



## SUPERVISOR NON-AVAILABILITY

### Student Perspective 1

I've been meeting with my primary supervisor about once per month. I guess I had in my mind this idea that we would have like maybe weekly supervision and that way we'd meet and if I didn't have anything necessarily to bring to the supervision session there would be something through the experience of my supervisor that we would be able to talk about. Maybe talking about what I haven't done and putting in place strategies to get that done. I definitely felt I would've liked a bit more support throughout the process.

Sometimes I felt like I was just being squeezed in or I might be there and my supervisor might have come a little bit late and he might have snuck off a little bit early. I appreciated that he was really busy, but experience with some of the other staff members was that, when I was in their office that was my time. I never quite felt like that with my supervisor because there was always things going on with phone ringing, e-mails buzzing, I always felt like I didn't have his full attention. It's very frustrating as well because I don't hear back from my supervisor often or at all. I send emails and I don't get replies, or only selective replies.

I don't think I'm alone in being frustrated about this. I remember talking to other dissertation students and some of them were having such a hard time getting in contact with their supervisors. They were stressed out because they had questions about the dissertation and they'd sent emails and their supervisors wouldn't email them back and they felt like they were stuck.

We are not the priority in the supervisor's academic life and they are really busy people with a lot to do, so we don't want to hassle them. I can't, I guess, expect to monopolise my supervisor's time. I knew my supervisor was very busy so I was always sort of a little bit conscious that I was taking up his precious time.





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### Student Perspective 2

Mostly, I'm happy with the supervision I receive. But I do find it frustrating when my supervisor goes away. Usually we communicate by email when she's away. Sometimes she forgets to tell me she's going away and I only find out when I email her and she tells me she is at a conference or something. You can't gauge – it's not like meeting face-to-face with your supervisor -so I don't know if the email is meant to mean – "I'm at these conferences. Don't bother me," or "I'm at these conferences and I just haven't bothered to say it, but don't worry because now I have some time. I'm gonna focus on you". It's the confusion in the medium of communication. I guess how I interpret it depends on how stressed I am. It's when you're stressed that you're gonna interpret situations and things a lot differently. It would have been nice if she could maybe just have made a sort of statement like, "I don't want you to feel like I'm prioritising these things over you. Like I know you have needs and expectations." Just a brief sort of, I guess, reassurance statement like that.

I think if you take on students, that's a responsibility you have to uphold. If you're going away, you need to make arrangements: "I'm going away. You need to contact this person while I'm away.", or some sort of plan. Last time my supervisor went away she did arrange a temporary supervisor for me, but it seemed to be an 'on paper' arrangement only. I think the issue with that on paper aspect was that I thought if I went to this on-paper supervisor, they wouldn't have any clue where I was at with the project or what I was doing. So I feel like the way to alleviate that would be to have at least initial meetings with both supervisors present. But I think that again speaks to the supervisor themselves. I think they should, from the outset, be like, "I'm not gonna be around that much. But for the first few meetings, we're gonna be meeting with such and such. And then if I'm away and you need to talk to them, you can".

I know I'm not the only student that feels like this. Like friends of mine last year had so much trouble with their supervisors going away in conferences and stuff and then they'd email them and they wouldn't hear back for two weeks and then they'd be like, "I don't know what the hell I'm doing now".

I also found myself, I guess, resenting it from the ideal supervising kind of angle because obviously supervisors know what they're getting into when they supervise honours students, or at least you'd hope they would. And I guess – it sounds harsh saying it now, but I guess I found myself thinking if you wanna supervise an honours student, maybe don't; maybe that's not for you, if you're the high-flying, conference-attending type, you know.





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### Coordinator Perspective

Common complaints I receive from students are “My supervisor doesn’t meet with me regularly”, “My supervisor is not providing me with enough information”, “My supervisor’s not here, and I don’t know what I’m doing”, “My supervisor’s not on campus, and not returning emails” and that sort of thing. If the supervisor expects a lot but does not provide a lot, that’s where you have the complaints. “He’s away. He’s not seeing me. He’s not giving feedback, and he wants me to do this and that.”

I’ve had good students, not needy students, in my office in tears, because they have been unable to contact the supervisor because the supervisor just isn’t ever on campus, and doesn’t return emails. How is that student supposed to get the supervision they need and feel supported if they’re not having any contact at all? I have to say that I can corroborate what the students are saying as far as that goes, because I’ve been trying to contact some supervisors for dissertation issues, one reason or another, and some just don’t respond.

I’ve had words to supervisors: “just FYI so and so has been looking for you and they were really upset because they haven’t been able to contact you. They’ve been sending emails for three weeks, and you haven’t responded”, and I invariably get a very aggressive, defensive sort of response about it. I’m just, “Look. Don’t shoot the messenger. I’m just telling you that I’ve had very upset students.”

Students are reluctant to complain to members of staff for fear having to pay the price for that, because it’s interpreted as criticism, which in fact it is, and they don’t want there to be any comeback from the supervisor. They’re worried that their grades might suffer, that sort of thing.

We say to students, if you’ve got an issue with a supervisor, the first port of call is with the supervisor. You need to go and have a word with your supervisor and tell them how you feel. Well, they’re intimidated by the supervisors. Why would they do that? It’s just stupid, so a lot of the time, they come to me hoping that I can intervene on their behalf with the supervisor and say





something to the supervisor, but very often it just ends up that I just kind of step in and give them what they need.

