

Supervising dissertations with both head and heart

ECHO tip 91 • May 2020



Centre of Expertise for Higher Education – ECHO (University of Antwerp), In collaboration with Iskander De Bruycker, Maastricht University (formerly UAntwerp, Faculty of Social Sciences)

In all academic programmes, students are required to write a Master dissertation in order to graduate. They pick a subject to discuss and one or more supervisors to guide them through the process. Research has shown that the relationship between the student and the supervisor is a decisive element in the success of a dissertation project (Anderson et al., 2008; de Kleijn et al., 2012; Drennan & Clarke, 2009). But which aspects of this relationship exactly form the basis for successful dissertation supervision? This teaching tip provides lecturers with a theoretical framework to reflect on their own coaching styles, completed with some practical suggestions for supervising students, both face-to-face and online.

The best supervision is situation-dependent

A good coaching approach always starts from the needs of the individual student. In this regard, the practice-oriented theory of situational leadership developed by Hersey and Blanchard (Hersey, 2014) offers a versatile framework to expand on. Based on the findings of the authors, we can conclude that the best support is situation-dependent, and linked to characteristics of both the student and the supervisor.

We can distinguish two dimensions in **supervisor behaviour**: the task-oriented and relationship-oriented dimensions. Task-oriented supervisors will focus on the content of the Master dissertation and the methods used, and they will generally be the ones setting goals and priorities. Relationship-oriented supervisors put more emphasis on the emotional component and attach great importance to encouraging students and creating conditions conducive to a smooth dissertation process.

Which type of support the supervisor ends up offering is not so much their own choice as it is determined in large part by **the student's level of task maturity**. This includes both the student's ability to perform the task and their willingness to take responsibility. Depending on these two

dimensions, the supervisor will take on a **more directive** or a **more supportive** role.

When we combine the task-oriented and relation-oriented dimensions with either high or low task maturity on the part of the student, we get **four possible supervising styles** (see Figure 1): leading (high direction, low support), guiding (high direction, high support), supporting (low direction, high support) and delegating (low direction, low support).

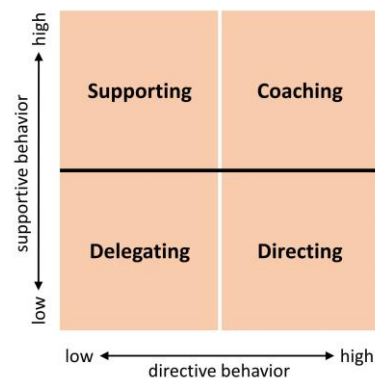


Figure 1. Situational leadership (Vanhoof & Van Petegem, 2017, p.91)

For example, a student who is already familiar with the dissertation subject will require less direction than a student without any prior knowledge. Furthermore, the supervising style can change through time, for instance by providing intensive support at the start of the dissertation

and then gradually dialling it down. In other words, supervisors can adopt different coaching styles in different phases of the project.

The task-oriented and relation-oriented dimensions are also reflected in the **dual role** of the supervisor. Based on their personal scientific expertise, the supervisor will help shape the dissertation project, monitoring the quality of the dissertation and ensuring that it meets academic standards. In addition, it is essential that the student feels supported in the process. This can be done by being approachable as a supervisor and showing genuine interest in the student's project. Research shows that supervisors are often torn between these two roles (Anderson et al., 2006). This conflict can become apparent when giving critical feedback (task-oriented aspect), while also wanting to take into account the motivation and feelings of the student (relationship-oriented aspect).

One role requires a more rational approach, so it is a matter of the head, while the other role focuses on the student's emotional experience, making it a matter of the heart. That is why supervision always involves a search for the right **balance between head and heart** (see Figure 2), and this balance will be different for each student.

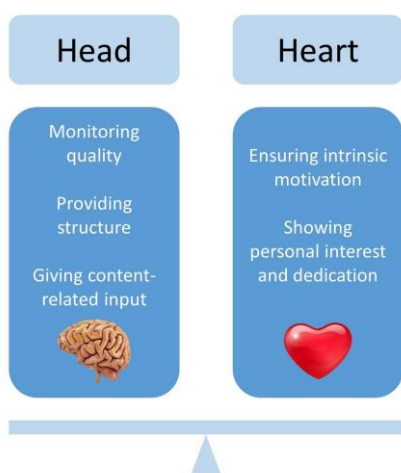


Figure 2. Head and heart components of dissertation supervision

Below are some suggestions with regard to the head component, the heart component and organisational aspects of supervision, based on results of scientific research.

