



DPhil Supervision at Oxford: case studies for discussion and reflection

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Introduction

These resources were developed in collaboration with Directors of Graduate Studies and have been tested in workshops at the University of Oxford with groups of both new and experienced supervisors. The resources are intended for use by departments/faculties wishing to host their own DPhil supervision session, or a session jointly with another department. **All resources can be tailored to suit the specific needs of a department/group of departments.**

These case study resources are intended to create the opportunity for in-depth discussion of different supervision scenarios; they have been designed for participants who have some experience of DPhil supervision and/or those who have completed the relevant online course in DPhil supervision at Oxford. They work well with mixed groups of experienced and inexperienced supervisors, and can be used to open up discussion around DPhil supervision practices and policies.

The resources in this pack are as follows:

- 1) Guidelines on developing your own case studies for use
- 2) A sample session plan
- 3) A range of case studies that can be adapted for your local context
- 4) A sample evaluation form

The case study scenarios in this booklet were initially developed in consultation with Directors of Graduate Studies (DGS) across MPLS and MSD and were used as a core component of DPhil supervision workshops in Oxford from 2016–2019.

Each case study focuses on a specific aspect of DPhil supervision, with themes including keeping students on-track for timely completion; the challenges of co-supervision; supporting students' well-being and dealing with academic under-performance.

You are welcome to edit and tailor all the case studies included here to ensure they are of relevance to your intended audience.

Each case study in this booklet is presented in a standard format and has the following characteristics:

- The scenario presented is intended to serve as discussion point for participants to: i) consider what they would do as a DPhil supervisor if they were faced with the same or similar situation; ii) listen to the experience of more experienced supervisors and share supervisory experiences; and iii) find out about departmental 'best practice' in supervision.
- A series of prompt questions are provided for each case study for participants to discuss in small groups and then later together in the whole group. The DGS/supervisor leading the session is advised to make a note of their own response to these questions in advance and to ensure that departmental best practice and any relevant policy/procedure is incorporated into the group's discussion.
- It is left unspecified in all of the cases presented here whether the student is full-time or part-time, fully-funded or self-funding. You may wish for discussion to focus on these aspects of DPhil study, either by raising it during the discussion or by amending your chosen case study to include these details.

- Elements of the presented scenarios have been left intentionally vague; this is to encourage participants to identify what further information might be required in order to determine a course of action.

Writing and anonymising your own case studies

The success of a case study discussion session depends upon having appropriate cases to discuss which highlight issues that may well arise in the local context.

As such, you may wish to create your own case studies for use, drawing on the experiences of supervisors in your department/faculty, or on difficult cases that the Director of Graduate Studies has encountered. We offer the following guidelines here to help you to easily create cases for use.

Key points

1. A case study is typically around 250–500 words in length. You may need to simplify the example(s) you have in mind and to reduce details in order to help your audience to focus on key details.
2. It is essential that you anonymise your case so that it could not be recognised by those originally involved. This is not just a question of changing the names of the individuals involved. Make sure you change key details or situations so that you can retain the core dilemma(s), but make the real case unrecognisable.
3. In DPhil supervision, supervisors don't always have every fact to hand when encountering a problem. You may find it helpful to deliberately omit key facts and indeed to ask your supervisors what additional information they might want/need to help them with the case.

Ideas for generating case study scenarios

It is rare for an issue in DPhil supervision to only be about supervisee or supervisor inadequacy. More commonly, there is a complex mix of failed opportunities (on many sides), poor communication, insufficient record keeping, or hope from many parties that someone else will resolve emerging issues. It can be helpful, therefore, to have more than one issue presenting itself in a single case example.

You may wish to ask administrators, students and Research Training Co-ordinators, as well as supervisors and Directors of Graduate Studies, to suggest case study scenarios that could usefully be discussed.

If a 'theme' for a case study session emerges (e.g. mental health, inclusive practices, research training, etc.) then do consider inviting an institutional expert in to listen to the session and comment on the discussion.

Example session plan

This session plan has been used successfully for supervision workshops in which group sizes ranged from 8 to 40 and it is outlined here as a starting point.

