

# Choosing a topic and supervisor

Related topics:

- [Supervision](#)

## Deciding on a topic

The process of choosing a topic requires a lot of research in itself. 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.

Useful resources to help you decide

### **The Thesis Whisperer**

[The Thesis Whisperer](#) is a useful blog for [developing research questions](#). The Thesis Whisperer is dedicated to helping research students – linking students around Australia and the world. It's edited by Dr Inger Mewburn, director of research training at ANU.

### **The Research Whisperer**

[The Research Whisperer](#) is another online resource, with specific focus on research in professional academia and funding.

### **The University of Sydney Learning Centre**

[The Learning Centre's](#) publication [Writing a Thesis Proposal](#) outlines how to develop a thesis proposal, and gives information about differences between disciplines, such as:

- students' range of topic choice
- students' degree of freedom in choosing specific research questions
- the overall timing of research projects

**It's not uncommon for your thesis topic to change over time, as you get further into your research.**

## Choosing your supervisors

### Approaching your lead supervisor

When you have a research topic, you can approach potential supervisors. Your supervisory panel 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 of Sydney'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.

### 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 Centre'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 supervisor should have a maximum of 5 research students**, unless they are given special permission to take on more.

## What qualities to look for in a supervisor

- Most students look for a supervisor who has good knowledge of their area of interest, and good 'people skills'.
- The role of supervisor requires a reasonable grasp of the academic and administrative policies and processes involved in supervising a research student. Ask other research students about their experiences with different supervisors in the faculty.
- Consider whether the supervisor can provide the appropriate level of support for **you**, knowing what you know about yourself, and your strengths and limitations.

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

## 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, or personality clashes etc. 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.