

Supervisor Judgement Calls

The technical problems in supervision get easier with experience — you know your field, you know the methods. It's the human problems that can multiply. For these you need judgement.

Judgement here isn't something taught in a policy document. It's built through experience and reflection, and through giving a name to tools you likely already use instinctively.

From technical questions to human ones

Early in a supervisory career, the questions tend to be procedural — are these the right protocols, is this methodology sound — and they largely answer themselves through data and literature. Later, the questions shift.

When a researcher's progress slows, is that deep thinking in action or avoidance? When does giving direction tip into micromanagement? Surface behaviour can be misleading, which is why a more structured way of looking beneath it is useful. The four tools below — a pre-flight check, a compass, a dashboard, and a ladder — cover that ground in sequence: ruling out the system, reading the ongoing balance, diagnosing a stall, and choosing how to respond to one.

The pre-flight check: start with the system, not the person

Before diagnosing a failure in a student's capability or motivation, it's worth checking the baseline first: have they actually had the training, induction, and resources the role requires? It's easy to mistake a systemic gap for an individual shortcoming. If someone doesn't know what's expected of them, or lacks the tools to deliver it, the fix is structural, not personal.

The supervisory compass: balancing live tensions

Supervision is a matter of continuous adjustment rather than a single fixed style. Every decision sits somewhere between three points on this compass — 1) offering more structure through plans, milestones, and accountability; 2) offering encouragement, challenge, or a sense of vision to build confidence; or 3) stepping back to allow independence as they learn to make their own decisions.

That means constantly weighing instruction against independence, support against challenge, and immediate progress against longer-term learning. Feeling friction here is normal — these elements genuinely pull in different directions, and holding that tension well is the skill itself.

The supervisory dashboard: diagnosing what's actually going on

When progress stalls, the same surface behaviour — missed deadlines, going quiet, work not moving — can have very different root causes. It might be an output problem: unclear expectations or weak project planning. It might be a capability gap, a genuine skill shortfall or a crisis of confidence. It might be motivation or wellbeing issue — burnout or personal stress. At times it might be a career-direction issue, a disconnect between the daily grind and where the researcher actually wants to end up or even avoiding progress so as to delay that “Where next?” decision.

Treating a burnout problem as a planning problem, or vice versa, means the intervention misses the actual issue.

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The intervention ladder: choosing how to respond

Once the likely cause is clearer, the response should escalate gradually rather than jump straight to the most serious option. Start with curiosity — “I’ve noticed things have slowed down, what’s getting in the way?” Move to clarifying expectations if needed, then to offering increased support. Only if the issue persists does it become an accountability conversation, and formal action is a last resort, reserved for situations where the researcher has the skills and resources but is choosing not to engage.

Starting at curiosity rather than at a formal conversation usually reveals far more about what’s actually happening, and lets the response match the reality rather than forcing a procedural response onto a human problem.

Why this matters

The quality of the supervisory relationship is one of the strongest predictors we have of whether a student completes, whether a postdoc thrives, and whether they stay in the profession. It shapes real outcomes. Naming these frameworks explicitly — rather than relying on instinct alone — is also what makes it possible to pass on wisdom, not just policy, to newer colleagues.

Looking ahead to your next meeting with a researcher whose progress has stalled: is the compass telling you something about the ongoing balance, where does the dashboard place the root cause, and which rung of the ladder actually fits?

This is one of a series of Briefing Notes on managing the realities of research life by Dr Margaret Collins. Find more inside Research Navigator at MargaretCollins.com.

