

# Letter of Understanding

## Checklist for Advisors/Supervisors and Graduate Students

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Student Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Student Number: \_\_\_\_\_

Degree Program: \_\_\_\_\_

Supervisor Name: \_\_\_\_\_

The aim of this checklist is to define expectations and responsibilities. Graduate supervision is an important part of training scholars. Positive, respectful, professional, and productive working relationships are paramount to the success of graduate students and their advisors/supervisors. This checklist is provided to help create an environment where such a professional working relationship can flourish. It does so by promoting dialogue about matters that, if not addressed, can potentially result in a less than ideal working relationship – unclear or mismatched expectations and responsibilities. By ensuring that expectations and understanding of responsibilities are aligned at the beginning of the relationship, and that each party has gained a thorough understanding of their respective role in the relationship, the path is paved for a smooth journey.

Graduate students hold the primary responsibility for the completion of their degree. Graduate study requires independent learning, as well as constant collaboration between the student and the supervisor. In accepting admission to a graduate program, the student is agreeing to pursue studies and scholarly work on a full-time basis (if registered full-time) under the supervision of a faculty member, to meet the regulated deadlines established by the Faculty of Graduate Studies, and to maintain open and regular communication with the supervisor. The student is expected to solve problems independently, progress well in research goals, to pursue opportunities to learn or advance necessary skills and ultimately to produce and defend a thesis.

The supervisor is expected to be available for mentoring, and to provide guidance, advice and educational opportunities. The supervisor is expected to provide timely and thorough feedback of the student's work on the thesis, scholarship applications, grant proposals, abstracts and manuscripts for publication.

To make sure that the relationship continues smoothly expectations need to consider changing circumstances and new information. The parties may wish to revise the checklist on a yearly basis, perhaps at the same time as the annual progress report, to keep expectations aligned.

## **OVERALL ROLES & RESPONSIBILITIES:**

### **Supervisor/Advisor(s): It is my responsibility to:**

- make every effort to ensure that the student's learning and research environment is adequately supported with guidance in choosing appropriate course work, providing suitable resources and work space
- ensure that the student's project has an appropriate hypothesis/question and achievable goals that can be reasonably completed within program time limits
- establish a professional and respectful working relationship to guide the student in research and thesis completion
- discuss program time limits, sources of student funding, and at what point a student is no longer eligible for funding
- establish reasonable expectations for student workload including student entitlement to normal full-time study hours (\_\_\_\_\_hr/week) and vacation time (\_\_\_\_\_weeks/yr)
- guide the student in learning to work independently and as a member of a team
- meet regularly (\_\_\_\_\_times/month), at minimum once per term, with the student to provide guidance, assess progress, set milestones and agree to time lines to help attain the goal of completing the degree program on time
- inform the student well ahead of time (ideally, at least one month prior) about any upcoming extended absences (leaves, sabbaticals, field trips) and arrange for how the student will receive appropriate supervision during these absences
- provide timely and thorough written feedback on research proposals, drafts of thesis and manuscripts (normally 3 weeks, depending on the length of the document). Communicate with the student so he/she can anticipate when feedback will be available.
- give credit in an appropriate manner to graduate student contributions to scholarly activity, for instance professional meetings, publications, or in applications for grants

### **Graduate Students: It is my responsibility to:**

- learn skills and approaches to thinking about problems that are suitable for an advanced degree
- exhibit independent judgment, academic rigor, and intellectual honesty
- interact with fellow students, both graduate and undergraduate, staff and faculty in a professional and mature manner
- devote full time to scholarly studies and make timely progress towards completion of degree within program time limits
- discuss expected work hours and the timing and duration of vacations with supervisor

- meet regularly (\_\_\_\_\_times/month; at least once per term) with advisor/supervisor and (\_\_\_\_\_times/year; at least once per year) with supervisory committee to assess progress and to agree on time lines and milestones for next steps
- complete the annual Report on Progress as per Faculty of Graduate Studies requirements
- complete any safety and training courses requirements are required for the research (e.g., Workplace Hazardous Materials Information System (WHMIS), Animal Care, Ethics)
- be aware of current policies, program requirements, procedures and deadlines for course work, research, and thesis completion via the program's web site, the Graduate Program Assistant and/or Faculty of Graduate Studies.

**For the Supervisor and Graduate Student:**

- We understand that the extent and nature of intellectual property varies with the circumstances of the research and student's contributions. See [<http://gradstudies.yorku.ca/current-students/thesis-dissertation/intellectual-property/>] for details of the factors that come into play
- We understand that conflicts can sometimes arise in the student-supervisory relationship and that we may seek assistance from the Graduate Program Director. See [[link](#)] for conflict resolution policy
- We agree that this checklist may be re-visited during the annual research progress evaluation or at any time deemed necessary

\_\_\_\_\_  
Supervisor

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Graduate Student

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Graduate Program Director

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

**APPENDIX: A template of additional discussion points is provided below that may be applicable to some programs. Each program may develop their own customized Appendix but the core questions in the main checklist should remain as is.**

**PERSONAL CONDUCT IN RESEARCH LAB OR LAB SPACE (IF APPLICABLE):**

**Supervisor/Advisor: It is my responsibility to:**

- maintain a high standard of professional and respectful relationships with trainees in the research group
- treat all members of the laboratory (and their work) fairly and with verbal and intellectual respect
- establish reasonable expectations for trainee workload in the lab taking into consideration student course work and RA/TA obligations.
- establish reasonable and fair expectations when assigning trainees to training new students in the laboratory
- respect the trainees' right to avoid working evenings, weekends, and on statutory holidays if they so wish

**Graduate Students: It is my responsibility to:**

- maintain a high standard professional and respectful relationships within the research group
- treat all members of the laboratory (and their work) with verbal and intellectual respect
- keep space tidy, respect the space of others, clean glassware, etc.
- report equipment or supply problems as they arise
- not borrow others' supplies without asking, or remove anything from the laboratory without asking permission
- participate in periodic laboratory cleanup
- maintain daily records of laboratory notes, including printed records of primary data and ensure backup copies are saved/copied daily
- use laboratory computers for research purposes only (*e.g.*, academic email, data analysis, literature searches and other forms of scientific communication)

**PUBLICATIONS:**

**Graduate Students & Supervisors: It is our joint responsibility to**

- present research results that are publishable in reputable, externally refereed journals, thereby achieving the goals of creating new knowledge and reporting it to the appropriate community
- discuss expectations and roles for different authorship roles (first, second, last author) in the discipline and what types of research contributions would normally constitute co-authorship on a paper.
- as early as feasible, determine authorship of planned manuscripts in a fair and collegial manner, in keeping with discipline-specific conventions and in consideration of the importance of first authorship for the student

**STUDENT FUNDING:**

- students are expected to apply for internal and external scholarships appropriate to program of study and well before deadline seek advice and feedback from supervisor to improve application success
- discuss the student's graduate student support and the variety of sources (e.g. RA/TA, York Fellowship, scholarship funding, bursaries, and research funds provided by the supervisor)
- supervisors/advisors are expected to provide timely advice and feedback to students about scholarship and bursary applications and to provide letter of reference when needed, given reasonable notice (normally two weeks).

**PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT:**

- work together to find opportunities for students to attend suitable conferences and present research findings and investigate sources of funding for travel
- encourage participation in non-academic programs for professional development, such as effective writing courses, teaching training programs, and workshops on research grants and conflict resolution