

LETTER OF UNDERSTANDING – DEPARTMENT OF BIORESOURCE ENGINEERING

Dear _____:
(student's name)

Welcome to the Department of Bioresource Engineering at McGill University!

Bioresource Engineering is an applied engineering profession focused on the areas of bio-production, bio-processing, bio-environment as well as related issues on food security and sustainability.

Required by Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies (GPS) for all doctoral candidates, the *Supervision Letter of Understanding* posits that the success of the doctoral candidate and their work are strongly predicated on the mutual expectations between supervisor and doctoral candidate being clearly defined and agreed upon by both parties. A Ph.D. degree is one predominantly devoted to original research and prepares students for a career as an academic, research scientist or industry personnel. To achieve this goal, the completed *Supervision Letter of Understanding* — best developed through an exchange between candidate and supervisor — serves as a foundation upon which the planning and completion of the thesis requirements rests.

The *Supervision Letter of Understanding* is neither legally binding, nor can it replace or supersede official McGill University statements of policies and procedures. The GPS requires the *Supervision Letter of Understanding* to be signed by the supervisor and candidate and uploaded to the candidate's *myProgress* file, ideally prior to the candidate engaging in the research, but no later than the first Progress Tracking Report. Given an evolving candidate-supervisor relationship over the period of the candidate's progress towards the degree, the *Supervision Letter of Understanding* should be revisited every 12 months or as needed. Should either party have questions or concerns regarding this letter of understanding, they can contact the Bioresource Engineering Department Graduate Program Director¹, Bioresource Engineering Department Chair², or Faculty of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences Graduate Program Administrator³.

General Roles and Responsibilities⁴

Supervisors should:

- Follow strict professional standards, provide guidance in all phases of the candidate's research as outlined in the McGill Expectations for Graduate Supervision (see below).
- Clarify expectations and responsibilities regarding:
 - Coursework and academic enrichment
 - Collaboration with other research groups
 - Authorship of journal articles and other scholar report
 - Oral and poster presentations at professional conferences
 - Potential intellectual property
- Make explicit:
 - Student funding for the entire duration of study (3-5 years)
 - Opportunity for teaching assistantship (TA)
 - Procedure and responsibility for data collection, storage and analysis
- Meet with candidate regularly
- Provide prompt feedback on drafted manuscripts and thesis

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⁴ Adapted from <https://mcgill.ca/gradsupervision>

Candidates should:

- Read and understand the policies, procedures and regulations established by the GPS
- Inform themselves about program requirements and deadlines, and work within these guidelines
- Communicate regularly with the supervisor and advisory committee
- Submit annual progress reports to the supervisor and advisory committee
- Inform supervisor of vacations or extended absences
 - Should health or personal issues potentially impeding the progress of their research arise, they should immediately inform their supervisor

Both Supervisors and Candidates should:

- Always demonstrate:
 - Professional judgment
 - Respectful, collegial behaviour
 - Academic rigour and integrity
 - Inclusion of all research community members
- Organize and schedule an in-person meeting with the entire advisory committee at least once a year
- Disclose and discuss any potential conflicts of interest (actual or perceived), so they may be handled appropriately
- Agree upon:
 - Meeting frequency:
 weekly bi-monthly other _____
 - Meeting format:
 full lab group meeting individual meeting other _____
 - Between meeting communication:
 drop-in e-mail appointment
 - Document submission/feedback expectations and communication of delays:
Format: printed electronic audiovisual other _____
Submission delay upon supervisor's request: _____
Turnaround time upon candidate's submission: _____
 - Professional development is expected during the Ph.D. Studies to participate in:
 workshops model/software training equipment training
 safety training isotope/radiation course conference attendance
 - Cooperation with other research group members
 field work lab chores other _____

Any other specific agreements or comments may be entered below:

Additional Resources:

There are several free workshops provided by SkillSets and Graphos. These can help you increase your soft skills or your professionalism. You can learn about these opportunities at myInvolvement where your participation in these workshops is recognized.

