

# RESOLVING SUPERVISION PROBLEMS

## Self-help strategies for dealing with problems in supervision

Supervision, just like independent research, is a complex process. Sometimes we can feel overwhelmed, out of our depth, irritated or helpless. This may lead to a supervisor or student feeling frustrated and without a constructive way forward. The problem may be situational or interpersonal. Sometimes the problem is new and unexpected, at other times it is a repeating one and you hear yourself saying, “Why does this always happen to me” or “How will I learn to deal with this”.

These kinds of situations are not unusual during the doctoral process. There are pathways available to you. Which pathway you choose will depend on the particular situation and the impact of the problem on you. There is no right or wrong way and all of the options have some benefits.

### Start with policy

Before turning to any of the options below, start by reading the University’s policy, [Resolution of Student Academic Complaints and Disputes Statute](#). The policy recommends that whenever difficulties arise, the student and supervisor aim to resolve them through informal processes. This document does not override the policy in any way, but it provides more detailed suggestions for how to handle informal dispute resolution processes. However, if you have an informal conversation and it does not resolve the problem then the following strategies are available.

### Clarify your thinking with self-reflection

Give yourself some quiet time and space to think about what is happening. It is very helpful to write down what is happening. Write in the first person using “I” statements, since you are thinking about yourself. Helpful questions include:

- How is this impacting on me?
- What does this mean for me?
- How am I interpreting this?
- What am I feeling?
- Who else is involved?
- What might they be feeling or thinking about the situation?
- Is anything else going on that might be contributing?
- On a scale of 1-10, how much impact is this having on me and my ability to function normally?
- Are there any patterns here?
- What else might be important?

Remember, there are no right or wrong answers; this is a private exploration of the situation and the intention is to simply clarify things for yourself. When your own thoughts are clearer, it is likely to be easier to decide what you might do next.

### Decide on a strategy

Once you have a clear idea of how you perceive the problem, the next step is to consider what you might want to do about it. There are three main strategies to choose from, depending on the circumstances:

- Do nothing at the moment, but monitor yourself in terms of how you are feeling. The problem may resolve itself. However, if it seems to increase in intensity, then its negative impact on you will likely increase.
- Seek advice from others about what you would like to do next.
- Act on your decision by raising the matter with the other person/people involved and have a discussion with them.

## Seek advice from others

Talk the situation over with one or more of the following people (in no particular order). Make sure you ask anyone you talk with to keep the discussion confidential and not to take any action on your behalf without your consent.

- a friend or someone in your family or community whose advice you trust;
- your [faculty postgraduate adviser](#);
- your Doctoral Candidate Adviser in the [School of Graduate Studies](#);
- the Student Advice Hub for [AUSA Advocacy](#) if you are a student, or a [TEU representative](#) if you are a staff member;
- University [Counselling Services](#) if you are a student, or the [Employee Assistance Programme \(EAP\)](#) if you are a staff member;
- a [University Chaplain](#);
- the [University Proctor/s](#).

## Act on your decision

If you decide to raise the matter with the other/s, it's a good idea to prepare for a discussion, rather than a confrontation. Recognise your preferred outcome before planning how you might best achieve it. While you cannot script a 'perfect' conversation, you can consider what it is you primarily want to change or know. So, for example:

- Do you want to inform the other person of your experience of the situation and ask them to do, or stop doing, something?
- Do you want to ask questions of them and/or check something out?
- Do you want to 'step up' to another level and state what the consequences might be if things don't change?

The following steps are designed as a guide to raising an issue and can be followed in all or any of the kinds of conversations described above:

- It's a good idea to begin by asking the other person if this is a good time to have a discussion. Although this sounds very formal, it's important to remember that this may not be a good time. Indicate (accurately) the amount of time you think the conversation might take and its importance to you.
- If the other person can't give the time when you ask for it, ask for an alternative time to meet with them. If they won't commit to a time, then you may have to rethink your strategy and consider asking someone else to assist you to have the conversation.
- Once the other person is engaging with you in the discussion, it's a good idea to put a context around what you want to say and to give a clear statement about why you want to have the discussion. For example, "I have been feeling uncomfortable about an issue recently and since it involves you, and I would like us to work together better, I'd like to talk about it with you." Showing a positive intent for the outcome, e.g. "I would like us to work together better", is a good motivating statement for this type of discussion and will likely put the other person more at ease.
- Accurately describe the problem that you are experiencing, e.g. "In the last two months I have tried to see you four times to talk about x and on each occasion the meetings have been cancelled by you at very short notice. I'm feeling really anxious about x and frustrated by the cancellations. I'd appreciate it if we could have regular meetings which were a real priority so that I would be more confident about meeting the deadlines we agreed."
- Ask the other person to comment, e.g. "I'm wondering if there is a problem for you about the meetings."

- Listen to what they have to say in return. Try not to interrupt or act defensively.
- If the other person seems willing to engage in the discussion but is unsure of why this may be important, it can be helpful to restate the outcome and your emotional response e.g. “As a result of the cancelled meetings, I’ve become less focussed and am feeling anxious about ...”. Add what would be helpful for you and why, e.g. “I’d like to be able to ... and that would mean that I could ... which would help us to move the project on.”.
- It can then be helpful to state what benefits there might be for the other person, e.g. “this would mean that you would be able to...”.
- If the other person has raised issues about a problem from their perspective that has contributed to your problem, then try restating the problem from their perspective and asking them what they might like you to do differently.
- If you agree to do things differently and the outcome of the discussion is successful, follow this up with an email, thanking them for their time and recording your understanding/s of what was agreed and how things will be different in the future.
- At some future time, it can also be helpful to evaluate the change in another discussion and to check that things are now ok.

If this process is new to you, you might like to talk through it with a friend whom you admire for being able to do this. Or you could choose someone from the list of people above (Seek advice from others) and ask them to coach you. Ask these people to keep what you say in confidence and to give you feedback about your style and tone.