

# Supervision and Social Distancing: A Quick Guide

RED Team, March 2020

The university's March 2020 COVID-19 response will affect most areas of university work, and this includes graduate research supervision. Fortunately, supervision is a flexible activity that can continue in many cases with just a few adjustments.

Many of our candidates will be feeling the effects of COVID-19, and providing **continuity in supervision is one of the best things we can do to support them through this period**. This quick guide provides some advice on things you might want to consider as you go about reviewing your supervision practice in light of the current social distancing provisions. The GRS also has a list of FAQs that may be of further assistance (see: [www.latrobe.edu.au/about/novel-coronavirus/grs-faqs](http://www.latrobe.edu.au/about/novel-coronavirus/grs-faqs)).

## 1. Review project requirements

Depending on the field, the project and the stage of candidature, social distancing measures will have different effects. In some circumstances, candidates will be able to proceed (more or less) as planned, while others will have to completely change their plans. Some of these changes may also impact on you and your own research program, so in the first instance think about the requirements of the project: are there any parts of the project that may be suspended at present? Any elements that are time critical and **must** proceed? Are there data collection processes in place that may need to be adjusted? Or is it preferable to postpone data collection until a later time?

*Critically consider the difference between tasks that are necessary right now, vs. those that are desirable, and be prepared to consider changing some of the project plans or expectations in light of the current circumstances.*

If the project is affected, consider whether a candidate may be able to shift to a different task for the moment. In some circumstances, a pause to the project/candidature may be desired.

## 2. Consider individual needs

Some candidates will be more affected by social distancing measures than others. Some will have lost jobs, some will be worried about family overseas, and some will have increased caring responsibilities. Some may have legitimate reasons to be concerned for their health or the health of those they live with. Some may be experiencing concern or anxiety because of the broad situation. Some will be absolutely fine, and others may even be looking forward to a period of increased isolation.

Whatever the circumstances, now may be a good time to **renew your awareness of services and supports provided by the university**. Some candidates may want to take leave for a period of time, while others will want to work through – either way, be sure to put clear plans in place for future supervision contact so that no-one feels abandoned in their candidature.

## 3. Bring the whole team together

One interesting thing about emergency measures is that we all respond differently, depending on our personal circumstances and views. Now is a really good time to touch base with everyone involved in the supervision team, just to ensure that project and personal needs are understood, and to enable forward planning. This could be as simple as an email, or a group message, or just 10 minutes out of a scheduled meeting.

*It is anticipated that a lot of supervision will now move to the online space, so...*

#### 4. Discuss your web-based communication expectations

Many supervisors already use Zoom or Skype routinely for supervision meetings, but for others, this will be a new experience. Either way, take the time to now talk through your expectations with each other. Will you simply follow the existing schedule of meetings, or does something need to change? How will you use the software? Who will set up the meetings, and what contingencies will you use if there's a tech issue?

*One important thing for supervisors to bear in mind:* candidates often take their cues about 'how the meeting is going' from nonverbal communication. Web-based meeting challenge this. It's harder to 'read' people, and how we use our voices changes. It's worth thinking about this, especially if you don't routinely meet your candidates online. Some simple measures include: checking the speed/volume at which you speak, structuring the content of the meeting according to an agreed agenda to avoid surprises, and periodically inviting candidates to seek clarification on things discussed.

#### 5. What about formal presentation and milestones?

Zoom-based meetings are technically considered 'face-to-face', and events using La Trobe systems, organised 'at' La Trobe, and involving a majority of La Trobe participants can be considered to be 'on campus', so there is no formal impediment to milestone presentations and meetings being conducted over Zoom. This is how milestones already work for many remote candidates.

However, there may also be reasons why formal presentations or meetings require an on-campus presence, or candidates for whom online presentation is difficult or impossible. In some cases, an extension to a milestone due date may be desired. Discuss this with your candidates.

**Remember that the purpose of on-campus graduate research presentations is to build a sense of community and provide opportunities for peer feedback**, so if your candidates are presenting over videoconferencing, consider what you can do to help build the audience and to foster constructive peer engagement (e.g. chairing the session, inviting questions/comments in the chat pane, which can be saved for future reference, etc.)

**Finally, if you have any concerns about your graduate research supervision, feel free to reach out to the RED Team ([red.grs@latrobe.edu.au](mailto:red.grs@latrobe.edu.au)) at any time, or come along to one of our online workshops for supervisors. Look after yourself and others.**