1. Introduction

Students are required to undertake a supervised research project which comprises 50% of the credit point value of the course.

Courses allow students to undertake worthwhile research with a view to developing their research skills through the preparation of a dissertation, where this includes the output of research in the form of a dissertation or the equivalent such as a composition, performance, exhibition or creative or other approved work (see University Policy on Courses: Coursework Dissertation).

The role of the course coordinator is to advise, guide and provide constructive feedback to the student throughout the duration of the project, as well as to encourage, support and mentor the student. An effective working relationship between a student and the supervisor is essential to the development and completion of a good dissertation. Students and supervisors have clear roles and responsibilities in establishing and maintaining this working relationship.

This best practice guide is intended to inform students and supervisors regarding the process of selecting a supervisor and topic, working with a supervisor, and the responsibilities of supervisors and students. Although the guide has application across the University, students need to be aware that there are important differences between disciplines in these processes and responsibilities, which primarily stem from the nature of the research being undertaken in the various disciplines. As a result, this guide is not overly prescriptive and some parts of the guide may not apply to all disciplines.

Although finding a topic is normally substantially the responsibility of the student, students are advised to consult the Course Coordinator if they are experiencing difficulty
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in identifying a suitable topic. Disciplines have considerable expertise and experience in assisting students in this important task.

The availability a student’s preferred research topic and their nominated supervisor is subject to the availability of resources (funding and physical resources) and staffing (expert supervision).

2. Selecting a supervisor and a research topic

The establishment of the student-supervisor(s) team and selection of the topic of the research project vary across disciplines, but ultimately these tasks need to be managed as an active collaboration between the student and the supervisor, and with the involvement of the Course Coordinator.

Some disciplines provide prospective students with a list of projects which are to be offered in the following year. For example, in the School of Physics, students are expected to attend seminars, meet with research groups and nominate up to three project preferences from the list. The research groups can confirm whether the research project, adequate supervision, and the required resources are available.

However, most disciplines expect that the student will take the initiative in seeking out possible supervisors and topics, and students need to understand the importance of making good decisions at the very earliest stages of their program.

As a first step, it is worthwhile for the student to have a discussion with the Course Coordinator to identify possible areas of interest for a research topic.

Although the remainder of section 2 is primarily directed towards the majority of students who are expected to take the initiative in identifying a research topic and supervisor, some of this information is also relevant to students who are studying in disciplines where prospective students are provided with a list of potential research topics.

2.1 Identifying potential supervisors

Before nominating a potential supervisor or supervisor(s), students are advised to:

- read some literature about conducting research and research in general, if this has not been covered in the student’s course to date;
- familiarise themselves with the research interests of academic staff within their discipline. Note: Information about the research expertise of academic staff can be found on the University’s website;
- talk to a few prospective supervisors about their research interests, possible research topics, their styles of supervision and what they expect of students;
- talk with current and former honours and postgraduate students in the school/discipline or research group, if possible, about their experiences of supervision.
2.2 Identifying a research topic and supervisor

Before selecting a preferred topic, it is advisable for the student to select one or more potential supervisors (See 2.1 Identifying potential supervisors above) and discuss possible constraints on topic choice with the Course Coordinator. These constraints will include the availability of staff (for supervision) and resources (funding and equipment).

The student is advised to then identify some possible topics according to the following criteria:

- The area is of interest to the student and is likely to maintain the student’s enthusiasm for a year-long project.
- The area is of interest to a prospective supervisor.
- The topic is one in which the student can identify questions to be answered or gaps in the current knowledge.
- The project can realistically be completed within the time allocated and resources available.

Students are advised to nominate a supervisor with whom they feel they can work comfortably. However, the final decision as to whether a supervisor can supervise a particular student rests with the school, as it is subject to workloads and other staffing issues. If the nominated supervisor is not able to supervise the research, the school may be able to nominate another supervisor or the student may be required to select another topic.

3. Working with a supervisor

The program of meetings between the student and supervisor will vary depending on the nature of the research project. Some schools will provide more detailed guidance on how meetings are to be arranged, but, in general, a student’s collaboration with the supervisor will progress along the following lines:

- An initial meeting is held to clarify both the student’s and the supervisor’s expectations, to establish methods for regular communication, to discuss a topic in general terms and to organise a framework for and limits on a research project that is appropriate in size and academic demand for a student. In particular, students should discuss and negotiate with their supervisor issues such as:
  - the regularity, timing and format of meetings. (Note: Typically, the meetings will occur at least once a fortnight.)
  - the type and level of assistance that the student would like, and the supervisor is prepared to give, with respect to: choosing a topic and refining the project; planning a schedule; setting goals; finding appropriate literature; collecting the data and information; analysing and interpreting

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1 The section on Working with a Supervisor is largely derived from the University of Melbourne, Language and Learning Skills Unit’s report Honours.
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findings; planning the dissertation; and writing and reviewing the dissertation;
- the appropriate research design, content and presentation for the dissertation;
- a schedule for the research and preparation of the dissertation, including deadlines for key elements of the process; and
- the resources, services and facilities available to students.

- Independent work (for several weeks at a time) occurs on elements of the project. The first of these would normally be a literature review or general introductory piece of writing. This review or initial project development may form part of structured coursework within the particular program, depending on the discipline.

