

SUPERVISION OF UNDERGRADUATES IN ASNC

A GUIDE FOR SUPERVISORS

This guide is directed towards postgraduate research students who have been invited by a Director of Studies in ASNC to undertake some undergraduate supervision for the ASNC Tripos. It is directed in particular towards those postgraduate students who are new to teaching in Cambridge, and who may therefore be unfamiliar with some of the procedures and conventions; but all supervisors may find it useful. The guide should be read in conjunction with *Reading Anglo-Saxon, Norse, & Celtic at Cambridge: a Guide for Students*, which is distributed to all incoming undergraduates, and which contains a section on college teaching. This booklet is available from the Departmental Secretary.

The University's Staff Development Office provides an introductory session on undergraduate supervision in early October, which you are encouraged to attend. Full details of the Staff Development Programme may be found on the University website, via the page on 'Staff information and jobs', under the heading 'Personnel matters'.

It is general practice in Cambridge that postgraduate students are not asked to undertake undergraduate supervision in the first year of their PhD, or when they are in the final stages of writing before submission. There is no doubt that undergraduates will benefit greatly from being supervised by postgraduate students, not least because they will encounter a view of the subject which may helpfully complement the view of the lecturer. It is hoped at the same time that supervising will provide the postgraduate student with useful experience, and that in one way or another it will also be to the advantage of the postgraduate student's own work.

Supervision is provided for all Part I papers. Undergraduates are normally taught weekly, for one hour, on one paper per term, except by special arrangement with their Director of Studies. Supervisions are not generally provided for Part II papers, with the exception of any papers borrowed from Part I or from other Triposes.

It is the responsibility of the College Director of Studies to appoint supervisors for their students, from a list provided by the Department. Undergraduates may be taught individually, or in pairs, as determined by the College Director of Studies.

THE ROLE OF THE SUPERVISOR

The role of the supervisor is to help clarify, focus, and extend the undergraduate's understanding of a particular subject, and thereby to assist the undergraduate in preparing for the Tripos. The aims of the exercise may be summarised as follows:

- to clear up any points of difficulty which may have arisen in connection with the student's preparation (including practical matters such as finding items on a bibliography or in libraries), to comment constructively on the substance, clarity and presentation of the written work, in these ways to encourage the student to develop his

or her confidence and independence of judgement, and in general to help the student prepare for the Tripos examination;

- to provide a regular setting in which a student will feel free to ask questions about the course as a whole, which may have arisen in connection with university teaching and private study;

- to help the student develop particular intellectual and analytical skills, including reading and assimilating a large body of material efficiently, assessing its value in relation to the topic set, and the ordering of thoughts succinctly and clearly (both in writing and in oral discussion);

- to help the college monitor a student's progress during the course of the academic year (please tell the Director of Studies at once of any severe difficulties that the student is having with work, for whatever reason).

SUPERVISIONS AND UNIVERSITY TEACHING

The supervisor will need to have a clear understanding of the title, format, and scope of the paper for which the supervision is given, and of the university teaching which is provided for it. The necessary information is readily available in various forms: the Course Description; the University *Lecture List* (a special issue of the *University Reporter*, published in early October each year); published lists of Set Texts (if appropriate); reading lists and bibliographies; and past examination papers. Students should be aware of any recent changes in (for example) set texts, or in the rubric and format of the examination. It is therefore important that *current* versions of all documentation be obtained from the Departmental Secretary; much of this material is available on the department's website. It is also a good idea to seek advice from a senior member of the Department experienced in teaching the paper (in the case of new supervisors, this might well be his or her PhD supervisor).

It is important to ask the student what other papers he or she is taking for the Tripos, so that you have a general sense of his or her interests, and so that you are able to encourage the student to bring his or her knowledge of one subject to bear on another. It is also important to urge students to attend all lectures and/or classes provided for the paper, and to ascertain whether they are doing so. Supervisors may themselves find it useful to attend lectures and classes in the papers they are supervising. Note that the University *Lecture List* is organised on an annual, not a termly, basis, and that undergraduates should be urged to attend relevant courses in all three terms (and in both years of a two-year cycle). The Director of Studies should have pointed out the importance of lectures and classes, but it is very desirable that you should reinforce the message and inquire periodically about your students' responses to the courses.

