

# Survey on MSc Supervision

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## Introduction

A number of former students whose MSc theses were supervised by me were invited to comment on my approach to supervise students. All of them have already graduated and have left UNESCO-IHE. Five students were invited to comment and all five responded. Following is the letter sent to the former MSc students.

## Cover letter and questions

### Survey on MSc Supervision

#### What is this, and what this is not?

The purpose of this short survey is to make an honest assessment of my MSc supervision during the last few years. Recently I have started attending the senior staff "university teaching qualification" course organized by IHE and this is a part of an assignment of that course. It is solely for this purpose, on my own initiative and does not go beyond the training program. So, the invitation here is for you to be straight-forward and honest in expressing your views. Particularly since you have already graduated and moved away from IHE, I believe you can be forthright in your evaluation.

There is no set limit of length of an answer for each question. Take as much space as you like. Please answer in a separate document and send it to me by e-mail.

Thanks

Assela

1. As one of the students supervised by me during the MSc research, how do you see my supervision process? What were the good points? What were the bad points?
2. Does the assessment (the final examination and the marks you got for it) a reasonable one? Did it do justice to your efforts? What are the good and bad points about assessment?
3. I encouraged you to work in groups and help each other. Sometimes I insisted on this. Now looking back how do you evaluate this? What were the good aspects/bad aspects of this approach?
4. We used a WIKI system (dimos.ihe.nl) for storing information and communications within the group. Did this help you? Was it a distraction? Give your views.
5. In addition to above what are the points that you would like to express (on any topic that is related to student-supervisor relationship).

*Dear < >,*

*Can I ask you to spend a few minutes to help me by filling out a questionnaire that is related a training course I am in currently. Please find the instructions and questions attached. I would appreciate it very much if you can fill this and return as soon as possible.*

*Regards,*

*Assela*

## Student 1

1. As one of the students supervised by me during the MSc research, how do you see my supervision process? What were the good points? What were the bad points?

First of all, I would like to thank you for giving me this wonderful opportunity which would help me to express my feeling about you. Your supervision was appropriately scheduled and very much organized. You gave us the guidance when we needed it, you let us explore when we wanted to, and I really feel fortunate to have had the opportunity to work my MSc research with you. I believe that your creative thinking and developing a strong team spirit within the students were the one which made you the most appreciable supervisor in the department.

Your outstanding capacity in all activities with a genial temperament helped us to do our MSc efficiently and gave us the chance to publish our research outputs. Your valuable advice, helpful comment and support are unforgettable. You motivated and showed your researchers how capable they are. For example, My MSc thesis involved model code development. Initially I was not so good at coding and so much frustrated that I can't manage it. However, the motivation and knowledge you provided made me a good programmer at the end of My MSc. That is also the point where my life turned. Now I am doing research which demands intensive modelling. I believe that you are the reason for my being a researcher. So there are no bad points that I can put about you. I hope you will keep your excellent qualities up and wish you all the best in your future career.

2. Does the assessment (the final examination and the marks you got for it) a reasonable one? Did it do justice to your efforts? What are the good and bad points about assessment?

There are many good points that I can site about your evaluation method. Some of them are you assessment was throughout the work, the evaluations are associated with timely feedbacks and the grades are assigned fairly and impartially. As mine is concerned, I did my best work in my MSc and got the best result. The grade that I got can also witness its quality. The satisfaction we had during your supervision and the grade we got according to our effort can make a possible persuade about goodness of your evaluation methods.

3. I encouraged you to work in groups and help each other. Sometimes I insisted on this. Now looking back how do you evaluate this? What were the good aspects/bad aspects of this approach?

As I mentioned under the first question, developing a strong team spirit between students were one of the good aspect of your supervision. The links you created between the works of different students were the most important strategy to develop team spirit. It allowed us to help each other, initiate brain storm and explore innovative ideas. Therefore, I feel the cooperative teamwork is important for most jobs to get done effectively and in timely manner.

4. We used a WIKI system (dimos.ihe.nl) for storing information and communications within the group. Did this help you? Was it a distraction? Give your views.

