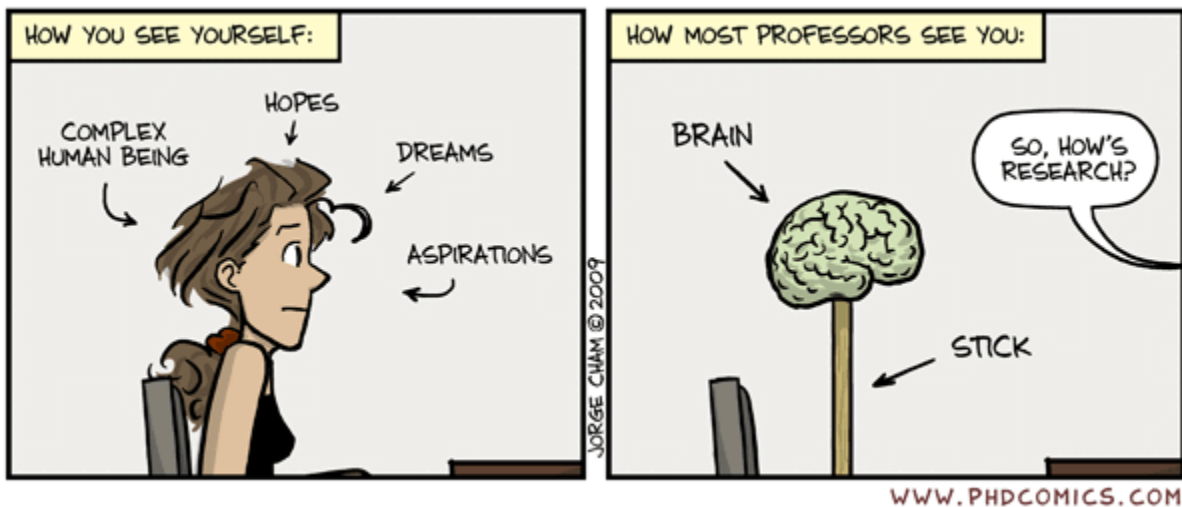# How to become an ideal supervisor

A reflective guide on how we can become better supervisors for master and PhD students in a competitive environment.

Prepared by the WaSo project
www.wasoproject.org

Supervision – let us repeat what is right and not repeat the mistakes

Each and every one of us have gone through a supervision process during our masters and PhDs. While the years as university students were probably the best years of our lives, there were numerous positive and less positive moments related to our studies. Many of us were without daily contact with our parents, thus our teachers and friends became the only sources of advice and comfort. It was a time where all of us would have benefitted from some professional support on guiding our studies and lives. Did we get that help – and to the extent we were expecting it?

The answer probably varies a lot, although it is sure that most of us agree it could have been better. As the graduate supervisors in a modern society of universities, both we and the graduate students deserve to explore the possibilities to improve the supervision practice.

There is a lot of information and guidelines on supervision available in the public domain. Some universities have published their own guidelines, while there are monographs authored by supervisors and students on general basis. The WaSo project (www.wasoproject.org) acknowledges the need to improve capacity and competence of supervisors as one of the important steps to secure graduates and post-graduates of better quality – with the limited supervision resources available.

Where to start this process? How can we become better supervisors? How can we even become ideal supervisors? We have identified inaccurate or incomprehensive perceptions and assumptions related to supervision as a major reason for poor supervisory qualities. To improve upon these, we need to understand the expectations of both the students and ourselves.

In this process, we have formulated six questions posed by us, the supervisors, and verified our assumptions and perceptions, with responses from graduate students from WaSo partner universities.

The six questions were:
- What does an MSc student expect from the supervisor?
- What does a supervisor expect from an MSc student?
- Why are we not ideal MSc supervisors?
- What can we do to become better MSc supervisors?
- What can students do for us to become better MSc supervisors?
- What can our universities/faculties/departments do to make us better MSc supervisors?

We asked the same question about PhD students too. Furthermore, we asked graduate students to list what they expect from a supervisor.

What is expected from a supervisor?

"I'm coordinating five different R&D projects, but SURE, I can spare a minute."

