
Letter of Understanding for Graduate Students and Supervisors

The role of graduate students, supervisors and supervisory committees, as well as the relationship between students and their supervisors, are key components affecting the success of research-stream students in their programs. Since conflicts and tension can arise in situations where expectations, roles, and responsibilities are unclear or mismatched, it is helpful for parties to develop a written understanding on such issues. This letter of understanding provides a basis for sharing views of the responsibilities and expectations of graduate students and supervisors, as well as the advisory committees during the graduate training. In addition, in the last sections, there is space to enter lab-specific details. **The last two pages must be completed and signed by the student and supervisor, and a copy sent to the Division of Experimental medicine where it will be kept in the student's file.**

ROLES & RESPONSIBILITIES

In this document, the **student** is the main party responsible for the progress of their study, which includes performance in related activities, such as thesis submission, all of which lead to their degree. The student should also demonstrate a deep interest in the selected area of research and a strong commitment in pursuing his/her study. The **supervisor** includes principal investigators with MD and/or PhD degrees.

Roles and responsibilities for students and supervisors, including the McGill Expectations for Supervision shared below, are assigned by the Division of Experimental Medicine, Department of Medicine, and Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies (GPS) at McGill University.

Academic and Research Progress

It is the student's responsibility to:

- Develop the necessary skills and learning approaches suitable for an advanced degree;
- Choose courses, which have been approved by the Division, in consultation with his/her supervisor, academic advisor, and (if necessary) the advisory committee (consult the Division in case of doubt);
- Exhibit independent judgment, academic rigor, and intellectual honesty;
- Spend the required number of hours carrying out research activities, course work and/or thesis preparation within the time-frame specified by the University: MSc maximum 3 years, PhD maximum 7 years;
- Be available to achieve the work required for completion of his/her degree;
- Give due consideration to workload and exercise care in the performance of the work assigned. For courses, the failure policy of GPS requires that a student withdraw from the

University upon a second failing grade (<B- or <65%), including supplemental exams, in any course(s) required for the Program;

- Submit material in a timely manner for evaluation by their supervisor or the advisory committee to receive adequate assessment;
- Define, with the assistance of the supervisor and members of the advisory committee, a yearly plan consistent with the progress and objectives of the research. If need arises, the advisory committee can meet more frequently than on an annual basis. Having two unsatisfactory research progress reports, not necessarily consecutive, is grounds for dismissal;
- Adhere to all deadlines and policies regarding registration, meeting milestones of the program, thesis submission, and if necessary, withdrawal.

It is the supervisor's responsibility to:

- Ensure that the student's master's or doctoral thesis project is manageable with respect to the educational program objectives and the time allocated for the completion of the program;
- Ensure that the student's project has an appropriate hypothesis/question and achievable goals;
- Assist the student in developing his/her research interests and help the student modify the program when unforeseeable problems arise;
- Provide appropriate mentorship and guidance in all phases of student training;
- Determine, in agreement with the student, the composition of the advisory committee;
- Provide the student with suitable material and technical resources and work space;
- Provide supervision in a way that leaves the student with room for autonomy (especially for doctoral students);
- Encourage the student to attend and present their findings at scientific meetings as often as possible;
- Provide constructive as well as timely feedback to thesis drafts and other documents submitted by the student in accordance with an agreed-upon schedule;
- Be open, honest and fair with the student when academic performance is not meeting expectations;
- With the advisory committee and the student, establish a yearly renewed or revised collaboration/study plan (or more frequently if the need arises);
- Assist in the selection of thesis reviewer(s).

It is the Division's responsibility to:

- Assign an academic advisor for each graduate student;
- Ensure that the supervisor adequately performs his/her mentoring duties;

- Help students and supervisors solve issues that they, the academic advisor, or the advisory committee are not able to solve.
- Help the student find a new supervisor in the event that this becomes necessary.

Communication

It is the student's responsibility to:

- Meet regularly with his/her supervisor to report on research progress;
- Hold face-to-face meetings with the advisory committee at least once per year and provide a progress report and research plan to the committee at least one week in advance of meetings;
- Participate in the Experimental Medicine Graduate Student Society annual conferences, departmental meetings, seminars and workshops regularly;
- Monitor and use his/her official McGill email address for official correspondence related to the student's program of study and as a student at McGill. Regularly access and read the University regulations and resources web pages: https://www.mcgill.ca/study/2018-2019/university_regulations_and_resources. Consult official University documents and communicate with administrators in home program (e.g. IDIGH, Meakins-Christie Laboratories);
- Keep in touch with his/her supervisor and administrators in home program. Provide supervisor and home program administrators with permanent and current contact information. Advise supervisor of any absences.