- McGill Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies <https://www.mcgill.ca/gps>
- Macdonald Graduate Studies <https://www.mcgill.ca/macdonald/gradstudents>
- MyInvolvement <https://involvement.mcgill.ca>

The Ph.D candidate and supervisor listed below have reviewed, discussed and understood these guidelines, both general and specific. Any questions or concerns about this document and its contents, *even after signing*, can be brought to the attention of the Bioresource Engineering Graduate Program Director, the Department Chair, the Associate Dean (Graduate Education) of the Faculty of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences, or to a GPS Associate Dean, and will be treated confidentially.

Checking a box below indicates that the individual has read and understood this form, and that the information provided within is true and accurate to the best of their knowledge.

<input type="checkbox"/>	<hr/>	<hr/>
	Candidate's name (printed)	Candidate's signature

Date: _____ (yyyy-mm-dd)

<input type="checkbox"/>	<hr/>	<hr/>
	Supervisor's name (printed)	Supervisor's signature

Date: _____ (yyyy-mm-dd)

McGill University Expectations for Graduate Supervision

Supervising graduate students and postdocs at McGill University is a critical part of academic duties for faculty, as indicated in section 4.1 of the [Regulations Relating to the Employment of Tenure Track and Tenured Academic Staff](#), henceforth referred to as “the Regulations”.

In order to supervise graduate students and postdocs, faculty must complete an [orientation](#).

Supervisors are accountable to the Chair or leader of their academic unit, who is responsible for the allocation of academic duties (section 4.3 of the Regulations). To ensure all graduate students have the opportunity to succeed in obtaining their degree, the University expects all supervisors to meet the university-wide standards delineated below.

Creating a respectful, inclusive, and professional research environment while also being present, providing regular feedback, recognizing limits, and knowing relevant policies helps faculty better support supervisees and prevent potential misunderstandings down the road.

Supervisors have a responsibility to:

1) Build and maintain a respectful, inclusive, professional research environment for their supervisees.

- a) McGill University expects supervisors to maintain a **research environment free from sexual violence, harassment, and discrimination.**

Policy Resources:

- [Policy on Harassment and Discrimination](#)
- [Policy against Sexual Violence](#)

- b) If a supervisor observes behaviour that might constitute sexual violence, harassment, or discrimination, **they must consult the [Office for Mediation and Reporting](#) or the [Office of the Dean of Students](#) to determine how to proceed.**

- Faculty should not assume that problems between supervisees in a lab setting will resolve on their own. Faculty and staff have a shared responsibility to ensure supervisees can learn in environments where they are respected and free from pejorative or offensive acts and comments. Trained professionals in the OMR and Office of the Dean of Students are available to support faculty and staff as well as students.

- c) Supervisors, as representatives of McGill University acting in an official capacity, **have a responsibility to uphold students’ rights**, as explained in [Charter of Students’ Rights, Article 3:](#)

- “Every student has a right to the safeguard of [their] dignity and a right to be protected by the University against vexatious conduct displayed by a representative of the University acting in an official capacity”.

- Supervisors have a duty to accommodate on the grounds of disability and religious belief. In some cases, there might also be a duty to accommodate on the basis of dependent care responsibilities. If you have any uncertainty about what constitutes a reasonable accommodation in a given situation you may contact the Office of the Dean of Students (in all cases) or the Office for Students with Disabilities (in situations involving students with disabilities)

Policy Resources:

- [Policy Concerning the Rights of Students with Disabilities](#)
- [Policy on Holy Days](#)

- d) Supervisors' words carry weight for supervisees. Offhand comments spoken in moments of frustration can leave supervisees doubting whether they can trust a supervisor to assess work fairly and equitably support supervisees' research and wellbeing. It is important for supervisors to keep the power differential in mind when speaking with supervisees and refrain from mocking, insulting, or undermining language.
- e) **Supervisors, as members of the University, have the right to work in a respectful and professional research environment.** [The Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures](#) holds that no student shall in a university context:
- "Knowingly create a condition that unnecessarily endangers or threatens or undermines the health, safety, well-being, or dignity of another person or persons, threatens to cause humiliation, or threatens the damage or destruction of property"

Resources:

- **Office of the Dean of Students:** Supervisors are encouraged to talk to the Dean of Students' office when a student or supervisee [exhibits worrisome behaviour](#), including dangerous, threatening, disruptive, or uncharacteristic behaviour. See the [Red File](#) for guidance.
- f) **Supervisors and supervisees must avoid conflicts of interest**, and if one should arise, speak to a department chair or director to implement measures to properly address the conflict of interest. For supervisors, this means ensuring that supervisees are equitably treated (i.e., avoid steps or measures that might be perceived as partiality, favoritism, or bias) and that relationships with supervisees are professional and centred on academic wellness.
- g) Following major conflicts, the best resolution may be to dissolve the supervisory relationship and have the graduate student continue under the supervision of another faculty member. It is critical for faculty to speak to both the Graduate Program Director and the Department Chair when considering whether this presents the best solution for all parties. When approached with a request for a transfer, faculty are expected to collaborate to ensure as smooth a transition as possible, clarifying what will happen to ongoing research, lab access, etc.

2) Be present for and accountable to supervisees by maintaining clear communication channels.

- a) Supervisors should meet regularly with supervisees, honouring the schedules agreed to in Letters of Understanding.
- b) Supervisors and supervisees should keep shared written records when it comes to important decisions about research projects, funding, authorship, graduation timelines, etc.
 - Annual Progress reports provide a framework to give feedback on a student's progress in writing and objectives for the following year in writing and represent a critical opportunity to indicate to students if their work is unsatisfactory.
- c) Supervisors must plan to ensure that graduate supervisees have appropriate supervision during prolonged absences (e.g., sabbatical leaves).
 - Supervisors who are not planning to maintain regular communication with supervised students during a sabbatical or other leave should ensure supervisees have an appropriate interim supervisor (e.g., a committee member) who will stay in regular communication with the supervisee and ensure they progress.

3) Provide supervisees with regular, timely feedback that clearly indicates how to meet their program requirements for graduation.

- a) Uphold the commitments made in Letters of Understanding regarding how long it will take to return student work with feedback. Providing regular updates for students on when to expect feedback is also helpful for ensuring accountability and on-time degree completion.
- b) Clarify expectations ahead of major milestones (e.g., proposals, qualifying examinations, thesis submission, oral defences). **Supervisees should understand how they will be assessed, what is required to pass major milestones**, and the departmental standards for thesis research and other evaluated graduate work.
 - Feedback on submitted work should be clear, substantial, and provide specific, actionable recommendations for improvement. Evaluations of student work must be made principally on the basis of the demonstrated quality of the student's research, and not comparisons with other students or supervisor opinions of the student's readiness to graduate or ability to succeed in a specific subsequent profession.
 - Supervisors must not prevent students from seeking to graduate if they have completed all the degree requirements and their work meets departmental standards.

4) Respect their limits in supporting supervisee wellbeing.

- a) Supervisors are often among the first to notice when a graduate student or postdoc is unwell. **Supervisors should offer a supportive ear while respecting their limits when it comes to addressing student mental health.** The [Student Wellness Hub](#) connects students with help from trained clinicians.

Resource:

- [Tips for talking to a student in difficulty](#)

- b) **Supervisors and supervisees alike benefit from flexibility and understanding** when it comes to balancing work responsibilities and personal wellbeing.

- Supervisors should encourage supervisees to maintain reasonable working hours and clarify expectations that supervisees will take time to rest, recharge, and connect with friends and family.
- Supervisors and supervisees should communicate their availability limits in Letters of Understanding (e.g., unavailable to meet after 3pm, will respond to emails within 48 hours, etc.). Supervisees should respect these limits and make use of available supports to maintain their wellbeing (e.g., Local Wellness Advisors, the Student Wellness Hub, etc.).

- c) **Supervisors must respect their supervisee's autonomy when it comes decisions that impact the supervisee's future.** Supervisees should be able to freely choose to pursue a particular career path, take advantage of professional development opportunities, start a family, take a leave of absence, etc., without fear that their supervisor will withdraw support.

Policy Resources:

- Parental Leave:
<https://www.mcgill.ca/gps/students/policies-and-guidelines/parental-leave>
- Leave of Absence and Vacation Policy:
<https://www.mcgill.ca/gps/students/registration/progress/leave-vacation>

5) Know policies relevant to graduate studies well enough to advise supervisees. If unsure, ask for clarification.

Resources:

- [Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies](#)
- [Secretariat](#)
- A Graduate Program Director or Department Chair