Timing	Focus	Notes
c. 10 minutes	Introduction (Ideally led by Director of Graduate Studies or an experienced supervisor.)	A brief overview of the workshop, indicating the format of the session (e.g. interactive case studies with group working opportunities) and clarifying the session's focus and aims. Some information to provide context to the session, for example, is it an introduction to supervisory practices in the department/faculty, a regular event, or perhaps a response to a recent issue(s) with DPhil supervision that has arisen?
c. 25 mins per case study	Case study discussions (Could be facilitated by an experienced supervisor, a DGS, or a neutral facilitator.)	Participants read the scenario and then discuss their thoughts on possible approaches with colleagues in small groups/pairs, depending on the group size. The time needed to discuss a case study will naturally vary depending on the number and supervisory experience of participants, but typically 15 minutes to read and discuss a case study in small groups, plus 10 minutes for a whole group discussion is usually sufficient. To facilitate sharing of ideas and experience, it is helpful if groups can be organised to comprise a mix of newer and more experienced supervisors, wherever possible. The session lead(s) facilitate the discussion by inviting a group(s) to feedback their thoughts on the scenario presented. Allow time for questions that may arise from the small group/whole group discussion and to clarify the Departmental and/or any expert 'position' on the case study that has been discussed. The DGS/session lead may find it helpful to ask individual groups to record their responses to the case studies during the session so that they can be shared with others who may have been unable to attend.
c. 15 minutes	Summary	The session lead(s) summarises the main points arising from the group discussions and invites any further questions; this is also an opportunity for any other supervision issues that have arisen to be addressed and/or recorded to be followed up by the relevant individual(s).

Case Study 1: (lab-based scenario) Issues with progress towards Transfer of Status

Helen, a research student, belongs to a large and prestigious lab group in Department X. Her progress has been satisfactory, but in recent weeks her experimental work has been frustratingly slow: her lab techniques have produced poor data, timely access to equipment has been problematic and there have been some issues with the quality of materials coming from the Department's research equipment supplier. Helen's co-supervisor, Jo, is dealing with the equipment supplier whilst, Rob, her other co-supervisor, is providing some support for her lab work. The knock-on effect is that the progress of Helen's Transfer of Status (ToS) report has been slowed significantly.

With three weeks to ToS report submission, Jo and Rob have recommended a substantial re-write of Helen's latest draft transfer report to take her recent problematic lab results into consideration. This is really stressful for Helen, who is already feeling overwhelmed and exhausted. Rob is new to DPhil supervision and thinks Helen is not particularly efficient at working in the lab and that's one of the reasons why she's now behind with the transfer report. He finds it frustrating that Helen doesn't have good lab skills and he's starting to resent the time he's spending showing her things he thinks she should already be able to do. Rob isn't sure if this is just a phase in Helen's DPhil or if it's going to be an ongoing issue. Either way she isn't meeting his expectations of a doctoral research student and he thinks Jo may have similar concerns.

In the next meeting with Jo and Helen, Rob tells Helen that he is disappointed in her progress; Helen becomes very upset and she leaves the meeting angry and confused about what she should do next. Although Jo thinks Helen is finding the research challenging, she believes some of this is down to things which are out of Helen's control, such as the issue with the equipment supplier. Neither supervisor knows how best to proceed.

Discussion points

- What key information does the scenario provide?
- What other details would be useful to know?
- Given the information provided, what would you advise the supervisors to do next and why?

Case study 2: (suitable for all disciplines): Developing an effective working relationship

Your research student, Sam, recently passed Transfer of Status and although you believe Sam to be a capable researcher, you are finding your working relationship with her quite challenging. You see Sam on a regular basis in the Department and you also arrange fortnightly 1:1 meetings with her and the other co-supervisor to discuss progress. Sam makes notes at these meetings, but you find that you're constantly having to remind her of what needs to be done. You find Sam to be quite hard work because of the constant reminders you have to give her about effectively managing her workload. In meetings, Sam is often quiet and she can sometimes get quite defensive about her work. You know that she gets on well with her peers and the other supervisor as you see her regularly chatting with them in the Department, so you don't know if it's the research project that Sam isn't engaging with, or if it's perhaps just a case of mismatched expectations.