The general principle is that a course of supervisions and the programme of university teaching should complement each other; both will be complemented by private study undertaken by the student during vacations. It is impossible, and would anyway be undesirable, to attempt to cover the whole range of most papers. It is best to concentrate on a selection of self-contained topics, each manageable in one week; but while it is important for the supervisor to ensure that the choice of topics is balanced (representative of the range and variety of subject matter in the paper as a whole), it is also important to allow the student an opportunity to express any preferences, should he or she wish to explore a particular aspect.

SETTING THE ESSAY TOPIC AND READING LIST

Each weekly topic is defined for the undergraduate by a question set by the supervisor, on which an essay must be written. Questions (or statements for discussion) need to be framed with some care. Please ensure that they are not ambiguous, and that they will involve preparation of a kind which will help the student understand the subject area as a whole. A recent examination paper may give useful ideas; but bear in mind that examination questions are set for purposes of assessment at the end of a year, and might be more tightly focussed, or presuppose wider knowledge and experience, than would be appropriate at an earlier stage. Above all, the selection of topics for a set of eight supervisions should amount to a balanced coverage of the subject (as stated in the previous section). In making this selection you should ensure that your students are aware of the range of different analytical techniques and modes of presenting evidence that different types of question will require.

It is the supervisor's duty to ensure that the undergraduate has a list of recommended or directed reading for each topic. Many supervisors prepare their own lists for a given topic, and give them to the students on a sheet of paper; reading-lists and more extended bibliographies for each paper are available from the Departmental secretary, or on the web. There is no harm in setting a list longer than a student might reasonably be expected to be able to read inside a week: it is good to give them some choices, and they will always have time in vacations, and in the revision period of the Easter Term, for further study. First-years in particular may, however, need some reassurance that they are not expected to read everything on a long list before writing the essay. Go through the list indicating particularly important works. It is usually best to indicate one or two general works for them to start with.

PROCEDURAL MATTERS

Supervisions normally take place at a regular, agreed time each week. It is reasonable to expect a student to turn up at the agreed time and place. In the case of a student who wishes to cancel or reschedule a supervision, it is expected that at least 24 hours' notice be given by the student. If a student fails to attend a supervision, without due notice, the supervisor is entitled to count it as a supervision when making a return to the College for number of hours taught; in many Colleges, the student will be charged personally for the missed supervision. If an undergraduate regularly inconveniences you, please inform the Director of Studies as soon as possible.

Ideally, an essay should be handed in by the student up to 24 hours in advance of the supervision, so that the supervisor has time to read it, to make written comments in the margin, and to provide a brief assessment at the end. Most supervisors do not give marks. The supervisor would then be able, in the supervision itself, to work systematically through the essay, commenting upon one matter after another, leading on into other forms of discussion. Students are not, however, always able to produce their work in good time. If an essay is handed in at the last minute, or if it is brought along by the student to the supervision, the student should be asked to read out the essay, or the supervisor should read it on the spot. The supervisor would then make extensive oral comments upon the essay, and ask questions about it; it may be that the supervisor would choose to retain the essay, and return it with annotations the following week. If a student does not produce an essay in time for the supervision, the supervisor may wish to postpone the supervision until the essay has appeared, though there will be circumstances in which it is better to press on, especially if the student can produce a plan full enough to make discussion worthwhile. You are within your

rights in refusing to reschedule the supervision for a different day, though again it is best to be flexible about this if possible.

