

Supervision Letter of Understanding

Faculty of Science

Introduction

The Supervision Letter of Understanding, now required by Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies (GPS) for all graduate students admitted to thesis¹ programs as of Fall 2017, is based on the premise that defining mutual expectations between a supervisor and graduate student supervisee plays an essential role in ensuring the success of the graduate student and their work. It does not replace or supersede official McGill University policies and procedures and is not intended to be legally binding.

The Faculty of Science strongly recommends that this letter 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 document to sign. The rationale behind this format is that conversation will facilitate mutual understanding, and provide an important orientation that launches the student's program. A broader goal is to establish and maintain consistent open lines of communication, which play a critical role in avoiding problems and resolving any that may arise. The letter should be completed according to the instructions below, and uploaded to the student's myProgress file within 12 weeks of the start of their program.

Instructions²

1. Before the meeting: The student and supervisor should each review the list of general points and possible discussion topics and choose those that are relevant. Supervisors may choose to prepare a standard template listing relevant points, bearing in mind that such a document should not replace an in-person orientation conversation and is not a contract.
2. 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.
3. After the meeting:
 - a. The student should write a one-page summary of the main points of the meeting and attach it to any meeting notes or written document. The supervisor should review the student summary, and both student and supervisor should sign the compiled document.
 - b. The student will upload the signed document to their *myProgress* file, within 12 weeks of the start of their program. Requests for extensions can be discussed with the Graduate Program Director.

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 | 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 entire advisory committee at least once annually.
- Disclose and discuss any potential [conflict of interest](#) (actual or perceived) that may arise, so that it 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 | 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 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)