You are keen to develop a more productive working relationship with Sam but as you've not experienced any of these issues with your other DPhil students (or co-supervisors), you don't know what you should do next.

Discussion points

- What key information does the scenario provide?
- What other details would be useful to know?
- Given the information provided, what would you advise this supervisor to do next and why?

Case Study 3a: (lab-based scenario) Supporting research students' well-being

Frank and his colleague, Mary, received funding to recruit a DPhil student, Chris, who is based in Frank's Department. Frank is a new supervisor and Mary has previously supervised several DPhil students to completion. Frank meets with Chris 1:1 once a fortnight and he also sees Chris most days as they are both based in the same Department building. Both supervisors meet with Chris once a month.

Chris initially struggled with the transition from taught undergraduate to independent research, but with a lot of support from Frank and Mary, he passed Transfer of Status. Chris is now two years into his DPhil and Frank has noticed that Chris' productivity has become particularly poor in recent weeks; the quality of Chris' written work has also significantly deteriorated. Chris has been turning up to the lab on an irregular basis over the past month and he now appears to be somewhat 'detached' from the rest of the lab group.

At their latest 1:1 meeting, Frank asks Chris how things are going and in response, Chris tells him that he's feeling a bit down about his research and is struggling to motivate himself. Frank tries to reassure him that these feelings are quite common in doctoral research, but immediately after this meeting, Frank phones Mary for her advice. Mary thinks that Chris is probably just experiencing the 'DPhil blues'.

Yesterday, however, one of Chris' friends came to see Frank; they said they were really worried about Chris' well-being, citing some out of character behaviour in recent weeks. The friend doesn't want Chris to know he's spoken with Frank and has asked for the conversation to be kept confidential. It is clear, however, that the friend is asking Frank to do something to help Chris. Frank isn't sure what he should do next as Chris has not disclosed any mental or physical health issues to him.

Discussion points

- What key information does the scenario provide?
- What other details would be useful to know?
- Given the information provided, what would you advise Frank to do next and why?

Case Study 3b: (non-lab-based scenario) Supporting research students' well-being

Frank and his colleague, Mary, are co-supervising a DPhil student, Chris, who is based in Frank's Department. Frank is a new supervisor and Mary has previously supervised several DPhil students to completion. Frank meets with Chris 1:1 once a fortnight and he also sees Chris most days as they are both based in the same Department building. Both supervisors meet with Chris once a month.

Chris initially struggled with the transition from taught undergraduate to independent research, but with a lot of support from Frank and Mary, he passed Transfer of Status. Chris is now two years into his DPhil and Frank has noticed that Chris' productivity has become particularly poor in recent weeks. The quality of Chris' written work has also significantly deteriorated. Chris has not been seen in passing by Frank over the past month.

At their latest 1:1 meeting, Frank asks Chris how things are going and in response, Chris tells him that he's feeling a bit down about his research and is struggling to motivate himself. Frank tries to reassure him that these feelings are quite common in doctoral research, but immediately after this meeting, Frank phones Mary for her advice. Mary thinks that Chris is probably just experiencing the 'DPhil blues'.

Yesterday, however, one of Chris' friends came to see Frank; they said they were really worried about Chris' well-being, citing some out of character behaviour in recent weeks. The friend doesn't want Chris to know he's spoken with Frank and has asked for the conversation to be kept confidential. It is clear, however, that the friend is asking Frank to do something to help Chris. Frank isn't sure what he should do next as Chris has not disclosed any mental or physical health issues to him.

Discussion points

- What key information does the scenario provide?
- What other details would be useful to know?
- Given the information provided, what would you advise Frank to do next and why?

Case study 4a: (suitable for all disciplines) Supporting research students' academic writing

You see Ali, your latest research student regularly and you frequently provide him with informal, verbal feedback on his research; this is in addition to your regular 1:1 meetings. You believe that Ali is making reasonable progress, and because you're often engaging with him about his research, you don't feel the need to spend a huge amount of time producing a detailed written account of his progress this term in the Graduate Supervision Reporting (GSR) report.