We have all been graduate students some time ago. And we have gathered substantial experience by guiding graduate students over the years. While it is a challenge to define exactly what today's graduate students expect from a supervisor, we have agreed that the following qualities are expected from a supervisor, if we were the students:

- **A professional guide on subject matter**: someone who is knowledgeable on the subject and has access to scholarly materials.
- **A coordinator:** who has patience and is supportive during the process, in defining a doable scope and following up with deadlines.
- **A personal guide:** who is accessible and who can understand the human behaviors and needs of graduate students – including the guidance on building up careers after graduation. Flexibility and willingness to discuss relevant issues in a friendly and encouraging environment
- **A resourceful person:** someone who can guide and assist in finding necessary funding and fellowships, relevant contacts, and a person with broad experience on supervision.

PhD students expect a managerial role from a supervisor in addition to what the MSc students expect:
- **A manager:** who is willing to discuss alternative ideas and approaches but still guides the candidates strictly along the set time lines; who is available and interested in continuous and frequent discussions at agreed intervals.

The above qualities were identified and discussed among the WaSo supervisors and refined through an iterative process.

To evaluate if our understanding of the expectation of today's graduate students were accurate, we have asked graduate students to list their expectations. In most occasions, their ideas overlapped with ours, while they showed a more demanding and precise involvement in time management, access to research resources, assistance in funding and fellowships and mostly a discussion partner who is friendly and available.
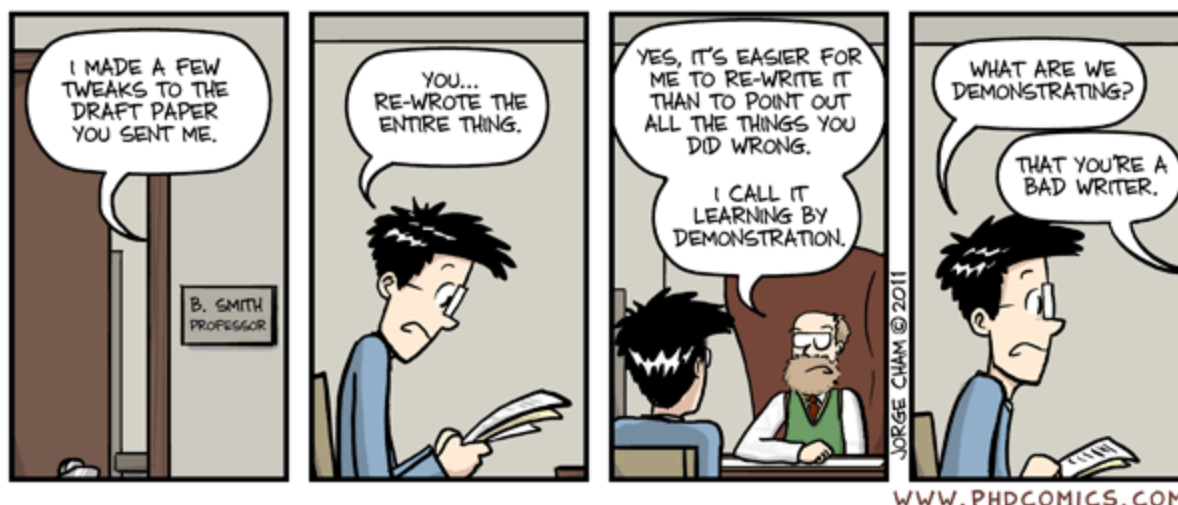
Our perceptions on what is anticipated from a supervisor are quite in agreement with what the students expect from us, as well as what others have written about in their books and blogs. The conclusion is that we have a fairly good understanding about what is expected from a supervisor. However, it is a questionable if each of us are capable and willing to become supervisors that provide these qualities. In many cases, we do not manage to become the ideal supervisors due to a range of reasons. Our daily schedules and responsibilities often come in conflict with these needs. To give priority to supervision activities among the many other activities that demand our time and attention, we also need to be motivated. Some students motivate us more than others…

What a supervisor expects from a student?