- Regular progress meetings take place where the student can discuss issues and ideas arising from the student’s research and the supervisor will provide feedback on research progress and the review of drafts of written work. Students should submit to their supervisor summaries of their progress, including results, and drafts of written sections of the dissertation in order to facilitate the provision of focussed and helpful discussion. Before meeting with the supervisor students are advised to prepare an agenda for the meeting including issues or problems they may wish to discuss. Students are advised to make notes of the meeting and to send a summary of these to the supervisor following the meeting to ensure that the student and the supervisor agree upon the outcomes.

- Final meetings occur when the student is close to submitting a dissertation. These final meetings should discuss presentation, and minor revisions to the dissertation. Major changes should not be made to the dissertation at this stage. If required, major changes should have been made at an earlier stage.

The structure of the project may be such that the student has a number of direct supervisors. For example, students may work in a laboratory for the first half of the year and then spend an intense period of several months writing up their dissertation. In this situation, students may work closely with a laboratory supervisor who may not be the project supervisor. In such cases it will still be necessary for students to meet their project supervisor regularly (at least monthly) to keep the supervisor informed of their progress. During the writing-up phase, students should submit their work on a chapter-by-chapter basis to ensure that they are progressing in the right direction.

Students should contact their supervisor if there are major difficulties. Generally, supervisors will rely on students to indicate if there are any difficulties. Students should be honest about their progress and should ask for the type of assistance that they need at a particular stage of their research project. This may involve more detailed feedback, advice on methodology, advice about staying on schedule or general issues of support and encouragement.

4. Responsibilities of a supervisor

Supervisors are responsible for providing academic guidance to students and for fostering an environment in which students can maximise their potential. Staff should not agree to
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supervise students unless they have the appropriate research expertise and relevant knowledge and interest in the student’s research topic. The Course Coordinator has an important role in guiding the student.

Prior to the commencement of any project, the supervisor must establish that it is appropriate in scope and character for the course, and is feasible in terms of time, facilities, equipment, and technical and resource requirements. Where concerns remain over the feasibility of the project after discussion between the student and the supervisor, the supervisor will raise these concerns with the Course Coordinator or head of school/discipline or research group.

The role of a supervisor involves:

- working with the student to clarify expectations of the program and the project at the outset;
- discussing with the student, at the outset, issues of research conduct relevant to the project, including the need for appropriate ethics approvals, the management of data, intellectual property and authorship issues, access to and use of restricted materials, academic conduct;
- suggesting ways in which the student can make the most effective use of time;
- recognising their own and the student’s personal strengths and limitations and identifying situations in which a student needs to be referred to colleagues for assistance;
- committing the time necessary to allow for maintaining the close and regular contact with the student (which normally includes weekly or fortnightly meetings) and establishing at the outset the basis on which contact will be made;
- requiring work from the student on a pre-arranged and agreed schedule;
- monitoring the progress of the work in accordance with the agreed schedule;
- discussing the progress against the agreed schedule with the student at regular intervals, and identifying any impediments to maintaining the schedule;
- monitoring the performance of the student relative to the standard required for the course, and ensuring that insufficient progress or work below the generally expected standard is brought to the student’s attention, and, if necessary, to the attention of the Course Coordinator and/or appropriate school or faculty officer;
- providing prompt feedback (within two weeks - the actual time will depend upon the volume of work submitted and the supervisor’s other commitments) on the work submitted by the student, to an agreed schedule;
- when the dissertation is submitted, providing a report on the student’s work outlining the student’s demonstrated levels of independence and initiative.

The supervisor’s role is facilitative and advisory. Supervisors are normally not expected to provide the candidate with a dissertation topic (though suggesting a range of possible topics available within the wider research program of the school/discipline or research group is good practice), tell the student what to do, write the student’s dissertation or remediate failings by the student.
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The supervisor must notify the Honours Co-ordinator if he/she will be away for two weeks or more.

5. Responsibilities of a student

Students have a number of roles and responsibilities that contribute to the overall success of the research project: Students are responsible for their own level of success in the program and must:

- have read sufficiently widely on the subject to be able to place the project in context;
- be thoroughly familiar with the steps involved in the research project;
- prepare proposals, submissions and presentations relating to the research project, as required;
- discuss with the supervisor the type of supervisory assistance they believe will be most useful to them, and keep to an agreed schedule of meetings to ensure regular contact with their supervisor;
- take the initiative in raising problems or difficulties with progress in the research project;
- maintain the progress of the work in accordance with the stages agreed with the supervisor, including the submission of required work in sufficient time to allow for comments and discussion before proceeding to the next stage;
- discuss with the supervisor at regular intervals progress towards, and impediments to, maintaining the agreed timetable;
- maintain a strong commitment to the research project;
- be able to work independently;
- comply with all requirements relating to ethical conduct, data collection, retention and disclosure; intellectual property; privacy; and occupational health and safety procedures;
- comply with all relevant University legislation, including regulations, rules and policies;
- participate in school events including attendance at research seminars; and
- keep the supervisor informed of any difficulties or problems which may impact on the research project.

6. Useful reports and links

Australian National University, Honours Guide, Nov 2010
https://academicskills.anu.edu.au/node/35381

UWA STUDY Smarter Honours Hub – Preparing for Honours: Hints and Tips
http://www.studentservices.uwa.edu.au/ss/learning/online_services/honours_hub