5. Supervising

Departmental supervisions, mainly in Part II and Part III, are currently organised by Rachael Padman (rp10001@cam.ac.uk). They are paid for by colleges, and you have to submit a supervision report at the end of term using CamCORS (Cambridge Colleges On-line Reporting System). Claims are generated automatically when you submit your report.

For small groups of two or three, there are various basics to remember.

Reading Take time early on to discuss books and reading.

Written work You must set appropriate written work to be done for each supervision. Your choice has a major effect on the students’ progress. Be sure that you know the course synopsis and decide in advance what are the key points: you won’t have time to cover everything.

Individual attention The chief point of small group supervision is to attend to the individual needs of students: so you have first to find out what their individual needs are, and then to meet them.

Preparation You must read and mark students’ written work before the supervision. It helps them much if you grade it with ‘class’, and write detailed comments on the script. Decide in advance what area you would like the supervision to cover, and remind yourself of the key points. But be prepared to be flexible.

Checking on progress Ask them to tell you their difficulties. If you don’t get much response, be prepared to ask them questions until you find where there are gaps. Then you can start explaining. Don’t come with a prepared lecture. Be prepared to go very slowly with weak students and to stretch bright ones. Never bluff. If need be, note down the question and answer it next time.

Unresponsive students If you have a lively student in a group it is only too easy to neglect the quiet ones. Be sure to bring them all forward; if necessary, alter the groupings.

Friendliness Never be scathing. Be firm about lack of work, but try to find what lies behind it. Build up confidence. Spend a little time finding out their aspirations. If you suspect that things are going seriously wrong, tell the college sooner rather than later.

Sexual harassment In small group teaching, students may be more sensitive than you realise. Make sure they all have as much personal space as they seem to want. Sometimes, it might be better to avoid having everyone sitting side by side at a table.

Feedback It’s important to keep a record of the students’ performance. At the end of term, go over their strengths and weaknesses, tell them your estimate of exam results, and lay definite plans for vacation revision. Try to make your report for the Director of Studies illuminating.
For larger groups it may not be feasible to set and mark much written work, but it is still important to probe and to get response from the students, perhaps by making them work at the blackboard. Try at least to find out enough about their progress to be able to write your end of term report with conviction.