The most motivating factor for us as supervisors is the commitment and the devotedness of the students. The moment we see that they are less motivated than ourselves, our motivation to prioritise our time for the student reduces radically. When a student comes well-prepared to consultations, we see that (s)he is a smart and/or hard working person and motivated to work. To respond to the preparedness of the student, we become motivated to devote our time.

Respecting the time limits available for consultations is also important. The consultation time can be used efficiently and productively or can be wasted on less fruitful discussions on minor, disturbing details.

We also appreciate good discussions, honesty and ethical conduct, good teamwork and finally, the students' writing and communication skills and their willingness to learn.

When we look back at how the numerous students behaved while we were supervising them, we notice a big variation. While we ensure ourselves that we will try our best to find sufficient time for supervision for the good and devoted students, we also need to think why a student is not motivated and what we can do to motivate him/her.

Despite the knowledge on what is expected from an ideal supervisor and our intentions to become ideal supervisors, it is not possible to deliver these qualities in practice. We will analyse them in the next sections.

Why are we not ideal supervisors?

During several occasions, we have discussed what are the reasons for making it difficult for us to become the ideal supervisors - whom we would like to be. Organisational challenges are identified as the biggest drawback in making us good supervisors. Sometimes we have too many students with limited resources (infrastructure, facilities, technical assistance), which are again a result of limited institutional resources. Not only is it difficult to get adequate funding, but even after getting funding the procurement process becomes a tiring and time consuming process.

On some occasions, we also note that the lack of research culture at departments is also a demotivating factor to devote more on graduate supervision. Political stability of a country and in the higher education administration are also necessary factors.

To our own disappointment, we see that some of our colleagues get carried away with private consultancy practices that competes for the supervision time. Lack of financial and institutional incentives are the main reasons for this, while lack of time, motivation and our choice to prioritise other needs are equally disturbing. In contrary to the organisational challenges, these are factors mostly dependent on ourselves, and which we should not let our students become victims of.

There is also one more factor that occurs more often that we would like to acknowledge. Sometimes, we are just outdated with knowledge, mainly due to the lack of time required for renewal of our knowledge. Lack of our ability to understand the capabilities of students and the problems they are facing are also issues. Finally, when we feel that we are incapable of writing good research proposals or getting them funded, it may also affect us in becoming ideal supervisors.

The way forward

The WaSo project has an ambition to improve the quality of supervision by making supervisors more aware of the needs and facilitate adequate resources such that necessary time can be allocated for all supervision related tasks. The first step is to understand the expectations, problem and challenges discussed in the previous sections.

Secondly, there are things that we can take initiatives on – both to improve issues depending on us and also to influence positively on issues depending on others. Our discussions have revealed the following as what can be done by students, university administrations and ourselves.
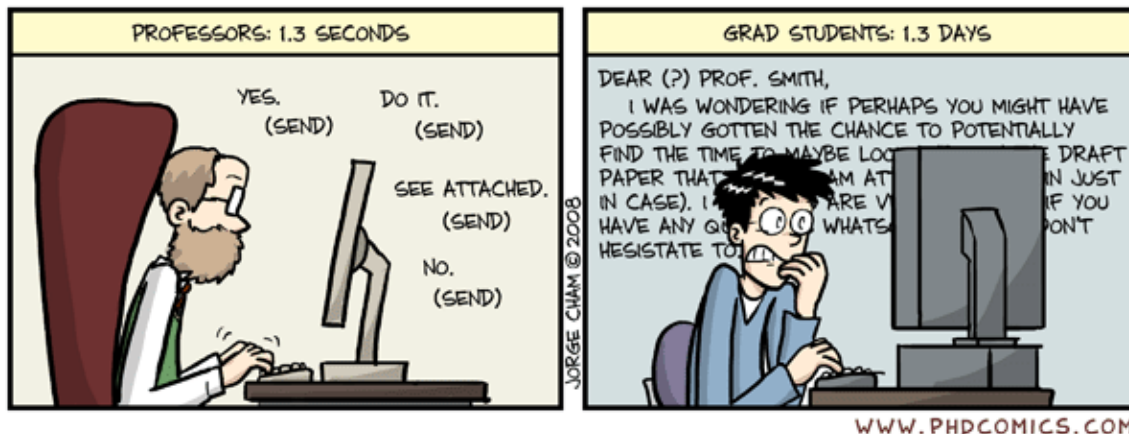
What can we do to become better supervisors?