I believe that WIKI system (dimos) made the learning and research processes very simple. It contains most important software tools, module/ course work materials and reference publications and works done by the students and staff members. This allowed us to exchange thoughts and materials efficiently. It also kept us in track with what has been done by the other members. In addition it encourages the spirit of team research work. Simple ideas are sometimes the most difficult thing that hold-up the progress on the research work. However, the WIKI system gave us the opportunity to know with whom to discuss whenever we face any challenges during our work.

5. In addition to above what are the points that you would like to express (on any topic that is related to student-supervisor relationship).

In addition to excellent teaching and supervision performance, you have got a pleasant personality and ability to handle different character of students. Your relationship with students is quite close and friendly. That also gave us the chance to express ourselves without frustration and ask any advice we need (even personal issues). Specially, IHE students are international students who are from different world and living away from their families and friends, in my view, friendly relationship is the most important thing during supervision.

## Student 2

**1. As one of the students supervised by me during the MSc research, how do you see my supervision process? What were the good points? What were the bad points?**

The supervision process was well structured, distributed and holistic. It helped us to realize and develop skills & confidence during the research project. Front loading (bulk of the work at the start of the project) was a good approach towards project time management. The modularity approach you used towards the solution of the research problem helped us in achieving the objectives easily without realizing. In addition the approach of regular target and result oriented meetings geared towards tracking progress was commendable

**2. Does the assessment (the final examination and the marks you got for it) a reasonable one? Did it do justice to your efforts? What are the good and bad points about assessment?**

The mark was an excellent one and truly we had to work hard for it. Even till the last minute I did not know what it would be like so I kept on working hard. For me it's not the mark but rather the skills and approach acquired during the time under your supervision which are of use to me till to date

**3. I encouraged you to work in groups and help each other. Sometimes I insisted on this. Now looking back how do you evaluate this? What were the good aspects/bad aspects of this approach?**

Working in groups helped us to acquire skills from fellow students. For those who had the skills it helped them to concretize these skills. This helped build team work which is a replica of what actually takes place in the field. The group presentations that punctuated our working in groups were also key in helping us keep track of our progress and moving together as a group

**4. We used a WIKI system (dimos.ihe.nl) for storing information and communications within the group. Did this help you? Was it a distraction? Give your views.**

It was of great help and in fact it acted as a platform that beefed up the working in groups analogy. In addition it acted as a back up in a way especially during code writing when you get lost in the middle of nowhere. This is in tandem with the existing advances where web based applications having become the ode of the day. It was a useful resource which I still access to date.

**5. In addition to above what are the points that you would like to express (on any topic that is related to student-supervisor relationship).**

All the topics you supervised were tough but never the less I liked the way you 'pushed' us out of the box, before we realized, we had achieved and attained a lot of skills and had gone a long way in solving the problem e.g. lot of programming mileage.

You understood the pressures we faced during the project and you took us piecemeal. In addition you helped and motivated us and encouraged us in many ways

## Student 3

**1. As one of the students supervised by me during the MSc research, how do you see my supervision process? What were the good points? What were the bad points?**

The quality of your supervision was very high and commendable. Not only you made me understand the concept very well, you also taught me new methods of problem solving and made it really interesting and innovative. The good points were teaching me the basics of programming and multi-objective optimization approach. The concept of multiple objective optimization has been deeply embedded in my mind and I am using that approach now at work for problem solving. The bad point is that at times you care for us too much and do the work yourself.

**2. Does the assessment (the final examination and the marks you got for it) a reasonable one? Did it do justice to your efforts? What are the good and bad points about assessment?**

I am completely satisfied with the final assessment and it not only justified my efforts but also encouraged me to take up research in a big way.

