**Letter of Understanding for Graduate Students and Supervisors**

**McGill Department of Linguistics**

**Last updated September 2022**

This Letter of Understanding is designed to promote an open dialogue between graduate students and supervisors to enhance their awareness of the responsibilities and expectations in research supervision in order to achieve a positive and mutually beneficial student-supervisor relationship.

The letter is structured as follows: **Part I** outlines the standard terms about research supervision, and **Part II** includes some suggestions for negotiable terms that should be discussed between the student and the supervisor(s) whenever a new supervisory relationship is started (e.g. when forming an Eval committee). The letter can be revisited and amended as needed. The letter must be signed by the student and the supervisor(s). Upon the signature, the student will be provided with a copy of the letter, which will become part of the student’s official record.

**PART I**

Both students and supervisors have rights and responsibilities that are assigned by the Department of Linguistics and the Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies (GPS) office at McGill University. Supervisors and students **must review** the McGill University Expectations for Graduate Supervision (see below).

1. **Communication**

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| **Students** | **Supervisors** |
| 1. Meet regularly with the supervisor.  2. Monitor and use the official McGill email address for official correspondence  3. Discuss with the supervisor before submitting any conference abstracts, papers, funding applications etc. Give the supervisor enough time to read and revise drafts of these submissions (discuss with supervisor how much time is needed).  4. Regularly access and read[the University regulations and resources web pages](https://www.mcgill.ca/study/university_regulations_and_resources).  5. Provide supervisor, GPD and administrators with permanent and current contact information. Advise supervisor of any absences.  6. Reach out to the GPD early in case of problems or conflicts within the supervisory relationship. | 1. Meet regularly with the student to provide guidance, assess progress and assist the student in the goal of completing the program on time.  2. Meet with the student to discuss specific issues including intellectual property and financial support.  3. Respond in a constructive and timely manner with comments/ revisions to drafts of applications, abstracts, or research presentations.  4. Reach out to the GPD early in case of problems or conflicts within the supervisory relationship. |

**2. Academic and Research Progress**

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| **Students** | **Supervisors** |
| 1. Maintain awareness of and adhere to all policies, procedures and deadlines of the study program as outlined in the [McGill GPS](https://mcgill.ca/gps/students) and [Linguistics PhD or MA guidelines](https://www.mcgill.ca/linguistics/graduate/graduate-student-handbook).  2. Take ownership of research projects and primary responsibility for moving them forward including seeking out resources and advising when needed.  3. Develop the necessary technical and professional skills and learning approaches for completion of the program.  4. Work diligently to meet the milestones of the program.  5. Choose courses that have been approved by the department, in consultation with the supervisor and committee.  6. Submit material in a timely manner for evaluation by the supervisor or the advisory committee to receive adequate assessment.  7. Attend classes you are registered for and inform the instructor if you will be missing a class.  8. Attend all departmental colloquia.  9. Attend departmental reading groups, lab meetings, and other events (specifics to be worked out with supervisor). | 1. Provide appropriate mentorship and guidance in all phases of the study program as outlined in the [McGill GPS](https://mcgill.ca/gps/students) and [Linguistics PhD or MA guidelines](https://www.mcgill.ca/linguistics/graduate/graduate-student-handbook).  2. Provide supervision in a way that leaves the student room for autonomy, especially for doctoral students.  3. Be open, honest and fair with the student when academic performance is not meeting expectations, in order to identify potential problems and find a solution.  4. Ensure that the project (e.g. thesis or Eval) is manageable with respect to the program objectives and timeline.  5. Assist the student in developing research interests and help the student modify the program when unforeseeable problems arise.  6. Provide constructive and timely feedback to thesis drafts and other documents submitted by the student in accordance with an agreed-upon schedule. |

**3. Professional and Interpersonal Conduct**

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| **Students** | **Supervisors** |
| 1. Familiarize yourself with the rules laid out in the Department’s Graduate Student Handbook.  2. Explicitly discuss with supervisor expectations and policies concerning authorship of publications (including conference presentations) and issues surrounding copyright and ownership of intellectual property where applicable.  3. Identify all funding sources you may be eligible for and discuss these opportunities with your supervisor(s) well ahead of the application deadline.  4. Apply for scholarships, travel awards or other types of awards that are appropriate to the study program, as discussed with the supervisor.  5. Departmental funding packages are provided in order for students to focus full-time on their training and research. Accordingly, taking on external employment is normally inconsistent with receiving Departmental funding, and requires approval by the Department. If you are considering taking on employment outside the program, discuss this with the supervisor in advance.  6. While considering important decisions, e.g., about the course of study and to define or redirect the thesis project, consult and discuss details with the supervisor well before a decision is (or needs to be) made.  7. If issues arise throughout the program that may impact your progress, such as challenges of integration, learning challenges, funding situation, selection of courses, any difficulty related to the supervision framework and any foreseen prolonged absence, discuss with the supervisor and/or GPD in a timely manner. | 1. Explicitly discuss with student expectations and policies concerning authorship of publications (including conference presentations) and issues surrounding copyright and ownership of intellectual property where applicable.  2. Guide the student in learning to work independently and as a member of a team.  3. Give credit in an appropriate manner to student contributions to scholarly activity, whether presented at professional meetings or through publications.  4. Provide advice to the student on completing applications for external funding and awards.  5. Implement a plan of action to help the student overcome unforeseen difficulties.  6. Maintain good professional and personal relationships with students in the research group and treat all members of the group (and their work) with verbal and intellectual respect.  7. Make arrangements to ensure the continuity of supervision during leaves or extended periods of absence. |