- Knowledge
  - Updating the knowledge through scientific literature and lectures
  - Involvement in Research development
  - Obtain adequate training on supervision and subject
  - Attend conferences and refresh the knowledge
  - Building network among other supervisors and researchers
  - Involve in publications – also in joint publications
- Availability/Accessibility
  - Find ways to increase motivation
  - Devote time for student supervision/ scheduled meeting with agenda
- Influence on organisational issues
  - Advocate availability of resources (infrastructure and facilities)
  - Work together with administration on providing training for ourselves
  - Influence on university administration to make research priorities
  - Seek access to latest research/Publication and advancements
- Be a better manager
  - Understand student background and needs
  - Look for, and facilitate, funding sources
  - Find smart ways to manage: organise research groups if there are several students
  - Plan ahead for the resources and time needed
  - Plan for funding of supervision through research grants
  - Train yourself on finding grants and proposal writing

What can students do for us to become better supervisors?

- Be efficient during consultations: be prepaid and well-structured to use the time optimally
- Ask critical questions and be reflective on the subject
- Be positive to provide input on updated knowledge, which are beneficial both to you and your supervisor
- Give the supervisor an opportunity to be well-prepared (time, questions)
- Hard working students will also make supervisors hard working

What can our universities/faculties/departments do to make us better supervisors?

- Be creative and find incentives
- Plan wisely to allocate necessary time for supervision by providing adequate work loads
- Appreciation of the time and effort of the supervisors
- Provide and facilitate funds and facilities research/education
- Provide administrative support so the supervisors can prioritise supervision on subject matters
- Be proactive on providing training /quality improvement opportunities

Discussion notes from working sessions

1.1 What does an MSc student expects from the supervisor (from a teacher's perspective):
- A manager?
    - Availability
    - Accessibility
    - patience
    - supportive
    - A leader, not a boss.
    - Defining the doable scope
    - Regular discussion on our progress
- A professional guide on subject matter?
    - Knowledgeable
    - knowledgeable of the subject matter
    - scholarly materials
    - advice in academic matters
- A personal guide?
    - Flexibility
    - Approachable (Understanding)
    - Time commitment and management
    - advice in personal matters (up to certain extent)
    - Close supervision
    - Understanding our personal life and our difficulties if possible assist
- A resourceful person?
    - previous successful completion of degrees by students
    - financial/ scholarship/funding/…….
    - Resources

1.2 What does an MSc student expects from the supervisor (from a student's perspective):
- Have access to, and willing to share, relevant knowledge
- Guidance on research direction and content
- Time management
- Assistance and recommendation for fellowships
- Prompt feedback
- Transparency, polite feedback with no bias or discrimination
- Willingness to listen and discuss ideas
- Establishing a network of students
- Assistance on personal issues, if required
- He is expected to encourage the researcher for publication of chapters the research under study;

Unsorted comments
- *Have access to, and willing to share, relevant knowledge*
- *Guidance on research direction and content*
- *Time management*