Ali recently produced his first substantive piece of written work, which you felt was way below standard, so you provided him with detailed verbal feedback in your latest 1:1 meeting. As it is early days you're reluctant to raise this as a formal concern on the forthcoming end-of-term GSR report. You continue to provide Ali with feedback on his writing, mainly verbal, but sometimes you follow up with additional details by email. Despite this, Ali's writing is not showing much sign of improvement and you are becoming a little frustrated, particularly as the Transfer of Status assessment deadline is looming. In his self-assessment for the latest GSR report, Ali indicates that he is a little demoralised about the progress of his research, but he thinks he is still on track for the Transfer of Status assessment. He doesn't mention anything about the issues you've raised regarding the standard of his written work. Upon seeing Ali's self-assessment, you're not sure what your next steps should be.

Discussion points

- What do you think might have been going on to lead to this scenario?
- How would you advise the supervisor to proceed?

Case Study 4b: (lab-based scenario): Supporting research students' academic writing

Helena belongs to a lab group and her two supervisors are also part of the same research group. One of her supervisors, Rob, is both new to the Department and to DPhil supervision; Helena's other supervisor is more experienced and is also the research group's PI. Helena sees her supervisors most days in the lab and has more formal meetings with them together every 2-3 weeks.

Over the past month or so Helena's research has been particularly problematic with lab experiments generating inconsistent results. Both supervisors have spent time with Helena to try to identify why the lab techniques aren't working as well as expected; they aren't yet sure if it's an issue with the experimental design or with Helena's lab skills. Helena is struggling with insufficient data and this has consequently slowed the progress of her Transfer of Status (ToS) report. With three weeks to go until the ToS report deadline, Helena has submitted her latest draft report; both supervisors agree that her academic writing needs much more work. Rob has already provided Helena with extensive feedback on previous drafts and is feeling frustrated that Helena hasn't taken a lot of this into account; the other supervisor has also provided her with feedback on earlier drafts of the ToS report. Both supervisors think Helena might benefit from some peer support for her academic writing but they're reluctant to suggest it because they don't want others in the research group to 'waste their time' if she isn't going to engage with the feedback process.

Rob is worried that Helena is getting really demoralised with her lack of progress, but at the same time, he wonders if Helena is actually up to the standard needed for doctoral-level research. However, he doesn't want to mention this to the other supervisor because it may just be a reflection of his inexperience in DPhil supervision. Rob has a significant teaching workload and a large grant deadline looming; he wants to support Helena but never imagined that co-supervision would take up so much time.

Discussion points

- What key information does the scenario provide?
- What other details would be useful to know?
- Given the information provided, what would you advise Rob to do next and why?

Case Study 5a: (lab-based scenario): Under-performing research student

Maria is an experienced DPhil supervisor and has successfully supervised six students to completion within their funding period. Maria has made a point of regularly meeting with her research students as she feels that this is the best way to 'keep them on track'. She adopts the same approach with her latest research student, Lisdalia, meeting with her once a fortnight; Maria is, however, finding the working relationship difficult. In particular, despite being enthusiastic at the start of the project, Lisdalia's productivity has dropped significantly in recent weeks and she regularly makes excuses to Maria for why work has not been completed. The latest draft report that Lisdalia has submitted to Maria in preparation for her Transfer of Status has clearly been rushed and she has not taken any of Maria's previous feedback into account.

Maria does not think that Lisdalia has the staying power for DPhil research; she thinks that Lisdalia resents doing the day to day lab tasks and is therefore not performing them to a sufficiently high standard. This, combined with Lisdalia's recent poor written work, is making Maria question whether she should perhaps suggest that Lisdalia defers to a Masters by Research instead.

Discussion points

- **Have you experienced anything similar to this scenario?**
 - **If so, how did you handle it?**
 - **What were the challenges?**
- **What other details would be useful to know in the above scenario?**
- **Given the information provided, what would you advise the supervisor, Maria, to do next and why?**

Case Study 5b: (fieldwork scenario): Under-performing research student

Maria is an experienced DPhil supervisor and has successfully supervised six students to completion within their funding period. Maria has made a point of regularly meeting with her research students as she feels that this is the best way to 'keep them on track'. She adopts the same approach with her latest research student, Lisdalia, meeting with her once a fortnight; Maria is, however, finding the working relationship difficult. In particular, despite being enthusiastic at the start of the project, Lisdalia's productivity has dropped significantly in recent weeks and she regularly makes excuses to Maria for why work has not been completed. The latest draft report that Lisdalia has submitted to Maria in preparation for her Transfer of Status has clearly been rushed and she has not taken any of Maria's previous feedback into account.