'Guiding with the head': some practical suggestions

- Ask the student to draw up a **roadmap** for their dissertation project. This roadmap should include elements such as a timetable and a step-by-step plan or schematic overview of the project itself.
- Use a **hands-on** approach when providing guidance on content. This means communicating regularly and having face-to-face meetings with the student. Ask for regular output and try to provide sufficient feedback. For some very independent students, a hands-off approach may work, but they tend to be exceptions to the rule.
- Make it clear to the student what the expectations and **quality standards** are. Refer them to existing conventions and **manuals**. Establish a link with courses that students may have taken with regard to research skills. In order to clarify the expected level of the dissertation, you can show good practices used by other students.
- Communicate clearly about how the dissertation is **assessed** and which aspects are taken into account. You can illustrate this with a concrete example (e.g. a completed assessment form). Another tactic is to have students provide each other with feedback. In this case, it is obviously important to keep an eye on the quality of such [peer assessments](#).
- Students appreciate it when their supervisors are **actively involved in research**. Not only do supervisors require expertise on the subject at hand, but they should also possess the necessary methodological knowledge to suggest alternative research designs in case of any problems. Therefore, you should always try to stay involved in ongoing research projects, so you can share this knowledge with students. By showing an example of a study, you can make it clear to students what is expected of them.
- The extent to which you provide content-related direction should be tailored to the student, without going too far. Some students need more direction than others, but it is important that the students always have ownership of their projects. This sense of **ownership** can be compromised if the supervisor provides too much content-related direction. It is



advisable to talk to the student about the amount of direction they expect or need.

- Access to proper **infrastructure** (library, classrooms, etc.) is conducive to a successful dissertation. The **prevailing intellectual culture** within the department or institution is also a crucial factor. Try to familiarise the student with the existing infrastructure and immerse them in the academic intellectual culture.

‘Guiding with the heart’: some practical suggestions

- An essential prerequisite for good dissertation supervision is **two-way communication**. This applies to both oral and written communication. Invite the student to start the conversation.
- Communicate not only about the dissertation, but **also about the supervision process**. How would the student like to be coached? What are their expectations and ambitions? To what extent can you accommodate those? Clarify how you see your role as a supervisor and explain your expectations early on in the supervision process. Forge a 'learning alliance' together with the student to work towards common goals. Speak about the importance of personal contacts and exchanging ideas. In short, communicate openly about the intensity and nature of the coaching relationship.
- Explain the possible **consequences of the student's behaviour** for the project. For example, if students do not make a roadmap or wait too long to get started, they are likely to get into trouble as the deadline approaches.
- Always remember to appeal to the **intrinsic motivation** of each student. Together, you need to find a subject that the student can relate to and can get excited about.
- **Mutual trust** is extremely important in this kind of mentoring relationship. As a supervisor, you should exude confidence and trust, giving the student the feeling that you believe in their abilities and in a successful outcome of the dissertation project.
- Make sure you have sufficient **availability** in your schedule for students to come and talk to you.

Indicate when and how they can contact you for feedback, and try to be flexible and responsive to their needs. For example, you can explicitly mention that they can always contact you with any questions, and give them an indication of how long it will normally take you to answer.

- Try to **match your critical feedback** to the student's abilities and level of self-confidence. Critical feedback must never undermine the student's motivation. Be sure to also discuss feedback verbally, as this is less harsh.
- Show **personal involvement** in the dissertation project. Ask the student how things are going: "How do you feel about the way things are progressing?" Show personal and sincere interest in the dissertation.
- It is essential that students feel they can come to you, not only for content-related questions or feedback, but also for **mental support**. This is particularly important in periods of uncertainty (e.g. the coronavirus crisis, force majeure, etc.). As a supervisor, you combine the roles of referee and supporter.

