Guidelines for Remote Supervision
FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES, YORK UNIVERSITY

The relationship between students, supervisors and members of a supervisory committee plays a pivotal role in the academic and overall wellbeing of graduate students. The impact of [your supervision role](#) (pdf) cannot be understated. Mentoring meetings continue to serve as the fundamental way that strengths-based and capacity-building guidance occurs. Since the conclusion of a global pandemic, many graduate faculty and students continue to meet for the purposes of graduate supervision via remote modalities. Concerns related to boundaries between the learning or research space and the personal space can be hard to navigate, further complicated by an unequal power balance between graduate student and faculty members. Further, issues related to *isolation, structure, boundaries, relationships and careful communication* must be considered when opting to enact your supervisory role, in part, remotely. With the caveat that, where possible, in-person graduate supervisory guidance should be prioritized, what follows are some key considerations pertaining to best practices in remote supervision.

Isolation

With the increasing reliance on virtual modalities in higher education, exacerbated experiences of isolation has been reported and this includes for graduate students particularly after course work is complete. Isolation can erode motivation, creating issues ranging from slow email response time, delays in responding to feedback, declining mental health and overall milestone completion. Additionally, having an enriching experience as a supervisor is equally important, and can be supported by in-person opportunities to connect with your students.

- Check in regularly as students appreciate supervisors who enact low pressure regular check-ins and establish a schedule for meetings or emails for updates, including in the absence of new data or writing to review.
- Schedule group supervision sessions if you have multiple graduate students to build connection and foster peer support.
- Foster and facilitate peer support mechanisms by encouraging your graduate students to have video 'coffee meetings' with each other outside of your supervisory meetings so that they have regular opportunities to socialise and talk

about their research. Regularly share information about opportunities for graduate students to find community with other students.

- Encourage students to make use of available department and <u>university resources</u> that will decrease isolation and support academic progression.
- Familiarize yourself with student support services including <u>Graduate Student Wellness Services</u> and communicate them regularly to students with assurances that it is okay to access the services as needed.

Need for Increased Structure

While supervisory styles vary, supervision at a distance requires higher structure and higher support. Distance from supervisors, programs and peers creates additional burden for students to self-organize, necessitating proactive structure as supervisory practice. For supervisors opting for some degree of remote supervision, it is important to underscore that mentoring practices including guidance, encouragement, structured teaching, networking and conflict resolution must occur.

- Co-develop and maintain regularly scheduled meetings with graduate students.
- Co-develop an agenda ahead of regularly scheduled meetings. Use the <u>meeting agenda template</u> (docx) under communication resources in the <u>Graduate Supervision Toolkit</u>.
- Keep informal contact going, e.g., periodic emails to check in or provide support.
- Maintain and establish multiple forms of contact with your student including research discussion meetings, presentations, regular reports, committee meetings, informal check-ins and networking.
- Co-develop schedules for task completion to keep progress on track.
- Support successful completion of small tasks and adherence to milestone timelines by providing <u>timely feedback</u> and structure for academic progress.
- Be responsive as this fosters feelings of connection, safety and predictability.

Relationships

The supervisory relationship is the key space where teaching and learning occurs for most graduate students, especially after courses are complete. Building and sustaining a healthy, supportive relationship requires attention and intentionality. Being genuinely interested in your student's whole life contributes to trust and rapport, while attending

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to relationship building, even at a distance during remote supervision, is an effective practice.

- Encourage students to consider work-life balance when setting goals and timelines.
- Establish clear expectations early including roles, responsibilities, and preferred communication styles to prevent misunderstandings.
- Foster mutual respect and trust by valuing the student's experiences, expertise and contributions and striving to understand each others' perspectives.
- Be attentive to wellbeing and inclusion by being mindful of stressors, accessibility needs, or cultural considerations that may impact the student.
- Encourage open dialogue about challenges by normalizing discussion of difficult academic and personal situations without judgement and working together to solve problems.
- Be mindful of inherent power imbalances in supervision and create opportunities for students to speak, share their perspectives and offer feedback.
- Support career development questions by discussing networking opportunities, academic and non-academic pathways and skill building.

Care in Communication

Communication is challenging in the best of times, and when supervision is enacted, in part, through remote modalities, communication becomes more vulnerable to misunderstandings. In the absence of non-verbal cues present when in person, taking care in communication during remote supervision is crucial. The chances of inadvertently offending someone are much higher when email becomes a more frequent tool for communication, and when people are primarily working remotely. If your supervisory role is conducted predominantly online, it is important to assume that all comments are well-meaning, however they come across, so starting with an assumption of good will is helpful. If you are unsure about intent or meaning, proactive and timely follow up is key. Working through the FGS Strong Start to Supervision Checklist (pdf) is a strategic way to foster shared agreement related to preferred communication approaches. Below is a list of some best practices related to care-based communication:

- Prioritize the time you schedule to meet with your graduate student online. Communicate your work schedule to people staying with you at home, to facilitate your full attention during remote supervisory meetings.

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- Consider how information is to be shared, creating clear expectations for timing, platform, and style.
- Model clear communication about availability, expectations and timelines.
- Make requests and give feedback in writing that is clear, detailed, and explicit. Be mindful of tone and write as politely and warmly as you would speak, if not more so. Include an agenda item (docx) in meetings to address any questions about written requests or feedback and follow up written feedback with an audio or video meeting to clarify and discuss further.
- Keep communicating as the more communication the better. Ensure your students know that you welcome their outreach to you. If your availability changes, or you anticipate being away for an extended period of time, remember to communicate this, ensuring supervisory coverage.
- Adopt a variety of technologies and discuss what can be managed using asynchronous communication and what is best managed synchronously.

Boundaries and Balance

Despite the convenience of remote options for mentoring meetings, enacting supervision remotely brings with it the potential for boundary blurring due to the possibility that meetings occur when students are in their private living space. Discussing, planning for and acting with consideration for their preference when meeting virtually is critical. Respecting students' time and availability and striving to adhere to business hours for deadlines and meetings is helpful.

- Boundaries between the learning and research space and the home life space can be hard to maintain. Maintenance of boundaries is a supervisory responsibility.
- Considerations of the student's right to privacy, despite taking a meeting in their personal home environment, are the responsibility of the supervisor to protect. At times, a student may need to have their camera off, so having this discussion and setting this as an acceptable option when needed is important.

Tips for successful online supervision meetings

- **Send** documents in advance of the meeting and agree on an agenda. As with face-to-face supervisory meetings, documents should be sent several days in advance of the meeting so that participants can read them and be fully prepared to discuss

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them. While screen sharing is a useful tool, it should be used sparingly, and it is not a replacement for giving someone time to read documents ahead of time.

- **Take time** to start with a general check-in. Start each remote meeting with a quick catch up about your lives outside of work and research provided you both wish to share. Not only will this help you to understand each other better, the supervisory meeting fosters connection between your student and the university.
- **Choose** a mode of communication that works for you both. This can be via phone, or online platforms such as Microsoft Teams or Zoom. Access to internet bandwidth must be considered as video conferencing requires a connection stronger than some students have access to.
- **Remember** the time difference. When setting up a supervisory meeting across countries, consider time differences and strive to meet during typical hours that the institution is open unless your student requires a bit earlier or later. Their comfort and privacy concerns as well as yours, are to be considered.
- **Keep** records and check understanding. Taking notes of the key points covered in remote supervisory meetings can be shared or rotated. Follow up with email agreements related to follow up actions via email.

York University benefitted from reviewing remote supervisory guidance from the University of Toronto, the University of Alberta, Queens University and Southampton University.

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