

The role of the supervisor

The supervisor of Honours, Masters and PhD students have a range of formal roles. The purpose of this page is not to document these, rather, it is to give you a sense of why you should think carefully about who you might like to supervise your higher degree.

Honours/Masters/PhDs are not “taught” in the way undergraduate degrees are taught. There are few lectures, tutorials, practicals. Rather you drive your research forward with guidance from a member of Staff who has been there before, guides you away from holes and tries to advise you as best they can towards a pathway they believe will maximize your performance.

Supervisors and Students work **closely** together for 1-3+ years (depending on the degree). Most Staff see students at this level as colleagues rather than Students. You are working on something the supervisor is personally interested in and they are likely to take a close interest in what you are doing. You should form an excellent working relationship with your supervisor and this has to be strong and communicative to withstand the pressures that always develop at times during these degrees. So, choose carefully and thoughtfully.

If you think the Staff member is non-communicative/horrible/stupid/boring then don't choose them as a supervisor ! If they are too busy to chat to you about possibilities, then don't choose them. If they tell you to come back at 10am next Tuesday, and bring a coffee, interpret that as an organized person who is likely to look after you until the caffeine addiction kills them.

For all degrees you should seek advice regarding a possible supervisor from as many people as possible. Current Honours students, the Head of Department, Academic Staff. The choice of a supervisor will usually evolve from a combination of the research area you wish to pursue, advice from staff members and your preference. The aim is always to find the best fit between student, research topic and supervisor, bearing in mind the other commitments of various staff members. Academic Staff really cannot supervise more than two Honours students at any one time. Bear this in mind, and get in early. Many supervisors will encourage you to think about Masters (Honours) instead of Honours. This is often very wise advice.

The role of your supervisor is to help you formulate your research topic and plan your research program, and provide resources for your project where possible. He/she is someone off whom you can bounce ideas. Continuing guidance and advice from your supervisor should be a critical part of the learning process. It is important that you and your supervisor strike a balance between originality and independence on your part, and guidance on their part. You should both clearly understand and, if need be, document what that balance is to be.

If you have any doubts about your ability to establish a productive working relationship with your supervisor, or if difficulties arise later on, you should discuss your concerns with the Head of Department (or another member of Staff if you prefer). It may be better to change supervisors than to attempt to persevere despite difficulties.