**3. I encouraged you to work in groups and help each other. Sometimes I insisted on this. Now looking back how do you evaluate this? What were the good aspects/bad aspects of this approach?**

I really liked the concept of working in groups though initially I had some aversion. I was immensely benefited by working in groups especially from Margie, Rasikia, Mark and Salamwit. I was also able to help few of my colleagues (Barun, Niyi,..) . The good aspect of working in groups is that there is a lot of learning. The bad thing is there is a lot of dependency esp. when it comes to programming (writing the code in C)

**4. We used a WIKI system (dimos.ihe.nl) for storing information and communications within the group. Did this help you? Was it a distraction? Give your views.**

This was an excellent documentation method you had taught me during the thesis. I am very poor in documenting things and taking backup. Use of *Dimos* helped me a lot to review my previous work and also helped to access my colleagues work. It was never a distraction.

**5. In addition to above what are the points that you would like to express (on any topic that is related to student-supervisor relationship).**

I was really lucky and gifted to have you as my supervisor. I initially sought your help only for cracking the code of epanet, but you ended up listening to my problem patiently and suggested me better methods to solve my problem and encouraged me to use a lot of tools and build an interface which expanded my knowledge in this domain.

## Student 4

1

Good points;

- You gave guidance and assistance to the thesis work diligently and you were able to give good advice and solution to all problems.
- You gave enough time for the supervision. You allowed us to come to you at any time when we encountered problem and stuck at some point in doing the thesis work, in addition to progress meetings.
- You have friendly approach which makes the relationship between the student and supervisor easy.
- You encouraged and helped to explore different options.

Some remarks;

- As far as possible it is good to establish scope/extent of thesis works with the student from the beginning and to have progress meetings in a fixed manner (e.g. biweekly). These might help the student to work seriously starting from the beginning and distribute the work stress throughout the period

2

- Personally I am okay with the assessment and the grading.

3

- Encouraging us to work in group have been very helpful and I have no reservation on its plus. In addition to learning from each other and getting support on the areas one person has better knowledge on common field, it gave a good experience on working in group and sharing knowledge.

4

- I found that using WIKI system (dimos) helps a lot. I feel that we were privileged for having such access and option. By using dimos we easily and conveniently share information with each other and with our supervisors. We keep our materials and our work along with its progress safely and easily. It will also help the succeeding students, who do related or continuing works to get information conveniently, in the same way as we get the advantage from our predecessors work. So for me it was not distraction.

5

- Generally working with you helps to explore and know lot of knowledge in various discipline and helps to have a good thesis work in the end.



## Student 5

1. As one of the students supervised by me during the MSc research, how do you see my supervision process? What were the good points? What were the bad points?

**Answer:** To me, I enjoyed my period of working under your supervision during my MSc research. The quality of supervision was superb and up till now, I can still remember all what I've done in my research. The confidence I had as an MSc researcher under your supervision make me to have interest in furthering my career and enrol as a PHD student.

The good points are many, but the most important one is that I've learnt so many skills (basic programming, urban drainage modelling, and data preparation using ArcGIS, to mention a few) within a short time of working with you as a researcher. Also, working with other colleagues and even students from other departments has improved my interpersonal skills and collaborative research.

The bad point was that I thought I would have finished my research earlier. but unfortunately, I was still working till the last month!

2. Does the assessment (the final examination and the marks you got for it) a reasonable one? Did it do justice to your efforts? What are the good and bad points about assessment?

**Answer:** I'm quite contented with my final mark. But maybe, I would have suggested that the final mark be of two parts, the larger one to be determined by the supervisor, while the rest should be left at the mercy of the examination committee.

3. I encouraged you to work in groups and help each other. Sometimes I insisted on this. Now looking back how do you evaluate this? What were the good aspects/bad aspects of this approach?

**Answer:** Working in groups really helps during the research work. This is an approach that should be encouraged among the MSc researchers

4. We used a WIKI system (dimos.ihe.nl) for storing information and communications within the

group. Did this help you? Was it a distraction? Give your views.

**Answer:** This system is quite impressive! It's quite safer to keep important information and data on DIMOS. It also serves as a file sharing avenue for the users. I wish all other departments are using this system.

