When Students Request a Change of Supervisors

A student may sometimes request a change of supervisor. When this happens, both the student and the department have certain obligations and restrictions of choices.

First, some ground rules.

The new supervisor must be able to supervise the student’s research area. Excepting interim supervisors, this is a requirement by the Faculty of Graduate Studies.

Situation 1

The student, current supervisor, and potential new supervisor all agree on the change. Providing there is no obvious problem, the usual course of action is that the change is allowed. This is typical of (say) moving from an interim to a permanent supervisor, or for students who are early in the program that have finalized their research area and found a better match.

Situation 2

The current supervisor is willing to remain as the supervisor, but the student wishes to change supervisors. This situation typically arises when a student wishes to move into a different research area, or has a perceived conflict with the supervisor, or sees a problem in their working relationship.

In this case, the student has the obligation to

a) Contact potential supervisors for interest.

b) The student and / or the supervisor must inform the Director, Graduate Affairs as to why they want / don’t want this change to occur. Both must document their reasons. The supervisor should include a recommended action.

c) The Director may assist the student in finding a new supervisor, but the student must give the department a list of potential supervisors knowledgeable in their research area, as well as an abstract. While the Director will do due diligence in this task, there is no guarantee that a matching supervisor will be found.

If a match is found and all are satisfied, then the change will likely be approved.

If no match is found, then the student’s only option is to remain with the existing supervisor and/or withdraw from the program.

Situation 3

Both supervisor and student are unwilling to maintain their relationship. The Director will try to find a new supervisor. If no appropriate match is found, then the Faculty of Graduate Studies will be informed. They will guide the next step.
**Situation 4**

The supervisor is unwilling to remain as supervisor, but the student is willing to maintain their relationship. See Step 3.

**Rationale**

Within our department, students are normally admitted to a specific supervisor or to a specific research group. This has implications regarding student funding, work-load balancing, and so on. The ‘normal’ expectation is that students will remain with their original supervisor (or with an alternate supervisor within that research group) unless all agree to a change.

Change of supervisors is lightweight early in a student’s program: students are trying to discover their research interests, and another supervisor may prove to be a better match to these interests. Changes at this time should be easy to do as long as all agree.

Changes of supervisor later in the program, i.e., after a year or after a student has done a significant amount of work, is heavyweight. Unless there are serious problems, it is usually not in a student’s interest to change supervisors as it may introduce delays. As well, it can be quite difficult to find a new supervisor who is capable in the student’s research area, who is able to fund the student, and who can take on a new student. The choices here are somewhat unclear in extreme situations. However, the Faculty of Graduate Studies has made it clear that only a knowledgeable supervisor in the research area is acceptable (i.e., a ‘signing authority’ does not suffice), and that if the original supervisor is willing to stay on but no other supervisor can be found, the only other alternative is for the student to withdraw.