Maria does not think that Lisdalia has the staying power for DPhil research; she thinks that Lisdalia resents doing the detailed preparatory work for undertaking her fieldwork and is therefore not completing this to a sufficiently high standard. This, combined with Lisdalia's recent poor written work, is making Maria question whether she should perhaps suggest that Lisdalia defers to a lower-level degree instead.

Discussion points

- **Have you experienced anything similar to this scenario?**
 - **If so, how did you handle it?**
 - **What were the challenges?**
- **What other details would be useful to know in the above scenario?**
- **Given the information provided, what would you advise the supervisor, Maria, to do next and why?**

Case Study 6: (suitable for all disciplines) Differences of opinion between co-supervisors

Ed received funding to recruit a doctoral student, Sam. Ed is a new supervisor, so Sam also has an experienced co-supervisor, Dale. Ed and Dale meet regularly with Sam.

Sam is now five months into his studies and Ed is concerned that Sam is struggling to transition to doctoral level study. In particular, Sam's writing is consistently of a low standard and he is finding it hard to keep up with the new approaches to research he needs to learn. In the meantime, Ed himself is struggling to cope with the demands of DPhil supervision as he tries to fulfil his own research obligations. Ed has spoken with Dale about his concerns, but Dale does not appear to be worried.

As Transfer of Status approaches, Sam submits a draft report to Ed and Dale; the report is poorly written and it is apparent that Sam seems unable to generate and communicate his own ideas. Ed doesn't think that Sam will pass Transfer and in fact he has bigger concerns about Sam's suitability for DPhil study. Dale, on the other hand, thinks that with enough support, Sam will be able to 'scrape through' Transfer and, with time, that Sam will develop his skills to successfully complete his DPhil.

Discussion points

- **Have you experienced anything similar to this scenario?**
 - **If so, how did you handle it?**
 - **What were the challenges?**
- **What other details would be useful to know in the above scenario?**
- **Given the information provided, what would you advise the supervisor, Ed, to do next and why?**

Case study 7: (suitable for all disciplines) Contrasting styles of supervision

Mo has just finished his second term of the research project and you are one of his two co-supervisors. You are highly organised and have a clear idea of the direction Mo's research should take if he is to complete on-time. Having recently been awarded a Departmental Lectureship after many years as a postdoc you are acutely aware of the importance of on-time completion of the DPhil for future career prospects. You see your main supervisory role as making sure Mo's doctorate is successfully completed on-time.

In your opinion, Mo is working hard and he brings lots of ideas to your meetings, but you think that many of these are unfeasible and/or are likely to fail. Mo's other supervisor has a much more laid-back approach to supervision, frequently encouraging the meetings to go 'off track' to allow Mo to spend time discussing his research ideas.

You get on well with the other supervisor but feel that your contrasting styles of supervision are not helpful for Mo; you are becoming increasingly worried that Mo is spending too much time experimenting with things that are unlikely to be productive for his thesis. You realise that giving Mo the freedom to make the research project his own is important; however, you are also aware of all the things that could go wrong and thus delay Mo's final thesis submission. The other supervisor is more experienced and doesn't have any concerns about Mo's progress, so you aren't sure what your next steps should be.

Discussion points

- **Have you experienced anything similar to this scenario?**
 - **If so, how did you handle it? What were the challenges?**
- **What other details would be useful to know in the above scenario?**
- **Given the information provided, what would you do next and why?**

Evaluation form

To get some feedback from participants on your DPhil supervision session, you may find it helpful to ask them to complete a brief evaluation form at the end, an example of which is given here:

1. Please indicate which element(s) of today's workshop have been *most useful*.

2. What was the *least useful* part of today's workshop?

3. Please suggest any improvement(s) to the workshop content and/or format:

THANK YOU