In fact, I've visited DIMOS to get some data I couldn't find when I get to my home country. This could have been practically impossible without DIMOS

5. In addition to above what are the points that you would like to express (on any topic that is

related to student-supervisor relationship). **Answer:** The student –supervisor relationship should be very cordial. Supervisors should make themselves available to students anytime they are needed while the students should also take cognisance of the schedule of their supervisors and be aware that they are also engaged to other things aside supervision.

## General Comments

Most of the students' comments are positive. Partly they may want to be 'nice' to me, but even if this survey was conducted anonymously by a third party, I trust the essence of the message will remain same. I am not surprised by the outcome. For me the most important part of my work is the supervision of the students and I take it seriously and personally. I have my own vision about the way supervision should be done and usually go out of the way to make sure that my plan is implemented in general. Usually students perform well and I do not expect less.

When I discuss students' research output with colleagues and friends, I often hear two viewpoints: first says that anyone, with proper guiding, motivation and training, any reasonable individual can succeed in research -- similar to the Suzuki philosophy for music. The second is that the talent is often born with. I consider myself -- in strong terms -- to be in the former view. While the ingenuity may have some hereditary (or random?) factors, to be successful as a researcher one does not have to be born with the talent. While there are certain personality traits that make the process easier, the combination of a willing student and a persistent supervisor works most of the times. Essentially, I consider the stories of these five students are validations of my views.

One of the biggest pluses in my working environment was the degree of freedom I had to choose and implement my own approaches and solutions. My supervision approach is built around several principals:

1. People naturally work in groups. They like to be appreciated by others for their achievements, to be helped by peers when needed and to draw moral support from each other.
2. For most of the students MSc is the first exposure to research. Almost all are overwhelmed by the 'openness' of the problems they have to solve, number of choices they can make and the need for self guidance. It is necessary to understand this state of mind and help the student out of it within the first few months of the work, but 'proving themselves'.
3. From the perspective of student's development, the specific topic of research is secondary to the skills she gains in solving problems (general, non-prescribed, open-ended). They may forget all they learned in the classroom, even the specific knowledge they gained during research. But these 'skills' they build for life.
4. There are many lessons that are best learned by experiencing. It is difficult (open impossible) to explain them to a student a-priori. I admit this is one of the issues I repeatedly encounter in the very beginning of my supervision. Students ask me for abstract questions. (e.g. 'what is the ultimate goal of doing this?') Or they fail to see why they have to do certain activities that look almost like rituals (e.g. 'Whenever you complete a stage of model development, upload the files to Dimos, irrespective of whether your model works or not') I hate to reply generally in the line of 'trust me and we'll see', but that is what I often had to do. But invariably they all reach the stage where I can indeed discuss (and help answer themselves) these questions and concerns.
5. Students should not only focus on their own small niche. They should pay attention to what others are doing, adapt their findings when appropriate and propose solutions to other's problems.

I implement these using a number of devices:

1. I maintain a comprehensive Wiki (explained in a previous document) where the students keep a log of their work. Whole group can read everything, edit anything.

2. We have roughly bi-weekly meetings where we discuss each other's work.
3. I invite more than one student to meetings together sometimes.

As a supervisor, these efforts take time. But, also for students these are time-consuming activities. In fact towards the second month or so, I have seen them wondering why they have to do all these. This survey, filled out by graduated students helped me to validate that that is not the feeling of the students who finished the whole process.

As far as the output is concerned, each of the above students has produced results that are published/being reviewed in peer reviewed international journals. Some have produced multiple publications.

### **Specific Negative Comments**

1. I sometimes could be too much involved that I solve problems for the students: This is true and is something I should really discourage myself from doing. It is necessary to do some degree of 'demonstration'; however, I should draw the line at the point where I might encroach on the student creative ability.
2. I should be more organized and predictable in supervision "it is good to establish scope/extent of thesis works with the student from the beginning and to have progress meetings in a fixed manner". Probably true. But is often difficult to uniformly implement. In the beginning students are at very diverse levels. Some need more hand-holding than the others; some need several 'warm-up' problems before venturing into the real research problem; others work best when they are left largely to their own devices. Overall, I do not consider this as something I should worry excessively about.