

Choosing a topic and supervisor

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Choosing a thesis topic and a supervisor to guide your candidature can seem like a daunting task. We have some information, tips and suggestions to get you started.

Deciding on a topic

The process of choosing a topic requires a lot of research. You may already have a deep interest in a research area, but you usually need to do additional reading in and around your area of interest before arriving at the 'right' topic.

The Research Whisperer

[The Research Whisperer](#) is a not-for-profit online resource, with specific focus on research in professional academia and funding.

The University's research proposal guide

U Syd website provides a guide to [preparing a research proposal](#). The guide is broken down into clear points on what needs to be included in your proposal.

The University of Sydney Learning Hub

[The Learning Hub](#) has resources on how to effectively develop your research skills early in your candidature. We recommend you review these skills so you understand the process of planning your research, staying on track and how to write a thesis.

Choosing your supervisors

Approaching your lead supervisor

When you have a research topic, you can approach potential supervisors. Your supervisory team will consist of a lead supervisor and at least one other supervisor, appointed by the postgraduate coordinator. This will be done in consultation with your lead supervisor, and (usually) you.

If you don't have an immediate idea for a lead supervisor, use the University's [Research Supervisor Connect](#) page. This lists all academics eligible for supervision for either master's or doctorate research, according to faculty and areas of research interest.

In some circumstances you may be assigned a supervisor from commencement, without having to approach any academics directly – these arrangements often work well.

Practical considerations

Faculty

When deciding on a lead supervisor, consider which is the relevant faculty for your research area, and whether your research area lends itself to an interdisciplinary approach. You will need to decide on your 'home' faculty – where your lead supervisor is located – while potentially also having supervisory guidance from an academic or expert from a different discipline or faculty, or even from a different institution, industry, or field.

Research area

For your lead supervisor, it's best to contact an academic who has researched and written in your area of interest, to ask if they have the capacity to take on supervision of a research student. We recommend writing a concise summary of your research topic (using [The Learning Hub's](#) resources), sending it to the academic, then meeting to discuss your proposal.

Supervisor's workload

If the academic is interested, check how many research students they currently supervise. While having many HDR students suggests a popular and possibly successful supervisor, consider whether it will impact the time and support you'll receive. University policy specifies that each full-time supervisor should have a maximum of 5 research students, unless they are given special permission to take on more.

Qualities to look for in a supervisor

Most students look for a supervisor who has good knowledge of their area of interest, and someone who they will get along with. Ask other research students about their professional and interpersonal experiences with different supervisors in the faculty.

The role of a supervisor also requires a reasonable grasp of the academic and administrative policies and processes involved in supervising a research student. This may be something to consider in your choices.

Consider whether the supervisor can provide the appropriate level of support for you, knowing what you know about yourself, your strengths and limitations and your personal circumstances.

What to do if you need advice

If you have doubts about the quality of any of your supervisory relationships, consider contacting your faculty postgraduate coordinator to talk through your issues. Sometimes students and their supervisors become incompatible due to changes in research area or direction, work styles, or personality clashes. Seek advice early from your faculty postgraduate coordinator. You can also [contact us for independent, professional and confidential advice](#) at any time in your candidature.

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