**4. Safety and Ethics**

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| **Students** | **Supervisors** |
| 1. Uphold the academic integrity of the University. Understand what constitutes plagiarism, misconduct and cheating.  2. Comply with all policies on research ethics, confidentiality and procedures governing use of human or animal subjects, including lab-internal standards.  3. Be aware of emergency procedures in the workplace. | 1. Ensure that the student is informed of the best practices for the responsible conduct of research, including lab-specific standards.  2. Ensure that all ethics certifications and training are obtained, and appropriate safety protocols are followed.  3. Make every reasonable effort to ensure that the student’s research environment is safe and adequately supported. |

**PART II**

The following points aim to provide an (incomplete) list of suggested topics for discussion and negotiation between the student and the supervisor(s) to discuss and clarify advisor-specific expectations. It is expected that you will revisit and revise Part II periodically and that this may depend on your research progress.

**Expectations regarding the Supervisor’s Research Environment**

**Operational Expectations:** working hours, frequency of student-supervisor meetings, preferred communication methods/ frequency, frequency of lab/group meetings, data storage and back-up, assistance from and to other personnel / students.

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| [edit as needed]  Expected working hours/hours per week:  Expected amount of vacation time:  When should the student/supervisor be in the office/lab?:  Frequency of meetings:  Preferred communication methods:  How quickly should the student/supervisor respond to email/direct message etc.?:  How much time is expected to make comments on drafts with deadlines:  Supervisor needs at least \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ for an abstract.  … at least \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ for a funding application.  … at least \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ for \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.  Student should expect comments for drafts without deadlines :  No more than \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ for an evaluation paper  … \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ for a manuscript for publication  … \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ for a thesis chapter |

**Academic Expectations:** course selection and course load, co-authorship and author order on abstracts or manuscripts, number of conference presentations and manuscript publications, details on data collection (e.g., location(s), funding etc.), attendance at academic activities aside from official requirements of the Graduate Program (e.g. reading groups, colloquia etc.)

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| [edit as needed]  Courses to take beyond required ones:  Shared goals for presentations:  Shared goals for publications:  Funding for data collection:  Expectations on (co)-authorship: |

**Co-Supervisor Expectations (if applicable):** Scheme and roles of co-supervision.

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**I have read and understand the above content.**

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| Trainee Name | Supervisor Name |
| Sign | Sign |
| Date | Date |
| Co-Supervisor Name (if applicable) | Co-Supervisor Name (if applicable) |
| Sign | Sign |
| Date | Date |
| Graduate Program Director |
| Sign |

Date

**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](https://www.mcgill.ca/secretariat/files/secretariat/employment_of_tenure_track_and_tenured_academic_staff_regs_relating_to.pdf), henceforth referred to as “the Regulations”.

In order to supervise graduate students and postdocs, faculty must complete an [orientation](https://www.mcgill.ca/gradsupervision/supervisors/training-supervisors).

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

Policy Resources:

* [Policy on Harassment and Discrimination](https://www.mcgill.ca/omr/harassment-discrimination-0)
* [Policy against Sexual Violence](https://www.mcgill.ca/omr/sexual-violence-0)   
  1. If a supervisor observes behaviour that might constitute sexual violence, harassment, or discrimination, **they must consult the** [**Office for Mediation and Reporting**](https://www.mcgill.ca/omr/) **or the** [**Office of the Dean of Students**](https://www.mcgill.ca/deanofstudents/) **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.
  1. 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:](https://www.mcgill.ca/students/srr/personalrights/dignity)
* “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](https://www.mcgill.ca/secretariat/files/secretariat/rights-of-students-with-disabilities-policy-concerning-the_1.pdf) Concerning the Rights of Students with Disabilities
* [Policy on Holy Days](https://www.mcgill.ca/importantdates/holy-days-0/policy-holy-days)   
  1. 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 supervises’ 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.
  2. **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](https://www.mcgill.ca/students/srr/personalrights/dignity) 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](https://www.mcgill.ca/deanofstudents/staff/worrisome-behaviour), including dangerous, threatening, disruptive, or uncharacteristic behaviour. See the [Red File](https://www.mcgill.ca/deanofstudents/staff/helpingstudents) for guidance.
  1. **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.
  2. 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.

1. **Be present for and accountable to supervisees by maintaining clear communication channels.**
2. Supervisors should meet regularly with supervisees, honouring the schedules agreed to in Letters of Understanding.
3. 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.

1. 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.

1. **Provide supervisees with regular, timely feedback that clearly indicates how to meet their program requirements for graduation.**
   1. 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.
   2. 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.

1. **Respect their limits in supporting supervisee wellbeing.**
   1. 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](https://www.mcgill.ca/wellness-hub/hub-clinical-services/hub-clinicians/local-wellness-advisors) connects students with help from trained clinicians.

Resource:

* [Tips for talking to a student in difficulty](https://www.mcgill.ca/deanofstudents/staff/helpingstudents)   
  1. **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.).
  2. **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>

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

Resources:

* [Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies](https://www.mcgill.ca/gps/students/policies-and-guidelines)
* [Secretariat](https://www.mcgill.ca/secretariat/policies-and-regulations)
* A Graduate Program Director or Department Chair