

TOOL



IF PROGRESS IS MARGINAL

Introduction:

While completing a dissertation can be an emotional rollercoaster, a supervisory relationship should threaten neither the health of any supervisor, supervised student or other member of the university community, nor their capacity for productive work. This tool focuses on assisting supervisors to recognise when recognising and attending to marginal progress can:

- safeguard health and productivity of that student, of all the members of a supervisory team and other members of the university community
- assist the student to regain the capacity to resume productive work toward completion of candidature.

Any supervisor can encounter a situation, where supervised students:

- appear unable to work productively with the current supervisory team, theoretical framework, or methodology
- appear to have lost (or failed to demonstrate) the required skills, commitment and other capacities necessary for completion of the dissertation
- need feedback and advice regarding the gap between the standards of work they are producing and the agreed measures of satisfactory progress.

The students may have:

- no ability to even identify barriers that need to be reviewed and addressed and identify strategies to resume productive work
- little control over the circumstances (e.g. an illness, financial problems, distressing family circumstances, data collection difficulties or unexpected action by an industry partner) blocking their productivity
- some ability to identify and address their productivity block.

In order to regain their capacity for productive work, some students may need:

- appropriate advice and support from health professionals or other support services on matters such as dealing with normal stress in an acceptable fashion or addressing sudden severe problems relating to their physical and/or mental health



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- formal or informal advice on matters such as intermitting studies, applying for loans for emergency overseas travel to attend a funeral or visit sick relatives, lodging formal complaints
- a different supervisory team, theoretical framework, methodology or set of skills, tools and other resources
- a break from study to acquire required skills and perspectives or to address key financial, personal or family matters.

In raising these issues with students, supervisors need to take care to preserve appropriate interpersonal boundaries and provide assistance that:

- is appropriate to their supervisory role
- demonstrates concern for the health and well-being of all parties
- does not overwhelm the student
- does not take over work that properly belongs to the student, and
- does not leave the student unsupported.

Prompt action to discuss whether the progress made by a student is acceptable or marginal can protect the health, well-being and productivity of students, supervisors or other members of the university community. Allowing a student to drift into a prolonged period of minimal productivity can have far worse consequences for the student, supervisor team and university. A period of prolonged frustration, anxiety and depression may trigger behaviour that threatens the health and safety of the student or others, or expands the need for support from health professionals and other support services.

Following any evidence of marginal progress, the student and the supervisory team need to consider and document a plan to assist the student to resume productive work as quickly as possible. Since supervisors are limited in providing support, any exploration of additional support services for the student should be clearly and formally documented, as it is up to the individual student to determine when and whether to accept personal help offered by the university. The student must, however, be left in no doubt that timely and effective action to resume productive work is required and that continued marginal progress is likely to impact on completion of the dissertation.

Original Source: <http://researchsupervisiontoolkit.com/page/marginal-progress>

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Modified Version Source: <http://www.dissertationsupervision.org/>

