning Services

**In terms of graduate supervision, the Letter of Understanding provides a good framework to open **conversations** about the move to remote supervision during the pandemic**



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# Letters of Understanding

- What is an LOU?
  - A **Letter of Understanding** opens a **conversation**. Students and Supervisors put in writing a set of mutual expectations.
- Recommended topics to touch on:
  - Supervisory meetings (ie. how often, topics discussed)
  - Communication between meetings (ie. email, teams, frequency, response times on weekends, etc.)
  - Feedback expectations (i.e. timelines, format of feedback)
  - Expectations for written work (what will be submitted when)
  - Student funding
  - Professional development

Everyone benefits from **flexibility** right now – but supervisees benefit especially from **your clarity** regarding expectations and what support you can offer



# Letters of Understanding in the context of Emergency Remote Instruction

## Discussing the move to Remote Supervision

- When are you available and how would you prefer supervisees communicate with you?
  - Time zones, childcare schedules, vacation time, etc.
- What resources do you and your supervisees have access to?
  - Computer equipment, quiet spaces to work, stable housing, childcare
- What resources do you need to work together remotely?
  - software, virtual workflow to share documents, etc?
- How can your supervisee make progress while balancing their well-being?
  - Towards their degree, towards their professional goals, etc.
- Returning to campus (for authorized labs)
  - What conditions would need to be met for you to return?
  - What conditions would need to be met for your supervisee to decide that they are ready to return?
  - What will happen if/when a lab is authorized to begin a gradual ramp-up before a supervisee is ready to return?



# Breakout Sessions



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Since approaches vary from student to student,  
here are some student cases to consider:

1. J.B. is an early-stage PhD student who is making good progress from their home country, which is 16 hours ahead of Montreal time. **How do you provide support to J.B. in this remote setting?**
2. M.E. is an early-stage Master's student who is frequently in touch via office hours, email, and phone calls at odd hours. M.E. often asks thesis-related questions, and seeks support around finding new part-time work and feeling disconnected from friends and family (all of whom live abroad). **How do you support M.E. in a remote setting in a way that's going to be sustainable for you both long term?**

Q. How often should supervisors reach out to their students?

What forms of “checking in” work in a remote setting?



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Since approaches vary from student to student, here are some student cases to consider:

3. R.K. is a PhD student who was on track to finish writing their dissertation by September, but shared in a recent meeting that they find themselves unable to make progress while caring full-time for school-age children. **How can you support R.K. remotely without adding pressure?**
4. B.L. is mid-stage PhD student whose research can be done remotely. B.L. responds to emails with promises to make ambitious progress since (in their words) “there will be no distractions” during the shutdown.

At the next check-in, when B.L. does not meet their goal, B.L. apologizes profusely and promises to do even more work than before, in less time. **How can you support B.L. remotely without adding pressure?**

Q. What forms of “checking in” work in a remote setting?



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Since approaches vary from student to student, here are some student cases to consider:

1. H.R. is an incoming PhD student starting in Fall 2020 who planned to observe children in a school setting. **Does it make sense for H.R. to change their project now?**
2. N.P. is final-year PhD student who has had some research setbacks and was in the middle of completing a final experiment when the government ordered a ramp-down. **Does it make sense for N.P. to change their project now?**
3. G.H. is a fourth-year PhD student who had planned to start a year of field work abroad in May 2020. G.H. has determined that travel to the field work site is not currently safe and does not know when travel will be safe again. **Does it make sense for G.H. to change their project now?**

Q. When does it make sense for a student to change their project or their methodology in light of the challenges physical distancing places on the student's ability to gather data and conduct research?



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# Questions



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# Further Food for Thought

- Eight recommendations for creating and maintaining affirming student advising for PhDs in uncertain times by Rachele L. Pope
- GPS's Supervision resources

