



He Rautaki mo te Akoranga Kairangi

6. Making the most of supervision meetings

I try and set up regular monthly meetings, sometimes fortnightly meetings, depending on the stage the thesis is up to. If it's early on in the game, then it's probably best to meet as regular as anything, but it depends very much on the person themselves. Who they are, where they live, how good they are, how self-motivated they are. (Māori supervisor)

We don't have a formal meeting at a certain time. If I need an answer from my main supervisor and he's not responding, or the other supervisor's not responding, I just bowl into their office and say, 'Right, what do I need?', get the quick verbal answer and then shoot off. Even if you have to pop over every so often and wait for that half an hour window when he'll open his door, you can always find other things to do. (Student)

One supervisor and I would go to a restaurant and there would be at least two bottles of red wine, every fortnight. So it was an entire evening and possibly in that fortnight also we would meet on a particular research aspect. With the other supervisor, it's lunch. First we sort of discuss broadly how things are going and then we'd spend two hours after that actually going through the nuts and bolts. We have very structured meetings. Every two to three weeks we will have a three-hour session. (Student)

Introduction

Most interactions between supervisors and students took place through supervision meetings. The frequency, style and length of these meetings varied hugely at different stages in a student's progress as well as between different supervisions. Different disciplines tended to have different patterns with respect to meetings: for example, scientific, lab-based research often featured lots of short, almost daily contacts between supervisor and student, while humanities and social science research featured less frequent, longer meetings. Here are some of the experiences and insights shared with us by students and supervisors, along with some guidelines for you as a doctoral student.

There are different patterns of meetings in each supervision

I used to meet with my main supervisor once a month. At the beginning of the year, we would actually block out our diaries and plot the dates through the year. But that didn't necessarily mean to say that that's how it remained. Sometimes she wasn't in the country and she would email me and say 'I'm going to be away, can we make another time?' (Student)

Meetings are totally individualised. And they're individualised over time, sometimes it's more intense than others. (Non-Māori supervisor)

Meetings were a challenge. They were not always structured in the form of a formal appointment, although we certainly had those roughly monthly. But quite often we'd find, because we had outside interests together, there were lots of opportunities to do supervision on the run. A number of times we sat together on little planes, going from A to B, talking about what was coming up next and what needed to be done. And that was certainly helpful with both those students. (Non-Māori supervisor)

My goal is, and the university standard is, monthly meetings. But the challenge of distance supervision has several levels. One is that you see the students less frequently. The other thing, which I often find difficult, is to have someone going through a whole day to supervise. Things get kind of too intense. You've given them so many jobs, they don't wanna have a meeting after lunch. And I discover that if you have too infrequent a meeting, they can head off down the wrong path and be a long way down it, if it's three months. (Māori supervisor)

Some supervisors and students met at a steady pace across the whole supervision. The advantage of this practice was that they didn't lose contact and it probably helped the student keep momentum. Also it was less likely that the student would head too far off track. Other supervisors were very clear that meetings should be paced in response to the student's own needs and preferably at the student's request.

Meeting frequency often varies across the research cycle

We try and meet face to face every two or three months, but it depends where they are in the process as well. If they're earlier on, it might be once a month. If they're further down, like the one that's out of town finishing her final draft, we haven't met face to face probably for three months. But we're in contact every two to four weeks when she's sending a chapter or a revision through to me. (Māori supervisor)

Most of my energy is at the front end and the back end of a student's thesis journey. Even before they enrol: I've got two at the moment who're nearly ready for registration, we meet regularly, we meet, like, every fortnight. I want this student to get ready to enrol when I know he knows exactly what he's going to do, why he's doing it, he's read some of the literature he's been avoiding, he's confident he can do it. 'Cause to me part of it is eliminating stuff, it's not just selecting what you're gonna do, it's consciously eliminating the stuff you're not going to do. I need them to do that, consciously, and tell me. So that's where I put a lot of my investment and time. Then once we're through the ethics and they've got their research plan, I don't expect to see them fortnightly. I just go back to monthly, or we'll have a cup of coffee. Then I put a lot in at the back end when they've actually got several chapters. (Māori supervisor)

More frequent meetings are likely to take place in the early and later stages. In the early stages it is crucial to get the student off to a strong start, especially by making sure they have a sound and do-able research design and are confident with the literature. At the later stages, when the student is writing intensively, the supervisor's feedback on draft chapters is indispensable for keeping momentum and ensuring the work is strong enough to go forward for examination.

