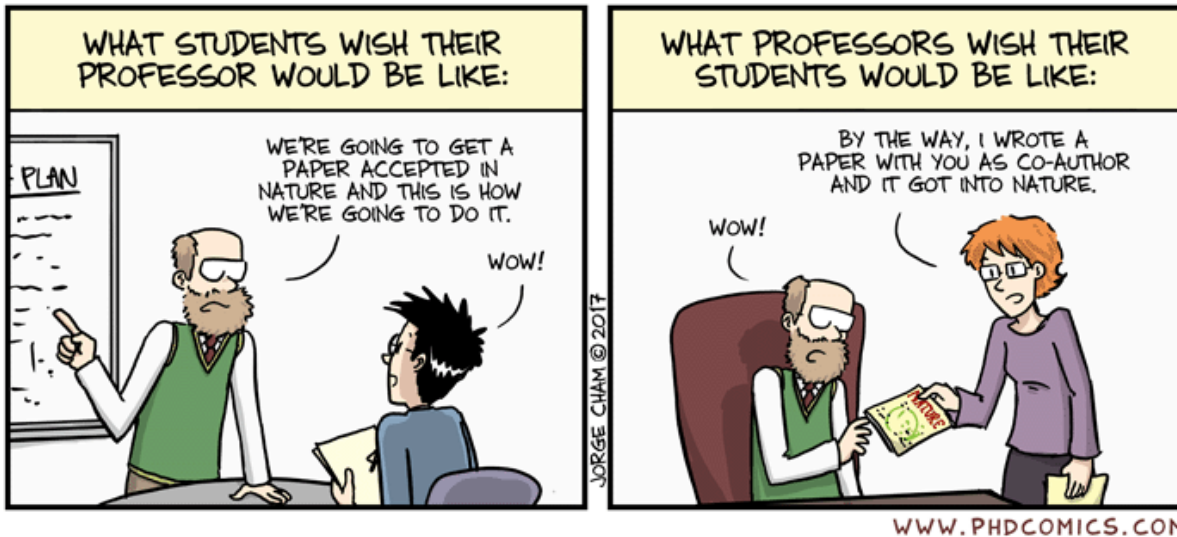# Tip Sheet: Twelve tips for setting expectations with PhD students

The following is a series of tips to help you navigate your relationships with your PhD students and will also link to some useful materials on the Imperial College London website to further your understanding. **Meet early to discuss them.** Most problems that happen between supervisor and student are a direct result of not comparing and agreeing clear expectations, roles and responsibilities, boundaries and ways of working early on in the relationship. This will help to prevent conflict and student stress over the long term.

1. **Be clear about the College's expectations of you –** The College's Cornerstone webpages are designed to support you as supervisor – they include:

- The Supervisors' Guide, which lays out your Roles and Responsibilities, Student Recruitment, Effective Partnerships, The PhD Timeline, Wellbeing

- A list of essential documents including a guide to setting mutual expectations in your student-supervisor partnership and various guidelines and policies on PhD supervision. Among the essential documents there is a document outlining the Roles and Responsibilities of the Supervisor. Make sure that you are familiar with these expectations and how you interpret them. Your student may have read the expectations and have interpreted them differently to you. The language occasionally uses intentionally "vague" words such as "normally" or "as appropriate" which can lead to very differing expectations. It is important to clear about how you are both going to approach the supervision relationship. Ask the student to read them and then meet to clarify any points on how you are going to work together.

2. **Compare your expectations of the support you will give:** You might also like to use Hugh Kearns researchers' expectations to supervisors questionnaire. You can ask the students and supervisory team to complete it separately and come together in the next supervision meeting to clarify any areas of difference which might give rise to confusion or conflict. There are no right or wrong answers to these questions, but differing opinions could lead to wasted time, confusion or frustration. It's also important to be clear if those expectations will change over the course of the doctorate i.e., as the student becomes more proficient and confident. (Learn more about this in our video on the Continuum of Leadership in the Performance Management materials).

3. **Clarify when and where you will have your supervision meetings -** and will this change over time?. It's advisable to not always meet in your office as this can set a very hierarchical tone to your relationship. Consider meeting in more neutral or relaxed spaces as well in order to encourage a more creative or open discussion. Check whether your faculty has an expectation on the frequency of your meetings. It's also worth considering whether this frequency will change over time, as the student gets more confident and experienced.

4. **Agree how will meetings be documented** – the suggestion is that the student takes notes and shares these with the supervisory team afterwards. This provides a clear and accurate record of everything that has been discussed and agreed upon and can be referred back to in the case of any future problems. It's also an excellent way for the supervisor to check

the student's understanding in case the student leaves the meeting with an inaccurate understanding of what's been agreed.

5. **Discuss appropriate communication pathways** – how do you want to communicate with each other e.g. email, Teams and, very importantly, what is a reasonable response time. PhD students will often get stressed if they perceive that their supervisor isn't replying to their emails, so it's important to clarify what the response time will be and at what point is it acceptable for the student to follow up with a reminder or check in message on email or by phone.

6. **Are there set working times and annual leave allowance?** Do you expect your students to have fixed hours when they are present? If you are lab-based there might be health and safety issues to consider, so timings for the working day may be important. In addition, it's important to know how much holiday students are entitled to which may be set by the College or their funder. Students often don't take enough holiday and part of the supervisor's role is to encourage them to book annual leave and agree a suitable time for holidays according to the programme of work.

7. **Will you expect your student to publish during their PhD?** this is very discipline specific, and some supervisors expect their students to be publishing during the doctorate whereas in other disciplines this might not be possible or appropriate. As such, supervisors need to be clear around their requirements and also around the level of support the student can expect to receive. Taking time to publish can affect their progress on the thesis.

8. **Will your students be teaching?** – is the student allowed to teach or help out with supervising undergraduates? This needs to be checked with the funding rules: how many hours they are allowed to spend in teaching.

9. **How will you give and receive feedback?** – setting out the expectations for when and where students will receive formal feedback, as well as how you would lie to receive feedback from them. This should be happening frequently (see our example meeting agenda and advice on giving effective feedback) this will include feedback on the student, the project as well as a training needs assessment. You should also be seeking

10. **Is there a budget for resources and travel**?– students are often unaware of budgets and how to access them and it is fundamental to the successful planning of a project. The budget may include travel, conferences, training, resources, licenses etc.
11. **What are the Ethical or IP issues** – this includes more formal processes such as any ethics approval requirements or commercial sensitivities, but also around the ethics of being an effective researcher, data sharing, ownership and authorship.

12. **Other sources of support** – what support can your student expect from the rest of the department? The supervisor isn't responsible for everything and the roles and responsibilities of the co-supervisor and the rest of the team need to be clearly set out so that the student knows who to contact and why. Once again this will prevent problems from surfacing later on if students are clear on the correct pathways for communication and what exactly their co-supervisor is responsible for.

These should be revisited on a 6 to 12 monthly basis