- *Assistance and recommendation for fellowships*
- *Prompt feedback*
- *Transparency, polite feedback with no bias or discrimination*
- *Willingness to listen and discuss divergeting ideas*
- *Establishing a network of students*
- *Friendly assistance*
- *Assistance on personal issues, if required*
- *A supervisor is expected to put some effort in creating networks for research grant as well as other experience sharing opportunities for the PhD researcher;*
- *He is expected to possess a technical as well as substantive knowledge on the issue under study;*
- *He is expected to encourage the researcher for publication of chapters the research under study;*
- *Timely reading, and personally i believe one supervisor is not enough for a PhD research. I suggest one internal and one external (non-Ethiopian) supervisors who have relevant qualification, experience and ontological knowledge on the subject matter under study.*
- *Reading the chapters I submit swiftly*
- *Providing relevant comments on the subject matter*
- *Indicating funding sources for the field work*
- *Providing letter of recommendation for fellowships when needed*
- *Establish a network of students conducting researches on related issues*
- *Give me deadlines so that I work hard*
- *I expect support on relevant literature on the area of the research that I am undertaking*
- *I expect my supervisor to give me feedbacks on my methodology at the beginning of the research which is very crucial since if such comments come towards the end it will be very difficult to go back and correct the whole process*
- *I expect my supervisor to give me comments early*
- *Tell me what the system looks like and what is expected from me in the process of completing the paper*
- *Provide support on research methodology and guide me on sources of data such as reference books, etc.*
- *Being available on consultation hours*
- *Understand personal problems, if it occurs during the course of thesis writing*
- *Being genuinely supportive*
- *Should take up weekly or monthly meetings face to face to understand the progress of students*
- *Should support me with reading materials as well as refer to people if needed*
- *Being friendly, so that I can discuss things with him/her freely*
- *Provide advice on personal challenges that may imping the student from completing work*
- *Proper follow-up throughout the period of the study*
- *He/she should be available in their office hours*
- *He/she should be responsive when students submit chapters*
- *Friendly relationship with the advisee because it increases openness and transparency to discuss issues under study. The relationship should not be boss-subordinate one*
- *Encouraging students to undertake study on the thematic area/topic they are interested in rather than forcing them to conduct studies in the area of interest of the supervisor. This is to say that advisors should have a position of guiding rather than forcing students*
- *Correcting students more flexibly and genuinely when they commit mistakes*

- *Developing a sense of integrity-being ready to help students by encouraging them better*
- *Being punctual in in providing feedbacks to students*
- *Willing to listen and accept divergent of ideas raised from students rather than ignoring them with the perception that students do not know anything*
- *Properly understand the research design which is applied by the student*
- *Advisors should give enough time to students*
- *Assist students by assessing the gaps of skill and knowledge they may face*
- *He/she should maintain good relations with the student and it is the role of the supervisor not to be a dictator*
- *He/she understand the wide-range of challenges students may have*
- *Supervisors should be competent in the area of study they are advising on*
- *Cooperative*
- *Valuable advice*
- *Advice on clear direction of research*
- *To discuss my opinions freely*
- *Guide me to build my carrier*
- *To learn something new*
- *Help me to publish my paper ina journal*
- *Assistance to obtain data where I do not have access to*
- *Create interactive classes/forums*
- *Generate new ideas*
- *Problem serving guidance*
- *Being responsive when needed*
- *Inspire or influence in research direction and methodology*
- *Mentorship*
- *Sharing and shaping of knowledge*
- *Good communication*
- *Correction of student failures*
- *Availability*
- *Task suitable for time*
- *Friendliness*
- *Timely feed back*
- *Assist without discrimination or bias*
- *Polite corrections without discouraging or pinning the student completely*
- *Assist in time management of studies*
- *Timely return of documents given for corrections*
- *Honesty and understanding*
- *Availability*
- *Guidance on unclear and difficult aspects*
- *Challenging criticism*
- *Knowledge on past, present and future*
- *Should have/share some relevant publications*
- *Accessibility – physically or via mobile*
- *Guide in the correct path*
- *Marks if we deserve*
- *Encourage us to publish our work*

- *Show mistakes*
- *Be friendly*
- *Guidance throughout the research*
- *Encourage and give comments for the work done*
- *Deadlines and working through a timeline*
- *Good communication*
- *Continuous progress evaluation*
- *Being friendly and reasonable, nobody wants a supervisor who is always scolding for no reason.*
- *Available to check the work at least twice a month.*
- *Being very good/an expert in the research area so a state of the art research can be conducted.*
- *Supervisor having a certain local and/or international recognition would help my future career also.*
- *If the supervisor is available and willing to give some advice in personal matters (up to a certain extend such as to get advice on moving to a new place, visiting family, etc.), it would be perfect.*
- *Regular progress evaluation meetings*
- *Assistance to find relevant research papers. Since we don't have access to reputed journals.*
- *Assistant in building the methodology and analysis techniques*
- *Assistance to find potential chances to publish the research findings.*
- *Reliable comments and corrections on proposal, papers and thesis.*
- *Assist and force to meet the deadlines*
- *Collaborate in compiling the research findings publication*
- *Link with the other researches, industrial experts and related personnel to grab the knowledge and thereby develop the research*
- *Work timely and trustworthy*
- *Protect the disciple against the unwanted pressures during the study*

