

Working with a supervisor on a research project

Before the project

Approaching a potential supervisor can feel daunting, but most academics will be happy to talk to enthusiastic students about their area of research.

We asked Andy Nicholls, one of our SURE 2018 supervisors, for his advice on approaching academic supervisors: *“I don’t mind if a student has already formed an idea or if they just have a desire to work in my area of research, as long as they show enthusiasm. I think most academics will always have small projects in mind so should be pleased to have someone with an open mind to try it, but equally if someone already has a project idea then for me it shows they will be engaged in the project and that is also desirable.”*

Regardless of whether you have a particular project in mind or just a broad area of research, it’s good to contact a potential supervisor as soon as possible. **An email is a good starting point, but one in which you suggest meeting to discuss your ideas.**

At the start of the project

Once your project starts, you should establish expectations between you and your supervisor. Things to consider include:

- How will you communicate? Do they prefer email, or is it ok to pop in to see them with queries?
- How regularly will you meet?
- What are your areas of responsibility?
- Try to agree on a clear plan of when you’ll see them, for how long, and what stages of work should be delivered by when.

Meetings

Regular meetings are a good way to make sure your project stays on track.

- Decide on a couple of questions or issues that you’d like to focus on. If you can, send these to your supervisor in advance so they can prepare.
- Keep a note of what was discussed and what you have agreed to do. Follow up on these.
- Make sure you schedule the time and date of the next meeting before you leave.

Examples of areas your supervisor can guide you with

- Advice and suggestions about reading. They might have specific authors and text suggestions, or it could be more general.
- Appropriate methodology (based on your discipline, topic, question), research design and methods, and research vehicles (questionnaires, interviews etc.)
- How to go about your data analysis
- They may read first drafts/parts of your work if this is agreed

Problems

Despite everyone's best efforts and intentions, sometimes difficulties can arise between student and supervisor. The most common problems are communication issues. You may find the following advice helpful:

1. Don't be afraid to ask for clarification

If you're given a task you're not sure about or receive some feedback you don't understand, ask for clarification to avoid further misunderstandings.

2. If they don't get in touch

There could be any number of reasons why your supervisor might not be able to get back to you straight away. Be patient, but follow up in a friendly and professional manner if the problem needs addressing urgently. If appropriate, you could approach them during office hours in person.

Other support available

- SURE Team: surescheme@sheffield.ac.uk
- 301 Academic Skills workshops and SURE events
- [Study Skills Online](#)
- [MASH](#)
- [Library Tutorials](#)
- [Creative and Digital Media support \(CiCS\)](#)