

# Reflections on supervising distance-based PhD students

Tim Unwin

New information and communication technologies (ICTs) permit exciting and innovative ways of supervising PhD students at a distance. This note is intended to summarise my experiences in seeking to deliver a supportive distance-based model of supervision, and it includes perceptive comments from some of my distance-based students.

## Elements of supervision

In order to explore ways of supervising PhD students at a distance, it is essential to be clear about the elements that contribute to a research student's intellectual life while actually based full-time within a university environment.<sup>1</sup> With my PhD students, I try to ensure that these include:

- Individual discussions with supervisor about the development of the research project (usually held on a monthly basis)
- Feedback from supervisor on written work (within a week of receipt)
- Peer-supervisory meetings (research students have very much to learn from each other, and we therefore hold monthly peer supervisory meetings which all of my research students are expected to attend)
- ICT4D Days – these are day-long events held every term in which all of my PhD students participate, and they usually include a social event as well as discussions on aspects of our research
- Access to bibliographical resources
- Regular networking and discussions with peer PhD students in the Department and elsewhere
- Participation in formal postgraduate training (at various levels, including Institutional, Department, and Research Group)
- Participation in seminars and academic meetings
- Experience at teaching undergraduate students
- Induction
- Formal annual review process

It is much easier to deliver some of these elements than others, and it should be recognised that a distance-based experience of doctoral research will perforce be very different from that of a full-time home-based PhD student. Nevertheless, personal circumstances and costs are critical issues that need to be taken into consideration by prospective research students, and distance-based solutions may

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that where full-time students are on extended periods of field research overseas, this in effect already requires a form of distance-based supervision. This has been the case for many years, and new ICTs can also contribute very effectively to this. Much of what is written here can usefully also apply to supervising students in the field.

be the only ones that are viable for some students. Additionally, it should be recognised that many distance-based students may also be doing other jobs part-time, and they will therefore be combining both part-time status with that of also being distance-based. As one student commented, 'This is a real complex world, sure! But I remember that I really needed to find a place where I could undertake these studies with this quality and distance-base studies have been (at least, until now) the solution. In my case, the majority of the problems come from the fact that I am part-time, not distance-based, and I really appreciate the supervisor's additional efforts'.

### **Individual supervisory discussions**

It is essential that some face-to-face discussions take place between supervisor and research student, especially at key stages in the research, such as the beginning, the finalisation of the aims and methodology, and discussions of the structure for reporting the results. We therefore try to encourage distance-based students to come for such meetings at times that coincide with one or more of the three ICT4D days held each year. This also provides an opportunity for them to get to know their peers.

Additional face-to-face discussions can also be arranged by the supervisor meeting with the student at their normal place of work/residence. This can be on occasions when the supervisor is undertaking their own field work, or when they are participating in conferences in locations near where the research student is living and working.

On a more regular basis, the bulk of supervisory meetings can be held using VoIP technology, such as Skype (<http://www.skype.com>), which permits free 'telephone' conversations, or where bandwidth permits through video-conferencing, again free with the use of Skype. It is particularly useful where an agenda is agreed beforehand, and I usually find that it is helpful if the research student prepares this. Distance-based students do not have the advantage of the more regular contact that home based students can have with their supervisors, being unable simply to bump into them in the corridor or laboratory, and I have therefore found it helpful to increase the normal supervisory frequency for such meetings. Thus, if a norm of 12 supervisory meetings a year is held with a full time home-based student, then 24 hourly Skype meetings a year seems to work effectively.

When distance-based students also work part-time, or are in very different time-zones, the timing of these supervisory discussions can be very problematic. This is particularly so when such meetings have to take place in the evenings after a long day's work, and I am very conscious that students may not get the best of me at these times! Some understanding of this issue amongst both student and supervisor is essential.

It is also very useful to maintain regular e-mail correspondence with students – and to ensure that one responds to them quickly. It is very easy for distance-based

students to feel somewhat isolated, and frequency of contact is therefore something that can help. This can be a real issue, with even the most enthusiastic student sometimes suffering greatly from feeling disillusioned and thinking about giving up. Many of my distance-based students also find value in regularly communicating with each other by e-mail or 'chat', which helps them share their particular concerns and overcome their isolation. When research students are in the field, I also like to hear from them if at all possible on a weekly basis, and e-mail (or even SMS text messaging) is a good means of communicating.

In reflecting on comments and feedback from my distance-based students, it is also useful to note the following concerns:

- The research environment can become almost synonymous with supervisory contact. As one student commented, 'many times, "Tim Unwin" is a synonym for "research" for me. The supervisor is frequently your only interface with the University, the Collective, the Library'.
- Online supervision can have some additional advantages, particularly through the way in which it forces you to learn how to manage online conversations. The chat facility in Skype enables one to clarify particular issues, and to maintain a record of certain aspects of the meeting. Moreover, by having several documents open at the same time, the supervisor and student can readily explore specific aspects of a piece of work. As a student commented, 'Now the process is, more or less, automated. I consider this experience is valuable as a practice for online interviewing, for example, which is a possible approach for methodology for distance-based students'.