It is the supervisor's responsibility to:

- Meet regularly with the student to provide guidance, assess progress and assist the student in the goal of completing the program on time;
- Meet with the student to discuss specific provisions related to their course of study, including intellectual property and financial support;
- Respond in a constructive and timely manner with comments/revisions to drafts of applications, reports or research presentations;
- Ensure that the student is aware of relevant policies and procedures for the conduct of research;
- Assist the student in the presentation of their work as it progresses, in accordance with pre-set program parameters;
- Encourage the student to participate in departmental activities related to their training;
- Attend and participate as much as possible to EGSS annual conferences

It is the Division's responsibility to:

- Make available through appropriate media (webpage, e-mail), clear information about program requirements, regulations and procedures, information about the faculty and staff responsible for the program, and names of faculty members and research areas;
- Ensure that approved advisory committees are established by the appropriate deadlines;
- Ensure that the student's advisory committee meets at least once a year with the student, that this meeting is substantive, and that a written report of this meeting, containing sufficiently useful details, is given to the student and filed officially.

Professional and Interpersonal Conduct

It is the student's responsibility to:

- Be receptive to any advice or suggestions given by the supervisor or other faculty member involved in their graduate training;
- Interact with graduate and undergraduate students, staff and faculty in a professional and mature manner;
- Seek assistance from the supervisor, especially when making important decisions about the course of study or while looking to define or redirect thesis project;
- Advise the supervisor, in a timely manner, of any issues arising throughout the course of their program (e.g. difficulties of integration, learning or financial issues, selection of courses, availability of the supervisor, absence or delay in feedback material concerning work of the student or any other difficulty related to the supervision framework);
- Advise the supervisor and the Division of Experimental Medicine, in a timely manner, of any foreseen prolonged absence; negotiate the amount of time and timing of holidays according to McGill rules;
- Abide by policies and rules and regulations in effect at the university (<https://www.mcgill.ca/gps/students>).

It is the supervisor's responsibility to:

- Monitor the accuracy, validity, and integrity of student's progress;
- Establish a professional working relationship to guide the student in his/her approach to research;
- Guide the student in learning to work independently and as a member of a team;
- Implement a plan of action to help student overcome unforeseen difficulties;
- Advise student concerning the preparation and submission of the thesis, and drafting of scientific papers;

- Maintain good professional and personal relationships with trainees in the research group and treat all members of the laboratory (and their work) with verbal and intellectual respect;
- Manage conflicts in the lab quickly and professionally with guidance from the Division, if necessary;
- Avoid personal or business relationships that may constitute a conflict of interest;
- Give credit in an appropriate manner to graduate student contributions to scholarly activity, whether presented at professional meetings or through publications;
- Make arrangements to ensure the continuity of supervision during leaves or extended periods of absence;
- Participate in activities to improve teaching, supervisory and research skills throughout career. Within the context of the role as supervisor, a professor's primary task is to guide and inspire his or her students to reach their scholarly/scientific potential. Limitations on supervisory privileges may be imposed on supervisors who demonstrate a pattern of problems in their relationships with Experimental Medicine graduate students.

It is the Division's responsibility to:

- Provide mechanisms to help resolve problems that may arise between graduate students, supervisors, and/or members of the advisory committee.

Funding Considerations

It is the rule of the Division of Experimental Medicine that every graduate student must be paid an adequate stipend. Graduate student support may come from a variety of sources such as scholarships from internal and external agencies as well as research funds acquired by the supervisor. Regardless of the funding source, the supervisor has to guarantee the stipend.

The *Letter of Understanding* should outline the level of support and the period during which financial assistance is provided. The stipend schedule should also be defined. Refer to the Division website for appropriate guidelines (<https://www.mcgill.ca/expmed/graduate-studies/fundingawards>).

It is the student's responsibility to:

- Apply for scholarships, travel awards or other types of awards that are appropriate to his/her program of study.

It is the supervisor's responsibility to:

- Provide consultation about scholarship and bursary applications in advance in order to optimize the student's chances of success.

Safety and Ethics

Different programs have various safety course requirements and training needed.

It is the student's responsibility to:

- Comply with Policies and Regulations on Safety and on Ethical Conduct of Research. Understand what constitutes plagiarism, misconduct and cheating;
- Complete the required safety courses (e.g. Workplace Hazardous Materials Information System (WHMIS); the New Employee Health and Safety Orientation; and Laboratory and Environmental Waste Management Safety training) when applicable;
- Pass the appropriate courses on animal use in research (if applicable);
- Be aware of emergency procedures in your workplace.

It is the supervisor's responsibility to:

- Ensure that all ethics certifications and training are obtained, and appropriate safety protocols are followed if the student works with animals and/or human subjects or tissues, radioactive or biohazardous material, lasers or other hazards.
- Assist the student in selecting workshop(s) and course(s) required for his/her program;
- Make every reasonable effort to ensure that the student's research environment is safe and adequately supported.

