

# HYVÄT Guidelines for Supervision agreement of the Doctoral Candidate



## Background

While many of the principles of supervision agreement written in this paper are mostly just common sense and the situation of most of the doctoral students is good or fairly good, these principles are not followed in all departments. There is considerable variance in the practices from one doctoral school and department to another. In the survey conducted in 2018<sup>1</sup>, HYVÄT has received reports of abuse. Unfortunately, in the University of Helsinki, there are some rare cases where students have reported of supervisors taking credit for doctoral students work or otherwise misusing the situation for their own benefit.

Why have an agreement? The agreement ensures that the student and the supervisor know what is expected of each party. It is also a chance to plan the following year, and to keep track of the progress. Planning helps to complete the studies and graduate on time.

HYVÄT survey 2018 indicates that funding, supervision and equality are the most important matters PhD students want to improve. Supervision got an overall good score in the survey, but even in cases when the respondents reported that supervision is fairly good, they often said that there were problems too. About one out of six gave a negative opinion about their supervision. What makes the situation even more complicated for those who have problems is that the university as a whole does not provide any assistance or systematic way of solving problems. This is something that the university clearly needs to pay attention to and provide some practical solutions for. Electronic follow-up with Thessa, for example, is one improvement, but it is not enough. Also, practical ways to intervene in problematic supervision relationships are needed.

Another alarming finding is that 47 % of the respondents do not feel that they are integrated in the research community. This figure does not vary much between the doctoral schools. Proper planning of doctoral studies is connected to student wellbeing. Vice versa, bad planning and pursuing the studies without agreement is inefficient and waste of resources. The agreement helps to guarantee clear communication between the graduate student and the supervisor.

The agreement should be signed as soon as the new student has been accepted into the program. The agreement should be obligatory also for the graduate students who have started before the year 2019. It is the student's responsibility to contact their supervisors and co-supervisors to arrange these meetings. However, the administration and the university staff should advice and encourage the student and the supervisor to sign the contract. There should be a standard procedure for signing an agreement.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://blogs.helsinki.fi/phd-association/hyvat-phd-student-survey-2018/>

## General guidelines and required content for the agreement

### Rights and Responsibilities

The rights and responsibilities of each party should be determined. The supervisee has the right to advance demands regarding the supervision. Such demands ought to be considered by the supervisor. Giving reasons and explanations is essential both for advancing demands and in cases demands are not accepted. The supervisor should be accountable in case he or she is unable or unwilling to commit to the work. In general, compromise should be sought. The agreement should be renewed at least once a year.

The doctoral candidate agrees to:

- Keep to the planned time frame of the work and quickly notify the supervisor if something that hinders the progress comes up.
- Send the required papers to the supervisor in time before the meeting.
- Take the responsibility to apply for funding and submit all funding applications well in advance to the supervisor for review.
- Report to the doctoral program on the progress of the work after the annual review meeting with the supervisor within one week.
- Attend the postgraduate or research seminar.

The supervisor agrees to:

- Familiarize him/herself with the material and text submitted for each meeting provided that the materials have been submitted in agreed time in advance.
- Give advice on the contents and progress of the dissertation work including literature, essential concepts and methodology as well as potential publications and presentations.
- Discuss goals and career plans with the doctoral candidate.
- Help the doctoral candidate in applying for funding (e.g., references).
- Help the doctoral candidate in integrating in the scientific community (e.g. via conferences and contacts).
- Notify the doctoral candidate immediately if changes in the supervisory relation occur.
- Make sure that the doctoral candidate is familiarized with the practices of his/her department, faculty and the doctoral program.
- Provide supervision in general matters related to doctoral studies (dissertation examination process, required study units, etc.).
- Take the necessary steps to ensure that a new supervisor is assigned to the doctoral candidate should any of the supervisors be unable to continue supervising the doctoral candidate until the graduation.

### Distribution of responsibilities between the supervisor and supervisee

Clear distribution of tasks between the supervisor and supervisee is required. The distribution of tasks includes the administrative tasks, commenting manuscripts, assistance with funding, research related questions, project management, mentoring and integration into the academic community.

## Planned frequency of supervision meetings

It is recommended that the supervisor and supervisee would meet at least once a month. Monthly meetings are recommended, but practices can vary according to needs and what is agreed. In any case, the meetings should be regular. In the agreement, the following meeting should be stipulated and the following question should be answered: How many supervision meetings do you aim to have per semester with main supervisor, with Co-supervisor(s) and in PhD seminars?

If a face to face meeting is not possible, the meeting can be held through phone, email or skype. Before the meeting, the doctoral candidate should send materials according to what is agreed. If there is no material or text to be examined, the meeting can be held to discuss the current situation of the project.

