

## Memorandum of Understanding: Video dialogue transcribed



**Note:** this resource package includes a template of an MoU that can be tailored to each unique postgraduate/supervisor research needs/research journey.

Participants:

Venita January

Karen Elser

David Phair

Jaco Le Roux

Rose Richards

Nathaniel McGregor

Mannini Kotele

Natasha Mothapo

*Are you familiar with the notion of an MOU between a student and a supervisor?*

**Venita:** I'm familiar with it yes, I wasn't before my Masters. I thought it was just very like, fill it out as we go along.

**David:** Yes I am. So I have not signed one or interacted with one myself, but the process is quite familiar with me. Sort of an interaction between the supervisor and students, to sort of get you on the same page before you go forward with your project.

**Rose:** It makes me think of an agreement between two parties. In the case a memorandum of understanding, between the supervisor and a student.

*Is there an ideal postgraduate/supervisor relationship?*

**Mannini:** Basically to have an understanding of what both parties expect of each other - what is the working relationship, what should the supervisor put in and what should the student put in and what they are both willing to take out of their time working together.

**Karen:** The projects are so widely different, so they work on such different scales of space, time; and also the personalities of the students, and their own backgrounds. Some of them require more input, some of them require less input, some of them are much more motivated,



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some of them really require regular meetings, others don't require meetings at all, and they are off on their own.

**Jaco:** Humans are so different in backgrounds - cultural backgrounds, personalities, etc. But there is no silver bullet student or supervisor, so you kind of have to have an adaptive dynamic approach to these kind of roles, you have to kind of have to adapt to supervise different students.

*Have you experienced any challenges in your postgraduate/supervisor relationship/s?*

**Mannini:** I have with regards to my work. We had to change what I was writing. Not particularly the focus, but I... we disagreed on what I want to write and how he wants me to do it.

**Natasha:** So, I think in solving challenges, communication is very, very important. Most people don't find it easy of course, because culturally, as a black woman, it's very challenging. Especially having to talk to, like, an older man.

**Nathaniel:** Students tend to arrive in the lab and think that, especially at postgraduate level, that things happening in your personal life need to be in your personal life, but everything always spills over. So I think, I have been very lucky, I haven't had too many challenges, but I think it's important to establish a relationship with your students where they... not give details of what's going on, but are comfortable enough to tell you what's happening, because if something is happening in your personal life it's going to affect your work. I think the only challenge I have experienced is some students are more reluctant to do that than others.

*What advice can you give to postgraduates with regard to the postgraduate/supervisor relationship?*

**Natasha:** What is important is to have an upfront talk about what you expect. Sure, as a student you know yourself, what you need, how much support you need and make sure that your supervisor understands the amount of support you need. "I would like to have a co-supervisor or I would not like to have a co-supervisor" – those things you can express right from the beginning. Of course also from the supervisor's side as well, directly saying to the students, "I need this and this of you and I know that you are an individual and you have your own needs and so on. So, tailor your needs according to what you need to deliver here and I can also bring in my part."

**Venita:** So communication and also verbalising your needs, yeah, like I need to see a person rather than just emailing him. And, your supervisor should be there if you tell him explicitly



that you need this. From the supervisor's side, I'm sure that they have expectations as well, so they also need to communicate their expectations. They can't just leave you in the air and not ... ask, "Can I get a chapter?" and after two months be like "Why aren't you doing anything?"

**Rose:** The impression I get is that actual communication doesn't seem to happen consistently or steadily. It's either a case of one person speaking to the other or at the other, or their communicating about certain things but not about all the things. For example some of the process issues, or issues around independence and identity and so on. Your identity changes a lot as a postgraduate student. So you start out being more undergraduate perhaps more dependent, and then you are supposed to become independent, especially at a PhD level, and that's a tricky process. Sometimes a supervisor isn't quite ready for that to happen, sometimes a student, and it can lead to frustration, so I think these sort of things need to be discussed occasionally.

*Is it important to have an MoU?*

**Natasha:** It's a very, very critical document, regardless of where you are within the academic space. It protects both the supervisor and the student and we're able to manage the expectations very well within the framework of the MoU because without it, when things go wrong, you don't have a leg to stand on, it's like a he-said she-said situation. So the MoU will especially play a critical role for conflict resolution in terms of getting the student to keep up with what they agreed to and also the supervisor, to make sure that they're keeping up with what they committed to.

*After watching the video/reading this dialogue, reflect on the following:*

1. How do you feel about an MoU?
2. Does your department have one?
3. How do *you* intend to establish a healthy postgraduate/supervisor relationship?
4. Have you considered all aspects of how the different stages of the research journey will be handled?
5. Have you agreed on the type and frequency of communication that needs to take place to maintain a good relationship?
6. Are you prepared to be flexible in your approach – to adapt the MoU contents if necessary as you progress along the research journey together?