### **Feedback on written work**

It is now very easy for research students to submit written work to their supervisors digitally from almost anywhere in the world. Not only does this save on postage costs, but it can also save on printing and paper costs, thus being more environmentally friendly! I used to have qualms about providing digital feedback on draft PhD chapters, because I have known of instances where research students have simply accepted all of their supervisor's suggestions without even thinking about them. However, it is possible to use tracked changes, and particularly comment bubbles to provide such feedback in ways that force them to consider the issue without simply hitting the 'accept all' button. There are complex ethical issues surrounding this, but these lie beyond the remit of this note. The bottom line is that feedback on written work can be exactly the same for distance-based students as it is for those who are actually based at the university where their supervisor is located. Skype conversations can then be held to go through the comments in detail.

As one of my students has reminded me, it is good practice to ensure that written work is submitted several days before a meeting so that the supervisor has time to read and return it. This greatly facilitates the use of online supervision time in discussing both the substantive and the stylistic aspects of a piece of writing. While this applies to all research students, and not just those that are distance-based, it is

particularly important that the benefit of shared online time is maximised for distance-based students.

### **Peer supervisory meetings**

This is a more complex issue. I have tried to use audio- and video-conferencing to involve distance-based research students in our regular monthly PhD student discussions, but this has not yet been entirely successful. The main problem is that using such technologies dramatically transforms the nature of the discussion, and in particular it disrupts the flow. I like to create a very informal environment for these meetings, with the research students leading on particular topics, and it is extremely difficult to manage this effectively using Skype or other conference technologies. On some occasions, we have involved a distance-based student formally at the start of the discussion, and then let them listen to the rest as it has continued. This has been quite effective. We also provide a summary of the discussion on our Moodle environment (<http://moodle.rhul.ac.uk/course/view.php?id=1621>) so that everyone in the group is aware of the issues that have been explored. Another issue, especially for distance-based students who are part-time, is that it is often impossible for them to attend the peer supervisory meetings online, because they have other jobs to do at the times which are most convenient for the other students.

The comments from my distance-based students on this point are particularly salient:

- 'it's very challenging. Amongst others, it requires a different chairing/facilitation technique. What we find helpful is to run a consecutive chat, whereby the person on Skype can indicate that he/she wants to say something so the chair can ensure that they can intervene adequately. Also we have become accustomed to saying 'over' at the end of an intervention, at both ends of the line (esp. if the connection isn't great or there is a delay); it feels pretty silly at first but you get used to it'.
- 'Yes, this is a challenge. The situation gets worse if you have difficulties to understand the language, there are many people talking among them, not at the microphone (which would be very artificial)'.

### **ICT4D Days**

These day-long events are very important to our collective research experience, and usually involve a social event (such as a visit to a gallery or museum) as well as some formal intellectual discussion (such as an exploration of a book we have all read). We hold one each term, and it is often possible for distance-based students to attend one or more of them, also using this opportunity to attend a supervisory meeting. To reduce accommodation costs, it is often possible for distance-based students to stay with a member of our collective.

### **Access to bibliographical resources**

Getting access to good bibliographical resources is an essential element of high quality research. Recent developments in the use of ICT have enabled a large

amount of digital bibliographical resources to be made available on-line. The College subscribes to various digital collections, and these are made available through MetaLib (<http://metalib.rhul.ac.uk>), which does provide a reasonable level of resource. However, it is not without its problems, and must be supplemented with other strategies. Google Scholar (<http://scholar.google.com/>), for example, provides a useful additional means to find out what has been published, although much of it is not actually available on-line. It is important where at all possible for distance-based students to have access to a high quality university library where they can access further material, and have an opportunity to browse library shelves. Many universities are very willing to permit such access.

Distance-based students find bibliographical access a real problem, as reflected in the following comments:

- 'this is the biggest challenge I have encountered so far, having no direct or easy access to a university library or journal database'
- 'I think most relevant literature in ICT4D can be found in Internet and not necessarily in academic resources. However, these kinds of resources are important in several fields such as methodology, ethical issues, development theory, geography issues...'

Fortunately, much of the literature in the ICT4D field in which we are working is actually available online, and so this very real problem can hopefully be minimised.

