

# THE SUPERVISION SCOOP

The YorkU Graduate Supervision Support Hub Newsletter



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## The Graduate Supervision Support Toolkit Launches

The Faculty of Graduate Studies is pleased to announce the launch of the Graduate Supervision Toolkit, a new digital resource designed to support graduate supervisors, committee members, program administrators and graduate students with resources related to our goal of supporting supervisory relationships to thrive.

At the June 5<sup>th</sup> meeting of Faculty Council, GSSH Manager Tracy Bhoola outlined her vision of the curated collection of practical, equity-informed tools, guides and strategies developed to support graduate faculty and students throughout the supervision journey. As a living resource, the Toolkit will continue to evolve through community engagement and contributions. We invite you to explore the Toolkit and consider how it can support your work in graduate education.

Stay tuned for the release of a YorkU Graduate Supervision Handbook.

## Supervising International Graduate Students

Graduate Studies at York University welcomes students from all over the world, adding to the richness of graduate research and scholarship. When working with an International student, there are added layers requiring supervisor intercultural competence.

Developed following extensive consultation with York International, and reviewed by leading supervisors of International students, the Strong Start to Supervision: An International Student Companion Guide aims to bring awareness to the unique aspects of the International graduate student experience while fostering open dialogue between supervisor and student.

Graduate Studies for International students presents unique challenges and requires both the student's adaptation as well as nimble supervisory skills and proactive approaches in navigating cultural differences through open communication.

As a communication tool, the companion guide can help with the following:

- To clarify roles and programmatic milestones
- To proactively address potential mismatches in expectations and responsibilities
- To encourage regular communication ensuring both parties understand their roles, program expectations, working styles, wellness and communication.

Guidance to supervisors is broken down sequentially, reflecting the International student life cycle, and includes key topics to be aware of, assist with, clarify and guide. Additionally, in consultation with York International, the companion guide includes suggestions for what supervisors can do, ask, and say. When the supervisor understands what International students are managing at various stages of their graduate studies journey, as well as the ways in which diverse cultural differences can lead to misunderstandings related to expectations and other aspects, they are more able to adjust their supervisory style and focus through intercultural competence and support.

The Strong Start to Supervision: An International Student Companion Guide can be reviewed along with the Strong Start to Supervision Checklist at the beginning of the student-supervisor relationship and be revisited periodically to discuss additional items that become relevant, especially during significant changes in circumstances or committee membership. To ensure a smooth relationship, it is recommended that both parties review these documents annually, ideally alongside the annual progress report, to keep expectations aligned.

## **About Conflict of Interest**

### **Understanding ‘arms-length’ as it relates to Internal/External & External Examiners secured for Defences**

In recent years, the Faculty of Graduate Studies (FGS) has made significant updates to thesis and dissertation regulations, from supporting the York University Sustainability Strategy through material ways to incorporating greater guidance on the variety of acceptable formats.

As part of these wide-ranging updates, and in concert with FGS’ work to develop procedures addressing conflicts of interest, additions were incorporated to expand on conflict of interest and arm’s length to guide appropriate decision making.

Our most recent update, related to conflict of interest, incorporates best practices from the university sector, specific to external examiners given their prominence in defences. Primarily, while all situations have specific context and circumstances, sector norms specify that the external examiner must be at arm’s length from both the student and the supervisor. Additionally, an expectation on the frequency of the same external examiner being selected by the program director and/or supervisor is outlined.

In keeping with the Faculty of Graduate Studies' Conflict of Interest Disclosure with Respect to Graduate Student Education, individuals may be involved in a potential conflict of interest in situations where there is an expectation of being arm's length and the individuals are:

1. Family members
2. Currently or previously engaged in a close personal relationship
3. Currently or previously a supervisor or member of a supervisory committee for the current or any other degree
4. Currently or previously a supervisee for the current or any other degree
5. Currently or recently (within the last six years) a close collaborator on a research project and/or publication
6. Currently or previously in a relationship (within the last six years) such that any benefit to the student may also directly benefit the faculty member (financial, academic promotion, etc.)

External Examiners are expected to be established academics and recognized experts on the subject of the student's scholarly, research and/or creative work. They must be at arm's length from the student and/or their research, as well as from the supervisor and have no conflicts of interest which might impact their ability to perform the duty of assessment of the dissertation and its oral defence by the candidate. It is expected that the same external examiner is not selected more than once per academic year by the program director and/or the supervisor.

Exceptions may be approved by the Dean of the Faculty of Graduate Studies. Should you require additional information, do not hesitate to reach out to the decanal team in FGS.

## **Guiding your Graduate Student's Ethics Submissions**

### A Supervisory Checklist

Many if not most graduate students are provided with some degree of background related to the development of a proposal and the completion of the related ethics forms. For some, it comes at a time where most of what is discussed remains abstract. Best practices in graduate supervision includes the supervisor guiding the student through all aspects of this important milestone. This includes ensuring their proposal meets FGS and the program's standards/length and that the requisite ethics forms are completed correctly. This provides many teachable moments between the supervisor and student and is best enacted through scheduled conversations regarding each aspect of the research ethics process. FGS has developed a guide for supervisory teaching with their graduate students, breaking down the relevant sections for ease of scaffolded discussion.