Laboratory Etiquette and Computer Use

It is the student's responsibility to:

- Keep his/her work and desk space tidy, respect the space of others, and participate in periodic laboratory cleanup;
- Understand that space and equipment are shared, and that care must be exercised and problems reported as they arise;
- Refrain from borrowing supplies of others and removing items from the laboratory without permission;
- Maintain good professional and personal relationships within the research group and treat all members of the laboratory (and their work) with verbal and intellectual respect;
- Maintain daily records of laboratory notes, including printed records of primary data. Use his/her data as the basis for meetings;
- Leave laboratory books and primary data with the supervisor (or if signing out, use a pre-determined process);

- Use laboratory computers for research purposes only (e.g. work-related email, data analysis, literature searches and other forms of scientific communication).
- Back up data appropriately.

It is the supervisor's responsibility to:

- Provide and discuss a proper data backup procedure.

Publications and Intellectual Property

Individual institutions may have varying policies and procedures regarding publications and intellectual property. As such, please review the following information as it pertains to the Division of Experimental Medicine. Students and supervisors are encouraged to enter into an agreement regarding intellectual property early in the program to determine how these issues will be addressed, should they arise. Refer to the policies at your institution.

It is both the student and supervisor's responsibility to:

- Publish research results in reputable, externally-refereed journals, thereby achieving the goals of creating new knowledge and reporting it to the appropriate community, recognizing that all data may not be publishable in peer-reviewed journals;
- Determine an authorship process for shared and non-shared authorship and identify the importance of first authorship for the student;
- Aim for timely completion and publication of manuscripts before completion of the program to facilitate preparation of thesis;
- Publish the findings from the research. Agree on the distribution of intellectual property if research results will be protected;
- Maintain appropriate confidentiality concerning research activities, in accordance with existing practices and policies of the discipline.

Professional Development

It is both the student and supervisor's responsibility to:

- Work together to find opportunities for students to attend suitable conferences and present research findings and to seek funding sources for associated travel costs.

It is the supervisor's responsibility to:

- Encourage participation in non-academic programs for professional development, such as effective writing courses, teaching training programs, conflict resolution and workshops on research grants.

It is the Division's responsibility to:

- Inform students of workshops and presentations that will support professional skills' development.

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 Student Accessibility & Achievement (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

To be completed by student and supervisor:

Detailed information on student: name, ID, start date, program, e-mail address, etc.

Detailed information on supervisor: name, e-mail address, office and lab addresses, etc.

Detailed information on co-supervisor (if applicable): name, e-mail address, office and lab

Financial Commitment: The current minimum stipend is listed on the Experimental Medicine Website. Researchers must guarantee that each student under his/her supervision receives at least the specified minimum stipend, through any combination of internal/external awards and/or payment from research funds.

Stipend guaranteed by supervisor: \$

Provide a short description of the research project that will be undertaken by this student:

Expectations re the Supervisor's Research Environment:

Specify: Operational expectations, including working hours and working days, frequency of student-supervisor meetings, group meetings, reports, record keeping, contribution to general duties, assistance from and to other personnel/students.

Role of the co-supervisor (if applicable):

Expected attendance at journal clubs, seminars, etc, aside from official requirements of the Graduate Program:

Policies on authorship (within the norms of the discipline and McGill’s Policy on Research Ethics):

Other additional important information not specified in the LOU):

Double Program Students (M.Sc./Medical Residency or Fellowship – PGME/CIP): Complete the sections on the last page of this document.

I have read, understand and agree with the above content:

Student Name

Student Signature

Date

Supervisor Name

Supervisor Signature

Date

Co-supervisor Name

Co-supervisor Signature

Date

EXMD Division Name

Division Signature

Date

Submitting this agreement attests to:

1. Compliance with University Regulations and Guidelines Governing Graduate Students and Supervisors.
2. Compliance with Policies and Procedures on Ethical Conduct of Research.
3. Commitment to Regular Performance Review and Completion of Progress Reports in compliance with the policies of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies.
4. Compliance with the Policies of the Program in Experimental Medicine, including funding, academic requirements, and milestones.

Double Program Students and their Supervisors Must Complete this Section (M.S.c/Ph.D & Medical Residency or Fellowship ONLY)

Provide the details of the Postgraduate Medical Training to be undertaken by the student:

Provide a description of the graduate research project to be undertaken by the student:

Note: Research conducted prior to starting the M.Sc. or Ph.D. does not count toward the EXMD graduate degree and should not be included in the thesis. The final thesis must consist of original research conducted by the student. Writing review articles, presenting case reports or data generated by others does not constitute original research and is not acceptable for a thesis

Time Dedicated to Graduate Research

Specify: Operational expectations, including working hours and days, percentage of time dedicated to each program, and frequency of student-supervisor meetings.

I have read, understand and agree with the above content:

Student name

Student signature

Date

Supervisor name

Supervisor signature

Date

Co-supervisor name (if applicable)

Co-supervisor signature

Date

EXMD Division name

Division signature

Date