### **Regular networking with peers and other related groups**

Doing a PhD can be a very lonely undertaking, and this is especially exaggerated when a student is working alone and at a distance. It is therefore very important to provide means through which distance-based students can interact with their peers. While attendance at the ICT4D days plays an important part in helping to build shared understandings among all of our PhD students, there does also need to be regular means through which they communicate with each other. This can be achieved in part through the use of e-mail and Skype, but we have also used the College's Moodle environment to provide a space for postgraduate interaction (<http://moodle.rhul.ac.uk/course/view.php?id=1621>). This is surprisingly not used as much as I would have hoped, with some students rarely if ever contributing. I find this extremely disappointing, but if they do not find it helpful then I actually see rather little point in forcing them to use it!

Student feedback on this issue is particularly telling:

- 'Perhaps what I miss is the informal encounters. I usually contact the supervisor by email if I need anything urgently'
- 'I would also add: participate in 'Communities of Practice' (CoPs) outside ... the university. As mentioned in one of the induction papers, it *can* be a lonely undertaking not just geographically but also intellectually. However, there are many, many CoPs with all kinds of people – researchers, practitioners, consultants – working in the same or a similar field. This can be extremely rewarding not just in terms of content but also in terms of networking (finding relevant colleagues, cases, etc).'

- 'Distance-based students who are working in their daily life find difficult to have time for the PhD. I know that you consider essential peer interaction to success in the PhD, but, if one day I have only 1 hour for the PhD, I usually like to invest it in reading or writing, with my particular focus. All the additional tasks in a PhD are time-consuming'.

### **Participation in formal postgraduate training**

Providing distance-based students with the formal postgraduate training available at the College, Departmental and Research Group levels is extremely difficult. Much of this training is delivered in an interactive seminar type environment, and students usually get out of it what they put into it! Distance-based students are unable to participate in this way. I have not solved this problem, but what I do try to do is to forward all of the learning resources (reading lists, seminar outlines, additional resources) to distance-based students so that they can read them. From their feedback, I am aware that this is insufficient, and in the future we might well record such sessions (in audio or video formats) and then share them with distance-based students. I also encourage such students to get in contact with those delivering the training if they have any questions. It would be possible to post this material through our Moodle environment if required, and College more widely could post all of their training material on a site so that students could access it at a distance. Additionally, it is sometimes possible to arrange for distance-based students to participating in aspects of training at nearby institutions in their own countries. There is increasingly a cost element in this, which can complicate matters. It is also possible to encourage them to come to Royal Holloway for specific training sessions, combining this with face-to-face supervisions as appropriate.

### **Participation in research meetings and seminars**

It is extremely difficult for distance-based students to attend regular Departmental research seminars and meetings. The Collective therefore arranged a specific ICT4D conference for postgraduate students in the early autumn of 2006, which was a great success. This provided an excellent opportunity for the distance-based students who attended to engage with ongoing areas of intellectual debate, and to gain experience at presenting short research papers. It is also usually possible for them to attend research seminars in institutions near where they are living. However, very often local universities do not actually have relevant research interests, and this is actually why the students have chosen to work with us on a distance-based basis! We also encourage all of our research students to participate in international conferences, which gives them an opportunity to engage with scholarly and scientific debate. Again, though, this is an area where I am sure that distance-based students do miss out a bit on the experiences available to those regularly working in College.

### **Experience in undergraduate teaching**

It is important for PhD students to gain experience at undergraduate teaching if they are going on to teach in higher education. Distance-based students are unable to do this on a regular basis, but should they want to do so it can be possible for them to contribute seminars or to do some demonstrating on the few occasions that they visit the College.

### **Induction**

It is very desirable for distance-based students to participate in the induction process at the start of the academic year. Many, though, are unable to do this. What we therefore do is provide digital copies of all of our induction materials (including presentations, handbooks, and other resources) that we send to our distance-based students, and we also ensure that key documents are available on the Department's postgraduate web-site. Regular supervisory discussions can help to ensure that research students do indeed understand the regulations and procedures.

Nevertheless, it is clear that distance-based students have great difficulty in dealing with those in the administrative side of the university, and as supervisor I often have to intercede on their behalf. This is probably in part because of a lack of experience that such staff have of the issues faced by distance-based students.

### **Annual Review**

Ideally, the annual review process for distance-based postgraduate students can be undertaken on one of the days that they visit the College. However, it is also possible to do these at a distance through the use of video- or audio-conferencing. Under such circumstances it is essential that good documentary materials are circulated well in advance, and that copies are to hand during the discussion. We have found that it is perfectly feasible to hold good annual review discussions at a distance, particularly where the student is making good progress. If there are any problems, though, I would strongly recommend that the annual review is actually held face-to-face.

Overall, it is very evident that the experience of being a distance-based student is different from that of those who are able to spend most of their time based at Royal Holloway, University of London. However, the use of some of the above techniques can help to ensure that they do indeed have a successful and enjoyable time while doing their research.

Tim Unwin  
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