Either students or supervisors might take responsibility for setting meetings

As chief supervisor, it's my job to schedule the meetings and to determine kind of what the agenda of the meetings will be. We have got into a pattern where we've asked the student, at the end of the meeting, to go away and write a summary of what we discussed and look at milestones, head for the next meeting. Then he'll email me it. That's a good practice to get into. (Non-Māori supervisor)

Meetings are done on an individual basis, it's totally individualised, and it's individualised over time. Sometimes it's more intense than others. (Non-Māori supervisor)

I'm really firm at the outset. If I don't get the agenda, then there's no point in having the meeting 'cause I don't know what it is that I'm supposed to focus on. And you stick to the student's agenda. The supervisor asks if you're wanting to add anything else to it. You don't chuck in unexpected stuff about, you know, 'So has someone died recently, or are you having marital problems?' or whatever. (Māori supervisor)

In some supervisions, one of the supervisors took responsibility for setting up meetings. But other supervisors felt strongly that this was the student's job. The same applied to the meeting agenda: sometimes supervisors led the agenda setting, but other supervisors thought this should be the student's role and that the supervisor should ask if they can add things rather than presume they can. There are usually good reasons underlying these different stances around meetings—often coming from the supervisor's own experience of being supervised or of supervising other students. Several supervisors talked about being laid back as new supervisors but coming to realise that they needed to put more structure into their supervision to help students make stronger progress.

It works well to submit written work in advance of meeting

We meet as a group and usually the student's got something to show us. I've asked repeatedly that we should be given this a week before the meetings, but it hasn't happened yet. We look at what she's done, make suggestions about it, read it afterwards and return comment after the meetings. At the meetings we're inclined to sort of thrash out some of the bits that she draws attention to and talk about them more, suggest other things that she might look at in the same kind of light. (Non-Māori supervisor)

I've gotten good at getting to a point that I actually plan when I'm gonna need some support. I will put an email together, for example, and say, 'On such and such a date, I will be at this point, and I will need you to do this, this and that. You will receive my work on this day and then I will contact you a few days after—or can we now please plan for you to have read that work on this date, at which point we will meet?' In the last month we've probably had two meetings but that's because we're at this stage. When I was getting close to finishing, I sent an email to both supervisors and said, 'This is where I'm up to. In order to get to there, I'm gonna need some really hard-out supervision.' (Student)

That's my emphasis: writing. Because I find also with many students, with Māori students in particular, a lot of talking is great fun and exciting, but I really don't want to hear the words much. I do some of that, but it's more social. When we have our monthly meetings, it's like we're working on a product. And so that's the gaze, always, rather than this (to the face), it's this (to the page). (Non-Māori supervisor)

Receiving written work in good time for a meeting and getting useful feedback during the meeting are complementary issues that came up in our research. Some supervisors thought that it was only worth having meetings when there was written work to respond to. If there was written work to be discussed, most supervisors wanted it in advance of meetings so they had time to read it and think carefully about what feedback they might give. And students, not surprisingly, wanted the supervisor to have read the work and be prepared to give substantive feedback that would support the momentum of their project.

Meeting with all supervisors

Meetings with the three of us were a lot of the time called by me. Usually I would meet separately with my main supervisor and he would give me feedback on my writing. We didn't really sit and discuss ideas, I didn't do that with either of them. Then I'd get feedback from my second supervisor on the same piece of writing and each of the pieces of feedback would be steering me in slightly different directions. So when I found that happening, I'd say, 'I think we need to meet, so I can determine where I'm going.' (Student)

We had relatively regular meetings, the three of us, we talked about the kaupapa. The other supervisor would probably describe our relationship as me being the good cop and her the bad cop. She's probably a lot more direct in terms of saying, 'This is what you need to do, bom, bom, bom.' I was a lot more flexible. So the student would then come to me and we'd work through those things. I think the team worked well. (Māori supervisor)

Here again we found a wide variety in what went on. Sometimes all the supervisors met almost every time with the student, sometimes taking quite different roles, and contributing different strengths. Sometimes they almost never met together, especially if the second supervisor had a very narrowly defined contribution to make, or they met just once a year. We also heard about second supervisors stepping up to take a more central role either in the absence of the main supervisor or if things weren't going so well between the main supervisor and student.

Strategies students told us about for making the most of meetings

- Have protected and substantial time for meetings where you and your supervisor can get deeply into the work together. This is especially important for infrequent meetings, such as in distance supervision.
- Share food as a time to be together to talk in a more informal way, and consider meeting in a place that is conducive to relaxation and work.
- Use an agenda to keep the meeting focused (the student can set it, although the supervisors will probably want to put things on it too).
- Plan milestones and goals robustly—stretch yourself!
- Brainstorm together, maybe using a whiteboard or big sheets of paper to record your discussion.
- Meet kitea kanohi (face to face)—particularly if there is disagreement.
- Keep email records of agreements and send them to all supervisors.
- Learn to say what you want.
- Learn to theorise through being willing to have challenging discussions with your supervisor. One student described how the challenging “so what” question made her take the difficult step of theorising traditional knowledge.
- Learn not to be overconfident and question impulsive responses that will (naturally) occur in meetings.
- If you receive invitations to do nonthesis-related academic activities (for example, represent your department, teach classes, write papers not related to your thesis), discuss them with your supervisor. They can help you fend off flattering offers that will distract you from getting finished.
- “Just in time” supervision is sometimes effective (i.e., short, focused conversations, sometimes by phone).
- Talk to your supervisor about who else to send your work out to for peer review, and get your supervisor's assistance in addressing the feedback.
- Ask your supervisor to help you prepare for presenting at national and international conferences.
- If your supervision meetings aren't helping you to make progress, talk with a trusted peer or another academic about how to address the situation.

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