

Supervising Research Students

Every experienced supervisor remembers the moment a student stopped needing them quite so much — the moment the student walked into a meeting and said what they were going to do, rather than asking what they should do. That shift from dependence to autonomy is the actual goal of supervision, and it rarely happens by accident. It's the product of deliberate, structured leadership.

What supervision is for

A doctoral or Master's programme isn't primarily a test of raw brilliance — it's proof of mastery of the skills needed to work independently. Supervision is the process of taking a capable student and, within a fixed timeframe, helping them become a colleague, through a combination of structured challenge and support.

That reframes the role. It isn't task management, and it isn't friendship — warmth and support matter, but blurring that line makes it harder to challenge someone's work when it needs challenging. It's developmental leadership: coaching someone to build their own critical judgement.

The division of responsibility that makes this work is clear on both sides. The supervisor owns academic direction, monitors progress, and safeguards standards. The student owns their preparation, communicates their struggles, and meets agreed milestones. When a student doesn't hold up their side, no amount of extra effort from the supervisor closes that gap alone.

A three-year shift toward independence

This balance of responsibility isn't static — it evolves. In the UK, most doctoral research programmes last 3 or 4 years, a Masters programme might be one or two years long. In year one, a PhD student typically needs high structure and is building literature mastery and research design. By year two, they're moving into data generation, ownership and writing early drafts, requiring less direction but more support through the transition. By year three, they should be operating largely independently, shaping the overall argument of the thesis themselves. Treating a third-year student like a first-year one — or expecting independence from the outset — can be problematic. It's important to really check your supervisory expectations against what the student can offer as the relationship develops.

Supervisory style needs to track this shift. A highly directive approach may suit a talented but inexperienced first-year student, and the same person may need much more autonomy two years later. Neither end of that spectrum is wrong — the question is always which approach fits where the student actually is.

Four practical anchors

Four habits tend to prevent a student feeling lost, particularly in the early months: regular structured meetings, rather than ad hoc drop-ins; written outputs requested early and often, since writing surfaces thinking that conversation alone doesn't; explicit milestone tracking, so both people know where things stand; and regular conversations about career direction and professional identity, not just the research itself.

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Research Meetings: Your Simple Agenda

A simple four-question meeting structure supports all of this:

- 1) What did we agree last time?
- 2) What did you actually do? (And if you changed plans, why?)
- 3) What does this mean for the research? (How does this contribute to learning and progress?)
- 4) What will you do before we next meet?

It's a light structure, but it removes ambiguity and keeps responsibility exactly where it belongs.

And while meetings need to keep research progress on track, also invest time for a personal check-in and sharing information like interesting research papers, calendar dates or plans to be away/unavailable.

That moment when a student stops needing you quite so much is the actual marker of success — the sign that a keen student has become a capable colleague.

Looking at your next scheduled meeting, it's worth asking what shift in your own approach might be needed to help that happen.

**This is one of a series of Briefing Notes on managing the realities of research life by Dr Margaret Collins.
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