Suggestions on how to organise dissertation supervision

- Dissertation supervision can be very time-consuming, especially when taking both head and heart into consideration. By supervising students together in a group setting now and then, you can reduce the workload. One possible way of going about this is by organising a **research seminar**, where students present the interim results of their dissertation research to their fellow students, and give feedback to one another. You can also work with so-called **'dissertation circles'**, in which you supervise several students working on the same topic.
- In order to ascertain the student's progress, it can be useful to introduce an interim **process evaluation**. In some programmes, this process evaluation is actually a compulsory part of the final evaluation.
- Your physical presence on campus is not an absolute must for proper supervision. Guidance can also be provided **online** via Skype or a digital environment such as Blackboard Collaborate Ultra. This can also be

a solution for supervisors who are tied up in research off-campus for prolonged periods. To avoid discussions, it is best to always provide a **written record** of any oral feedback, or additional written feedback to the student.

- In addition, you could also provide **video or audio feedback**. However, be sure to link such feedback to an interactive moment where students can ask additional questions. After all, it is important that dissertation supervision always remains a **two-way conversation**.

Want to know more?

Centre of Expertise for Higher Education – ECHO (s.d.). *Overview of ECHO teaching tips regarding assessment of students*. <https://www.uantwerpen.be/en/centres/centre-expertise-higher-education/didactic-information/teaching-tips-english/assessing-students/>

Centre of Expertise for Higher Education – ECHO (s.d.). *Overview of ECHO teaching tips regarding supervision and support of students*. <https://www.uantwerpen.be/en/centres/centre-expertise-higher-education/didactic-information/teaching-tips-english/supervision-support/>

Anderson, C., Day, K., & McLaughlin, P. (2006). Mastering the dissertation: Lecturers' representations of the purposes and processes of Master's level dissertation supervision. *Studies in Higher Education*, 31(2), 149-168. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075070600572017>

Anderson, C., Day, K., & McLaughlin, P. (2008). Student perspectives on the dissertation process in a master's degree concerned with professional practice. *Studies in Continuing Education*, 30(1), 33-49. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01580370701841531>

de Kleijn, R. A., Mainhard, M. T., Meijer, P. C., Pilot, A., & Brekelmans, M. (2012). Master's thesis supervision: Relations between perceptions of the supervisor–student relationship, final grade, perceived supervisor contribution to learning and student satisfaction. *Studies in Higher Education*, 37(8), 925-939. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2011.556717>

de Kleijn, R. A., Meijer, P. C., Brekelmans, M., & Pilot, A. (2015). Adaptive research supervision: exploring expert thesis supervisors' practical knowledge. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 34(1), 117-130. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2014.934331>

Drennan, J., & Clarke, M. (2009). Coursework master's programmes: the student's experience of research and research supervision. *Studies in Higher Education*, 34(5), 483-500. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075070802597150>

Concerning the role of (online) communication in thesis supervision

Augustsson, G., & Jaldemark, J. (2014). Online supervision: A theory of supervisors' strategic communicative influence on student dissertations. *Higher Education*, 67(1), 19-33. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-013-9638-4>

Baltzersen, R. K. (2013). The importance of metacommunication in supervision processes in higher education. *International Journal of Higher Education*, 2(2), 128-140. <https://doi.org/10.5430/ijhe.v2n2p128>


Centre of Expertise for
Higher Education (ECHO)

Venusstraat 35
B - 2000 Antwerpen

echo@uantwerpen.be

www.uantwerpen.be/echo





Concerning formulating goals in thesis supervision

de Kleijn, R. A., Bronkhorst, L. H., Meijer, P. C., Pilot, A., & Brekelmans, M. (2016). Understanding the up, back, and forward-component in master's thesis supervision with adaptivity. *Studies in Higher Education*, 41(8), 1463-1479.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2014.980399>

Concerning situational leadership

Hersey, P. (2014). *Situationeel leidinggeven: Een op de praktijk gericht model om flexibel te kunnen inspelen op wisselende omstandigheden*. Amsterdam: Business Contact.

Hersey, P., Blanchard, K. H., & Johnson, D. E. (2013). *Management of organizational behavior: Leading human resources*. Boston: Pearson.

Vanhoof, J., & Van Petegem, P. (2017). *Doeltreffend schoolbeleid: Praktijkboek beleidsvoerend vermogen in scholen*. Leuven: Acco.