## Research plan

Research plan describes the process, timetable and scientific content of the doctoral project. Research plan must be prepared by the doctoral candidate and supervisor(s) according to the supervision agreement. Minimally, the research questions should be outlined in the plan and a broad overview on how to aim to answer them provided. If any party wants to change the plan it is mandatory to inform other party and organize a discussion where all can freely express their opinions. Especially, in the situation where the doctoral project is a part of a bigger project carried out by a group in which the doctoral candidate works, it is the supervisor's duty to ensure that progress of the doctoral project and advancement of the candidate's career is not harmed by changes in the group. It is also the supervisor's responsibility to consider the doctoral candidate's position when such changes to be produced.

Significant changes to the research plan, such as fundamental changes in responsibilities or setting of the project (especially in multidisciplinary projects), inclusion or exclusion of a publication or a subproject, setting new goals, new direction etc. can be made only at the meeting where the doctoral candidate and supervisor(s) are present. If needed, external thesis committee members or other researchers involved in the project can be invited by either side.

## Commenting manuscripts

Supervisor comments the manuscript and commits to read and comment the text according to agreed schedule. The supervisor commits to read, comment and give constructive feedback on the supervisee's work in the best of his/her capacities, while the supervisee seriously considers the supervisor's comments learns of them. The supervisor commits to leave freedom of thought/ideas to the supervisee, while the supervisee, however, has the obligation to be able to argue for his/her ideas.

## Good scientific practice and the ethical principles followed in the field of research of the doctoral candidate

The ethical principles (including copyrights) must to be in line with the guidelines committed by the university. The Finnish National Board of Research Integrity (TENK), appointed by the Ministry of Education and Culture in Finland, have published ethical principles of research in the humanities and social and behavioural sciences which are, for the most part, applicable in other fields of study too. The principles address topics such as autonomy of research subjects, privacy and data protection, avoiding mental, social and financial harm and many other issues. The ethical principles and guidelines can be read in the links below:

- [https://www.tenk.fi/sites/tenk.fi/files/HTK\\_ohje\\_2012.pdf](https://www.tenk.fi/sites/tenk.fi/files/HTK_ohje_2012.pdf)
- <https://www.tenk.fi/en/ethical-review-in-human-sciences>

Other important matters include immaterial property rights concerning the research project, including the ownership of the research data and copyrights, open access and openly shared data after the publication. These matters should be discussed together with close collaborators, participants, supervisee and supervisor(s).

University of Helsinki encourages open access publishing and requires researchers affiliated with the University to self-archive their scientific articles after they have been published in academic publications in the University's Open Access repository Helda:

- <http://libraryguides.helsinki.fi/oa/eng>

## Publishing policies and principles of joint publications

Publications must be written and submitted as soon as consistent and conclusive scientific results are achieved. Joint publications with collaborators are encouraged. Good scientific practices and ethical principles as discussed above should be followed.

## Goals

The agreement should include goals to help the supervisee to graduate in time. When setting the goals, the following topics should be discussed: timetable, primary research, secondary research (literature reviews, etc.), writing of thesis, publications (completed and published), training courses, teaching experience, applications for funding, international activity (conferences, international visits, international courses) and national conference presentations.

## Scheduling doctoral work

The agreement should contain both long-term and short-term goals for the doctoral work. The first agreement should contain a three-year or four-year work plan (i.e., from the beginning to the end of the project). The plan should be discussed with the supervisor.

The schedule should be reviewed every six months, to check whether the doctoral student is on track with the plan, and to change the plan if the situation has changed. In the renewed agreement, the past year should be discussed, and a statement made: What went well and what did not? How and when the doctoral candidate aims to complete the doctorate. The plan can also be revised whenever a change is made to the students or supervisor's working situation.

## Funding

Funding is probably the most important reason for inequality among the doctoral students. There is a considerable variation between the doctoral schools as well. Some of the doctoral students use their own savings or unemployment benefits to finance their living. The supervisor should coordinate and help to find funding for the whole duration of the PhD project and give feedback on the funding applications.

## What to do in the case of problems or disagreement

University should provide a third party (instance or person committed to the issue) to whom doctoral student or supervisor could report cases of misuse. HYVÄT survey conducted in 2018 received some reports of abuse. Of course, the third-party procedure should be the last option in solving problems. There are several possibilities for the third-party person. It could be one of the following ones:

- The supervising professor (when he/she is not the adviser him/herself)
- The thesis committee
- The coordinator of the doctoral program
- HR person from the university of Helsinki
- Designed member of the doctoral program steering group
- The head of the department

In order to prevent any conflict or disagreement, the university should organize regular leadership trainings that every supervisor should undergo. Special attention should be brought to communication, conflict resolution, good supervision practice, health protection and prevention of burnout as well as the recognition of behaviour that violates these norms. The university should also offer workshops or courses for doctoral candidates that focuses on the supervision: relations between supervisor and supervisee, good scientific practice, occupational health protection, mechanisms to report and resolve conflicts.

In case of a supervision conflict, it must be reported and protection for doctoral candidate's studies and career must to be ensured. The university should appoint independent temporary supervisor who would support doctoral candidate during fixed transition period. The university should ensure that doctoral candidate has access to research data, results and facilities needed to complete the doctoral project. The university should also inform the department or research group where conflict occurred to exclude possibility of further bullying or aggravating conflict.