

## **The Student-teacher Relationship in Research Supervision**

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Post-graduate research can be considered to be a long-term collaboration between a student and his or her supervisor. There is no denying that university faculty have a considerable responsibility in supervising and guiding their students in order to lead them to become independent researchers in their own right. In many cases, the level of success achieved is closely linked to the relationship between the student and their supervisor. This essay focuses on the student-teacher relationship in post-graduate research at CUHK. We interviewed eight experienced supervisors and collected their opinions on the topic. Two main types of student-teacher relationship were identified as being ideal for a successful collaboration; these were: 'friendship' and 'professional' relationship.

### **Friendship Relationship**

The normal duration of a doctorate degree in Hong Kong is three years. Unless a student is co-supervised by two (or more) faculty members, he or she normally receives one-to-one supervision. In this period, the teacher and student are not in the rather asymmetrical (i.e., formal teaching) relationship that a student experiences first at school and then at university as an undergraduate student. Rather, the post-graduate student interacts with their supervisor on a daily basis as they spend much of their time working together to answer a common research goal. The relationship should, in other words, be close. "We are an academic family," said Professor Stephen Wong, Associate Dean of the Faculty of Education. "We share ordinary things in our life casually during gatherings. My students are just like my family members." Professor Jimmy Yu also described his relationship with students. He emphasized that having a close relationship with his students helps to stimulate their development above and beyond their research experience, and the best way to maintain the relationship is to get close to the students in their daily life. "I reserve a tennis court on campus every weekend and invite my research students to join me," he laughed, "anybody can come to challenge me at any time."

The friendship that forms during the three-year period of the doctorate degree may then continue after the study period has finished and it thus develops into a life-long relationship. Professor Huang Jianwei told us that he always wants to establish a long-term relationship with the students both academically and personally. This enthusiastic supervisor from the Faculty of Engineering told us, "It is a life-long relationship; I hope that students can come to me when they have exciting news or challenges in their career." Indeed, most of the professors we interviewed told us that they keep in touch with their students after graduation. Professor Yu is especially proud of his students who go on to become scholars in other universities. During our interview with him, he showed us a recent email. "This is the email one of my previous students sent to me yesterday. She is now an award-winning professor at a university in Mainland China. We still contact each other regularly," he said. The friendship that develops between a student and his or her supervisor may also result in the establishment of a strong network of links with various top universities around the world.

## **Professional Relationship**

The other student-teacher relationship that was mentioned several times during our interviews was a 'professional' relationship, a term that seemingly has the opposite meaning to that of 'friendship'. According to supervisors, a professional relationship refers to an equal association on the basis of mutual respect. "The supervisor does not own the student," stressed Professor Huang Jianwei. "He only supervises. This means that he cannot, and should not force the student into conducting a particular type of research. He needs to communicate with the student extensively to find a project that is of common interests in the long-run." For Professor Huang, a professional relationship is student-centered and so he often tries to reshape the projects in order to amplify the unique strength of each research student. In this sense, research supervision is exclusively a mission to facilitate student research and thus to benefit the student.

Professor Sun Hao from the Faculty of Medicine also talked about having a professional relationship with his students. Nevertheless, he believed it should be 'mutually beneficial' to both the supervisor and student. "There is no such thing as 'student research' in my field," he stressed. "The major research force and the research work comes from the output of the research students... especially for the junior faculty; their success depends heavily on the success of their graduate students." A professional relationship therefore implies a top-down guidance from the supervisor in a hierarchical structure. Professor Hao also indicated the differences that occur with students from the various cultural backgrounds, such that students from Mainland China tend to stay close to their supervisor, while Western students are more independent. He believes that an ideal relationship should be kept at a professional level, "We work together for the research, and there shouldn't be too many personal issues involved," he said.

## **Remarks: Relationship and Responsibility**

The nature of the student-teacher relationship is a main concern during research supervision as it might directly affect the research. After a quick glance at the two types of relationship, we may need to focus on their correlation with a supervisor's responsibilities. Does a particular relationship facilitate or impede the research work? Is there any conflict between a good relationship and the supervisor's responsibilities?

From the interviews we conducted, we realized that the majority of supervisors successfully form a professional relationship with their students during the period of supervision, which subsequently develops into a close friendship after graduation. This implies that the two relationships are not mutually exclusive, but are complementary to each other. Mutual respect facilitates research at a professional level, while close guidance leads to a long-lasting friendship. As Professor Dora Lau said, "An ideal relationship with students is a fifty-fifty, teacher-and-friend relationship. I won't force them like a secondary school teacher, nor take care of them like their parents. As a supervisor, I will advise and guide them in their research; however, I will also read books and discuss these with my students every week, just like their friend."