

PROVIDING EFFECTIVE FEEDBACK TO RESEARCH STUDENTS: A GUIDE FOR SUPERVISORS

This short document has been put together to emphasise the importance of effective communication skills when providing feedback to research students. It is also designed to raise awareness of some of the difficulties students face when receiving feedback.

As a reminder, the Graduate School's [Mutual Expectations for the Research Degree Student Supervisor Partnership](#) is designed to facilitate the first meeting between a supervisor and their new student.

This document recommends that supervisors should normally be available to their students for at least one hour per week. It is therefore suggested that this dedicated time is a great opportunity to provide students with feedback. Being mindful of this expectation, supervisors may wish to consider the number of students they supervise so that effective feedback can be provided to all students being supervised.

Positive as well as Constructive Feedback

Students welcome feedback on their progress from supervisors and others.

It is important to let your student(s) know when they are progressing well in addition to providing constructive feedback to help them improve and develop.

Imperial's [Doctoral Proposition](#) states that the College will provide students with a world class research programme "throughout which internationally- acclaimed academics support, inspire and challenge you as you develop into an independent researcher." As well as supporting your students' development, part of your role will be to critique and challenge their research and to ask questions. However, do not underestimate the power of positive feedback in terms of motivating and inspiring.

Power Dynamics

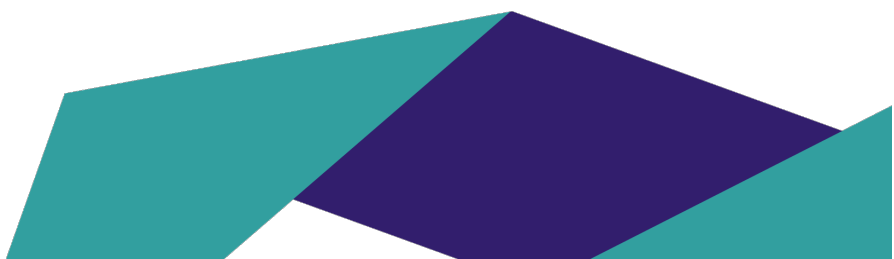
Another important consideration is to have an awareness that students will perceive you to be in a position of power and they will hold you in high regard.

This has all sorts of implication for the effective management of the partnership but in particular if you deliver developmental and constructive feedback poorly, it can be devastating. One of the goals of supervision and feedback should be to reduce the perceived power dynamic within the partnership.

Conflicting Messages

In some cases, students receive conflicting feedback from members of their supervisory team.

Whilst it is perfectly normal for academic staff to challenge each other and to present research arguments in different ways, this can be confusing for students. It is important to acknowledge early on that this situation may arise. It is suggested that meetings (scheduled or ad hoc as required) of the student and the whole supervisory team take place where all parties can share their views and agree a way forward.



Feedback as Dialogue

Feedback should be a two-way process of discussion and debate and should be an active learning process.

Having regular contact with your students should help to facilitate this. A dialogic process can be achieved through introducing more opportunities for self-reflection. [Pendleton's rules](#) are a useful tool which can be used to guide and start feedback conversations. A summary is as follows:

1. Ask the learner what s/he did well
2. Discuss what you think went well, sharing any comments from others, if relevant
3. Ask the learner to say what went less well and what they would do differently in the future
4. Discuss what you think went less well, sharing any comments from others, if relevant

Having regular contact with your students and being able to see their work at various stages means you can take more of an 'ipsative' approach to feedback. Ipsative feedback involves commenting on a student's progress as it relates to their 'personal best' (Hughes, 2011). Ipsative feedback helps learners self-assess and become more self-reliant. It focuses on what the learner needs to do next rather than dwelling on the inadequacies of current performance. Ipsative feedback is thought to be more motivating to students and they are more likely to act on it. Critique should be paired with advice on how to improve. Some steps to giving ipsative feedback are outlined in an article from the Guardian ["Want to help students improve their work? Mark them on their progress"](#) (Hughes, 2014).

Milestones

As well as regular informal feedback to your student(s), [Milestones](#) are an ideal opportunity for you to provide formal feedback to your student(s) following the Early-Stage Assessment (ESA) and Late-Stage Review (LSR).

The ESA and LSR forms provide helpful prompts for supervisors to discuss not only the outcome of the assessment but also other training and development opportunities.

These milestones are also a useful opportunity for both the student and supervisor to seek feedback from an external examiner(s) who can provide a less biased outlook on the research.

Supervisors may wish to have at least some written record of supervision/feedback. If written by the student, this can aid student understanding and help the supervisor find out the level of student's understanding. This can be critically important in cases where problems arise with the student's performance. It is also an invaluable tool for project management, helping to ensure that tasks don't get overlooked. It doesn't need to be formal minutes – a simple email with a few bullet points is enough.



Sources of Support

As a reminder, all Departments should have a pastoral care system in place for research degree students, and this is likely to involve social activities. You are therefore encouraged to attend these events with your students to support the development of a vibrant research community within your department.

For Students

- **Coaching:** As well as the Graduate School's programme of [professional development opportunities](#), the Graduate School offers a [coaching programme](#) designed to support effective professional development and other challenges facing students during the PhD. More information is found [here](#).
- **1-2-1 Support:** The Graduate School also offers 1-2-1 tuition to look at specific aspects of professional development such as presentation skills, assertiveness and building confidence. Please advise your student to contact the tutor of the relevant course or [Head of Pedagogy](#).
- **Centre for Academic English:** [The Centre for Academic English](#) aims to help postgraduate research students to communicate their research as accurately and professionally as possible. The Centre offers a range of courses at all levels as well as one-to-one consultations to respond to language needs related to the PhD. In addition, the Centre aims to enhance students' ability to represent their work in the wider academic community, particularly in relation to publications and conference participation.

For Staff

- **Cornerstone:** The [Cornerstone](#) site brings together information about the training and support available across the College to help Main, Co- and Assistant supervisors best support and guide their Doctoral students. It also provides details on what training and continued professional development is mandatory.
- **Supervisors' Guidebook:** The [online guidebook](#) provides key information to supervisors to support them in their role. There is also a section on providing effective and constructive feedback. You can access the guidebook [here](#).
- **Roles & Responsibilities for the Research Degree Main Supervisor:** You can access the College's roles and responsibilities document for research degree main supervisors [here](#).
- **Centre for Academic English:** [The Centre for Academic English](#) is also available to help academic staff with both academic and social English. You will be given the opportunity to share your knowledge and experience, and expand your professional and social networks, through meeting other academic staff from a diverse range of fields.

References

Hughes, G. (2011). [Towards a personal best: a case for introducing ipsative assessment in higher education \[pdf\]](#), *Studies in Higher Education*, 36(3), pp. 353-367.

Pendleton's rules: <https://www.gp-training.net/feedback/pendletons-rules-feedback/>