Taking a proactive approach to working with your students collaboratively during this milestone can prevent untimely delays due to missing items, or incongruencies between the proposal and the ethics protocol. Download and go through [the checklist](#) with your students. They'll be happy you did!

## **Supporting Students in Distress**

International, national and York-based surveys indicate that student mental health has emerged as a central issue of concern within the graduate supervisory component of graduate studies. Supervisors are voicing concerns related to needing guidance about what to say, and to know when and how to refer students for professional support. Together with the Graduate Student Wellness Services of FGS, we have developed guidance for supervisors and students. For students, we have increased awareness efforts so that graduate students know that York has student-centered mental health supports. We have co-created reflection tools to enable students to gauge [how they are feeling](#), and to know [where they can go for support](#).

For supervisors, we have developed the [Supporting Students in Distress: A Response Guide for Graduate Supervisors](#). Based on the 4Rs of Recognize, Respond, Refer and Reflect, the response guide is intended to create a culture of care while helping supervisors to assist graduate students in distress without taking on the role of counsellor.

Rather, supervisors are empowered to play a role in recognizing warning signs so as to connect students with professional supports and resources. Supervisors care about their students, and this guide ensures we understand what is and is not our role, and guides supervisors with possible next steps. Rather than attempting to step beyond the role of advisor and mentor, supervisors are encouraged to reach out to [Graduate Student Wellness Services](#) with any questions they may have regarding student wellbeing. Graduate Program Directors are invited to bring this forward for discussion at an appropriate time early in the academic year.

## **Ever Wonder if You Have the Characteristics of a Great Supervisor?** **Self-reflection is a Key Component**

In 2024, FGS and the GSSHUB hosted a York-wide graduate student survey related to their experiences of graduate supervision. While we gleaned much from the survey, we learned that the scholarship regarding the characteristics of strong supervisors was reflected in our student's survey responses. Have you ever wondered if you have the characteristics most desired? We bet you do!

Some of the most desired characteristics include:

- Gives time and thought to the acceptance of graduate students to supervise
- Establishes and collaboratively maintains a positive, professional relationship
- Clarifies expectations of the student and the supervisor transparently
- Demystifies and supports the completion of program milestones
- Is available, responsive, and supportive of their supervisees
- Meets regularly with the graduate student, sharing the task of agenda setting
- Provides timely and constructive formative feedback, with specific guidance for improvement, expansion or clarification
- Views the student holistically and encourages/models healthy work-life balance

We invite supervisors to reflect on their own supervisory practice and we have developed a self-reflection tool. What we know, is when supervisors can tease out and highlight these characteristics, and then reflect upon them, their practice becomes an intentional pedagogy with supervisors reporting greater role satisfaction. Download the [Characteristics of an Effective Supervisor Self-Reflection Tool](#) to see how you are doing.

## **Communities of Practice** Across Canada and Here at York

Studies surrounding supervisor wellness have demonstrated that seeking out and participating in peer support regarding supervisory experiences and practices has a positive benefit. In November 2024, the Graduate Supervision Support Hub hosted [Dr. Gina Wisker](#) for the first graduate supervision workshop with the sole intent of highlighting the documented sources of stress associated with supervision, and what Dr. Wisker's international research with supervisors indicates is helpful. Establishing peer support through intentional community-building is key. To that end, York University established a national community of practice (CoP) in collaboration with the [Canadian Association for Graduate Studies](#) (CAGS). The National CoP's goals include:

- To foster conversations and sharing of effective practices among supervisors across Canada
- To foster strong research cultures that enable supervisors and students to flourish
- To co-create and share a national set of principles on supervision
- To co-create rich, open access resources and materials for supervisors
- To support an annual online conference on supervision

By the end of June 2025, the [National Community of Practice on Graduate Supervision](#) will have hosted 3 national meetings, with upwards of 400 registrants and 200 participants for each. Supervisors want to share experiences and hear about strategies that work. If you are interested in being kept in the loop for the National CoP, register your interest with CAGS by [registering here](#).

## What about a Community of Practice at York?

Given FGS' goal, through the work of the Graduate Supervision Support Hub, to support supervisor well-being and share supervisory best practices, FGS commenced the establishment of a York University CoP, in partnership with Faculty Affairs. We hosted our first meet up on May 8<sup>th</sup>, 2025 titled 'Thriving Through Peer Discussion' reflecting scholarship equating peer discussion with supervisory wellbeing and we welcomed several faculty members who supervise across multiple disciplines and Faculties.

Learning about how to support students to progress through their milestones, to reflecting upon one's self-imposed cap to avoid burnout and perceived inadequacy, our first meeting demonstrated that York supervisors have experiences worthy of sharing. Watch for updates related to subsequent meet ups that will be advertised via FGS and Faculty Affairs. Our York CoP will feature opening presentations on key subjects indicated in our 2024 Graduate Supervisory Survey, followed by peer dialogue.



A group of six individuals, casually dressed, standing in a circle smiling and talking with each other in an open hallway at York University.

Read past issues of [The Supervision Scoop Newsletter](#).

### Reach out to the GSSH Hub Team

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