THE SUPERVISION

There is no one way of supervising. Different approaches and tones are appropriate for different undergraduates and different stages of the course. The educational training, aptitude, intelligence, industry, self-confidence, fluency, and perhaps sex of the student need to be weighed up in deciding how forceful, critical, sympathetic, wide-ranging and/or talkative you should be as a supervisor. Supervisors should always be aware that overly hostile or exclusively negative criticism can do great damage to undergraduate morale, particularly in the first year. Criticism is an essential part of the supervision process, but it should always be accompanied by encouragement and suggestions as to how the work can be done better.

The writing of a weekly essay gives students experience in the process of distilling material into a clear and concise written form, trains them in the organisation of an argument in response to a given question, and provides them with opportunity to develop their own ideas. In the course of your assessment you will need to comment on content, range, depth, structure, and style (clarity, syntax, and spelling). The qualities of exposition that go into the making of a good undergraduate essay include: accuracy, clarity of argument, close engagement with the question, effective and critical use of evidence, independence of judgement, making of interesting connections, and relevant quotation where appropriate. You will need to give general advice on how to improve essay structure and presentation, for such matters are just as important as matters of substance. It is important in this connection to encourage undergraduates to take extensive notes in course of their reading, to organise their material, and to plan the structure of their essay in such a way as to promote clarity of exposition in relation to the given question. A common problem among first-year students is a tendency to take shelter behind summary of the views of others; so you may need to help them gain confidence, and encourage them to develop and to express their own ideas. You will want at the same time to test the student's understanding of what they have written, to ask them about matters not covered in the essay, and to give them the opportunity to make connections between what they have written and what they could with more thought and/or reading have written. In other words, you will want to clarify and broaden their understanding. Encourage them to have their own agenda and to ask you questions. It is often a good idea to end by asking if anything is still obscure to them.

A supervision is not a lecture. Do not be embarrassed if you reduce a taciturn student to silence from time to time while forcing him or her to think. However, students should probably take *some* notes in supervision. Encourage them also to collect their thoughts and commit them to paper immediately afterwards.

If you are supervising in twos, it is important to get the chemistry right; don't be afraid to ask the Director of Studies to change a pair at once if they are ill-matched in ability or temperament. Try to prevent one partner from dominating the discussion, and do be aware that male undergraduates can sometimes be more talkative and ready to speculate than women. Greater care than usual may be needed when criticising written work in a group, and it may be desirable to talk to each student individually about his or her progress from time to time. But pairing undergraduates can encourage the swapping of ideas, can lighten the atmosphere, and is often more enjoyable for all participants. In particular, it may cheer up students who lack

self-confidence to discover that their more forthright peers are not necessarily more acute. In all cases, supervisors should feel free to contact a senior member of the Department if difficulties arise.

SUPERVISION REPORTS

The Director of Studies is responsible for notifying the College Tutorial Office, who will send you a payment claim form and a supervision report. If these have not arrived two and a half weeks before the end of Full Term, contact the Tutorial Office or Senior Tutor's Secretary of the College, giving your name and that of the undergraduate and Director of Studies.

It is important to make a considered assessment of the student's work in the supervision report, which should be sent back to the College ten days before the end of Full Term. Please take special care in this respect, since supervision reports are the principal means by which the student's Tutor, and Director of Studies, are able to monitor the student's progression during the course of a year. One should add that reports may subsequently provide the basis for letters of reference written by the colleges on the student's behalf. Supervision reports are usually read out to the undergraduate by the Director of Studies and/or Tutor, so try to make helpful suggestions for improvement. If you do not want the report to be read out in its entirety, you should head it 'Confidential'.

You should receive a cheque or notification of bank deposit within two weeks after the end of Full Term.

REVISION SUPERVISIONS

You may be contacted by an undergraduate whom you supervised for a paper, or by the Director of Studies, to see if you will give one or two revision supervisions in the Easter Term before the Tripos examination. There is no requirement on you to accept, though many supervisors feel a moral obligation to do so. Check with the Director of Studies before agreeing to an undergraduate request, and check also if the number of supervisions which the undergraduate requests is acceptable. You may choose to have the undergraduate write some timed essays from past Tripos papers, and to go through them. You should claim for payment for these supervisions in the normal way.

Department of ASNC

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