1.3 What does a supervisor expects from an MSc student? (from a teacher's perspective)
- Punctual
- Availability
- Honesty/ethics
- Commitment /eagerness
- Prepared
- Hard/smart working
- Motivated
- Be efficient during consultations
- Good teamwork
- Devotedness
- Writing and communication skills

1.4. Why are we not ideal MSc supervisors? (from a teacher's perspective)
- Knowledge
  - Not properly understanding the student problems
  - Not updating the knowledge
  - Inability to understand student capability
  - Incapable of writing good research proposal for funding and resource
- Organizational

- o Lack of resources (infrastructure and facilities)
- o Number of students is too many
- o Limited institutional resources
- o Frustrating procurement procedures
- o Not sufficient sources to get funds
- o Less priorities for student supervision
- o Lack of research culture at the work place
- Factors beyond our control
  - o Political instability
- Personal priorities
  - o Lack of motivation
  - o Lack of time (opportunity cost)
  - o Lack of financial incentive and institutional incentive
  - o Occupied with other activities

1.5. What can we do to become better MSc supervisors? (from a teacher's perspective)
- Knowledge
  - o Updating the knowledge
  - o Involvement in Research development
  - o Training
  - o Attend conferences and refresh the knowledge
  - o Building network
  - o publications
- Availability/Accessibility
  - o Motivation
  - o Devote time for student supervision/ scheduled meeting with agenda
- Influence on organizational issues
  - o Availability of resources (infrastructure and facilities)
  - o Providing training for ourselves
  - o Access to current scholarly materials
  - o Institutional support to make research priorities
  - o Access to latest research/Publication and advancements
- Be a better manager
  - o Understand student background
  - o Funding sources
  - o If there are many students, supervisor should organize research groups.
  - o Plan ahead the resources needed.
  - o Funding through research grant
  - o proposal writing

1.6 What can students do for us to become better MSc supervisors? (from a teacher's perspective)
- Be efficient during consultations
- Ask critical questions and be reflective on the subject
- Be open
- Input on updated knowledge
- Give the supervisor an opportunity to be well-prepared (time, questions)
- Hard working students will make supervisors also hard working

1.7. What can our universities/faculties/departments can do to make us better MSc supervisors? (from a teacher's perspective)

- Incentives
- Allocate time / adequate work load
- Appreciation of the time & effort
- Funds and facilities research/education
- Administrative support
- Training /quality improvement opportunities

2.1 What does a PhD student expects from a supervisor? (from a teacher's perspective)

- A manager
    - The supervisor has to be accessible at any time through electronic media but at least once a month face to face
    - The supervisor shall be very clear on the research topic.
    - Timely feedback (max. 2 weeks)
    - Willingness to facilitate periodic contact (min. once a month)
- A deadline in addition to what suggested at proposal has to be given.
    - Accommodative to new ideas
    - Constructive and timely- critical
    - Available (at consultation hours)
    - Accessibility
- A professional guide on subject matter?
    - Up to a certain extent, the supervisor shall make every effort to guide the student to access related literature/material.
    - Knowledge in the field (incl. literature)
- A personal guide?
    - Keen interest until the end.
    - Supervisor has to be a mentor whenever need arises
    - Supportive* (exposure, empathetic)
    - Responsive
    - A resourceful person?

2.2 What does a PhD student expects from a supervisor? (from a student's perspective)

- Availability
- Knowledgeable in the field, and willingness to share
- Encouraging to publish
- Prompt and constructive feedback
- Assist and facilitate in funding
- Establish a network of students / like minded students
- Be friendly, patience and have "emotional intelligence"

Comments - unsorted

- *A supervisor is expected to put some effort in creating networks for research grant as well as other experience sharing opportunities for the PhD researcher;*
- *He is expected to possess a technical as well as substantive knowledge on the issue under study;*
- *He is expected to encourage the researcher for publication of chapters the research under study;*

