Role of your Supervisor

Their key responsibilities

A key to your success as a higher degree by research (HDR) student is your relationship with your supervisor(s). Supervisors progressively develop your capacity to work independently by guiding and mentoring your research development. By the completion of your Master of Philosophy (MPhil) or Doctor of Philosophy (PhD), you should be equipped to function as an independent researcher who can generate new knowledge, critically engage with your field, and contribute to academic and professional communities.

As you develop your relationship with your supervisor, it is important to navigate the following common areas of your development to help set your expectations. Early in your candidature, it is important to complete a student/supervisor agreement that outlines everyone's roles.

Type of feedback provided

Some supervisors prefer to provide broad feedback about your written work. For example, they might help you ensure there's a logical sequence to your arguments, a "red thread" tying the different sections of your thesis together. Another supervisor might focus on aspects of academic writing that beginning HDR candidates often find challenging, such as how to synthesise and critique prior research. Others review your work with a (figurative) red pen out, correcting some common grammatical errors. Proofreading is often best done through professional editing services (which your HDR research funding can be used for) or software tools.

Support for your mental health

In addition to their academic expertise, supervisors can also share insights with you about coping with the challenges of academic life. As you develop your relationship with them, you should feel comfortable to inform and discuss personal and life experiences that may be affecting your progress and your wellbeing. If they know what is going on in your life, supervisors can play an important role in referring you to the range of student services at Federation University. Knowing what is going on for you means that they can advocate for you as needed.

Time management skills

The supervisory role is different from that of a workplace manager – the onus is on you to ensure that you can meet deadlines, work effectively, and so on. Part of managing your time is prioritising which professional experience will help you in your post-HDR life, such as joining professional networks, publishing, finding teaching work, and so on. Discussing and refining your Skills Audit and HDR Skills Development Plan with input from your supervisor(s) can optimise the choices you make during your HDR journey.

CRICOS 00103D | RTO 4909 | TEQSA PRV12151 (Aust)

Supervisors are not tutors

Your supervisor mentors the production of your thesis and inducts you into academic life. Some HDR students opt to co-author published journal outputs with their supervisor – at the PhD level, this is called a "thesis incorporating publication" – but the main aspect of their role is to act as a more senior guide who can gradually enable your development as an independent researcher.

Supervisors are not the font of all knowledge

While your supervisor will be an expert in the broader field that your research is situated within, they will not know absolutely everything that is relevant to your project. A core purpose of a higher degree by research is to make an original contribution to existing knowledge. This means that the research conducted for your MPhil/PhD extends beyond what is *already* known. If all the answers were already available from your supervisor or the existing literature, there would be little opportunity for new knowledge to be created. Consequently, as an HDR candidate, you become an expert in the niche area of your MPhil/PhD.

What about the supervisory relationship beyond candidature?

The main job of your supervisor is to see you through to the end of your candidature. That said, they may be able to continue to advocate for you in some capacity after you have completed your degree. This may take the form of providing references or letters of recommendation, introducing you to useful people in the field, or giving advice on potential publication outlets for your work.

Discuss and negotiate expectations directly with your supervisor(s) in the first instance. If this does not lead to a shared understanding, seek guidance from the HDR Coordinator.

Related resources

Control-click on the following resources to open their links.

- Graduate Research School (GRS)
- Skills Development Program (SDP)
- Scholarships for Research
- Principles for Respectful Supervisory Relationships

CRICOS 00103D | RTO 4909 | TEQSA PRV12151 (Aust)