Supervision Letter of Understanding
Overview and Guidelines
Faculty of Science – Fall 2020

Introduction

A Supervision Letter of Understanding is now required by Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies (GPS) for all graduate students admitted to thesis[1] programs as of Fall 2017. This requirement is based on the premise that defining mutual expectations between a supervisor and graduate student supervisee plays an essential role in ensuring the student's success. The letter does not replace or supersede official McGill University policies and procedures and is not intended to be legally binding.

Format: a conversation, not a contract.

The format of the letter itself is flexible, but it should be prepared in the context of an in-person conversation between the graduate student and supervisor, rather than presented to the student as a completed "form letter" type document to sign.

The rationale behind this format is that an in-person conversation will better facilitate mutual understanding, and will help establish and maintain consistent open lines of communication that will help avoid/resolve future problems. And since supervisors are presumably already having such conversations with their students, using this conversation as a platform to generate the letter should not add considerable extra work. Additional guidance can be found on the GPS web site: https://www.mcgill.ca/gradsupervision/supervisees/discussing-expectations

Instructions[2]

1. The student and supervisor should review the list (below) of general points and possible discussion topics. The list is long, but is meant to make it easier to think of topics that are relevant to discuss.

2. Supervisors may choose to prepare a standard template, but such a document should not replace an in-person orientation conversation and is not a contract.

3. At the meeting, discuss each point to arrive at a mutual understanding, taking notes on important points as necessary. These notes can be submitted as part of the resulting letter.

4. To generate the letter, the student can write a summary of the main points of the meeting, attaching any meeting notes or other written document. The supervisor should review the student summary, and both student and supervisor should sign the compiled document.

5. The completed letter should be uploaded to myProgress by the student, ideally within 12 weeks of the start of their program.

---

[1] GPS requires Supervisory Letters of Understanding for all PhD students admitted as of Fall 2017. The Faculty of Science recommends that these letters be completed for Master's students as well, to ensure that this foundational orientation information is provided in an equivalent manner to all graduate students in the research group.
[2] Questions, concerns or feedback can be directed to gradstudies.science@mcgill.ca.

Part 1 | Mandatory: General points to discuss

In general, both supervisors and graduate supervisees should:

- Stay informed about program requirements and deadlines, and relevant University policies and procedures.
- Organize and schedule an in-person meeting with the student's entire advisory committee at least once annually.
- Understand the meaning of [conflict of interest](#) and disclose and discuss any potential conflicts (actual or perceived) that may arise, so that they can be appropriately managed.
- Demonstrate appropriate professional judgment, collegial behavior, integrity and academic rigor and integrity at all times.
- Strive to maintain an environment of collegiality, respect and inclusion across all members of the research group.
- Strive to address conflict in a timely, honest, respectful and professional manner.

Part 2 | Ideas for additional possible discussion topics

With the above responsibilities in mind, the following are examples of topics that can be covered in the conversation.

1. How will we interact? Will we have regularly scheduled meetings and, if so, how often? How formal will these be? Can we also meet spontaneously on a drop-in basis?
2. What is the preferred mode of communication between the student and supervisor? Which queries/emails/letters sent out the by student does the supervisor want/need to be copied on?
3. What are the expectations regarding research responsibilities, e.g. hours in lab, lab etiquette, taking on outside work, safety training etc.? Do grad students normally work individually or in teams?
4. How are graduate student research projects determined? Is the proposed work fixed at the outset, or do students often take on side projects as the project evolves?
5. How do the lab and/or research group generally run? Are there lab chores, technical support, periodic group meetings, etc? What conventions should be followed for data collection, lab notebooks, storage, archiving, etc? What are basic policies regarding the lab (e.g. access for non-lab members, bringing food into the lab, taking equipment home)?
6. What are the data sharing policies of the lab or project in which the student is involved?
7. How often do graduate students in your group normally serve as teaching assistants?
8. Do new graduate students normally work closely with a more senior graduate student, who helps with training? Are graduate students normally expected to supervise undergraduate research students?
9. What are the normal expectations for submitting drafts of written work (e.g., submitting chunks or large sections; submitted electronically) and receiving supervisor feedback?
10. What are the normal practices for publishing our data? How are issues of authorship and intellectual property handled?
11. How is graduate student funding normally administered? Does the amount vary from semester to semester? Are students expected to apply for external fellowships?
12. What are the expectations regarding vacations?
13. What opportunities exist for professional development (e.g., conferences; teaching; writing courses;

techniques/skills workshops; outreach activities, etc.)?

14. What happens if problems arise, e.g. in research progress, in the student-supervisor relationship, or in personal matters? The Graduate Program Director is an important first contact who can provide guidance, but what other resources are available and how can they be accessed?
15. Other topics (add as many as necessary)

Part 3 | Additional topics to consider – Covid-19 *(from the Faculty of Science new trainee lab access form)*

1. Safety training: How will the new trainee be trained in COVID-19 safety procedures? Will the proposed work allow personnel to maintain the two-metre distance for all work areas? If not, please explain in detail. What other standard lab safety training will be required?

2. Is research training required? If yes, please describe, explaining clearly how physical distancing requirements will be maintained during training. If distancing cannot be maintained at some point, please explain the safety and security measures that you will use.

3. Personnel who are in high-risk groups must not participate in any on-site lab-based activities. Is your new trainee in a high-risk group?

4. Have you talked with the trainee to find out if they are concerned about on-site research? If there are concerns, how have you addressed them?

5. Have you instructed the trainee to read carefully the University guidelines? https://mcgill.ca/coronavirus/resources/campus-research-directives

6. Is the trainee aware of the actions they need to take if they become sick from the virus or come into close contact with someone who is sick? See:

   https://www.mcgill.ca/coronavirus/resources/self-declaration-forms
   https://www.quebec.ca/en/health/health-issues/a-z/2019-coronavirus/self-care-guide-covid-19-revised-edition/

7. If the trainee does not feel comfortable, or over time becomes uncomfortable, working on their project or in their research space, how will you deal with this situation?

8. Describe the steps, duration and consequences of a potential sudden rampdown of the proposed project (i.e., sudden closure of the building, labs, etc.). For undergraduates, is there a backup plan in place to ensure that they will be able to finish their Honours/independent research project? For new graduate students and postdocs, is there a backup plan in place to ensure that they will be able to continue to make progress in their research and/or toward their degree?