- *Timely reading, and personally i believe one supervisor is not enough for a PhD research. I suggest one internal and one external (non-Ethiopian) supervisors who have relevant qualification, experience and ontological knowledge on the subject matter under study.*
- *Reading the chapters I submit swiftly*
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- *Give me deadlines so that I work hard*
- *I expect support on relevant literature on the area of the research that I am undertaking*
- *I expect my supervisor to give me feedbacks on my methodology at the beginning of the research which is very crucial since if such comments come towards the end it will be very difficult to go back and correct the whole process*
- *I expect my supervisor to give me comments early*
- *Be friendly*
- *Can guide me as much as she can*
- *He should study besides the student*
- *Give time to student*
- *Help in literature review and scanning themes*
- *Proposal development (structure)*
- *Research design/methodology setup support to acquire tools/technicians*
- *Guide in direction of data collection*
- *Support report preparation and proof checking, comments for revisions*
- *Presentation and facilitation skills*
- *Cooperation during my operational work*
- *Statistical supervision*
- *Share his working experience so I Can be best*
- *Help me to achieve my goals*
- *Guide me at all aspects of y working and study*
- *His time*
- *His focus on the research*
- *Availability*
- *Financial support provision/option*
- *Knowledge on the state of the art*
- *Cooperative*
- *Proper guidance on research work*
- *Help in career development*
- *Availability*
- *To have emotional intelligence*
- *Approachable and able to solve problems amicably*
- *Can mentor and guide the students*
- *Who is able to work with students from different backgrounds and culture*
- *IS reliable and present for his/her students*
- *Availability for consultations*
- *Quick feedback for draft thesis*
- *Exposition of new and emerging technologies in the field*

- *Linkage to like minded student initiatives*
- *Facilitation of exchange student programs*
- *Frequent feedback*
- *Guidance and availability for consultation*
- *Knowledgeable in my field of study*
- *Patience*
- *Dedication for supervision*

2.3 What does a supervisor expects from a PhD student? (from a teacher's perspective)
- Support master students / guidance
- Self-motivation
- Independence & self confidence
- Creativeness
- Structured
- Punctual
- Availability
- Honesty/ethics
- Commitment /eagerness
- Prepared
- Hard/smart working
- Motivated
- Be efficient during consultations
- Good teamwork
- Devotedness
- Writing and communication skills

2.4 Why are we not ideal PhD supervisors? (from a teacher's perspective)
- Knowledge
    - Ideal supervisor has to be well knowledgeable on the proposed area of research.
    - Poor recognition of the assignments
    - Failure to be updated on knowledge and information in the field
- Organizational
    - Topic has to be selected considering the educational background of the candidate
    - Let the topic be open-ended, however the supervisor has to guide the candidate for this proposal preparation.
    - Supervisor has to be more professional - both strict as well as friendly
    - Poor remuneration
    - Lack of research institutional support to supervisors
    - Not properly trained
    - Poor/lack of consultation while assigning supervisors
    - Poor collaboration between supervisors
    - Heavy teaching load
- Factors beyond our control
    - ????
- Personal priorities
    - Low salaries (and sometimes greed)

2.5 What can we do to become better PhD supervisors? (from a teacher's perspective)
- Knowledge
  - Training in new technologies of supervision
  - Training in fund raising (research proposals)
  - Update your knowledge
- Availability
- Influence on organizational issues
  - Peer assessments involving both supervisors and students
  - Review of institutional PhD supervision policies
- Be a better manager
  - Exposure to other ideas
  - Be accessible and helpful (have set consultation times)
  - Commitment/ adherence to PhD contracts (institution-supervisors-student)

2.6 What can PhD students do for us to become better supervisors? (from a teacher's perspective)
- Constructive discussions /critical thoughts
- Assist in supervision of master students and teaching?
- Update subject knowledge
- Contribute to the department/research groups life

2.7. What can our universities/faculties/departments can do to make us better PhD supervisors? (from a teacher's perspective)
- Consent & dialogue with supervisor in selection/ appointing process
- Incentives
- Allocate time / adequate work load
- Appreciation of the time & effort
- Funds and facilities research/education
- Administrative support
- Training /quality improvement opportunities