

Advising / Mentoring Guidelines for BMS Phase I

BMS Phase I advisor and mentor

Each Phase I student in the BMS should have an advisor and may have a mentor from the BMS faculty. The advisor and the mentor may be the same person. Here we describe the distinct (but overlapping) roles of “advisor” and “mentor” separately, using “student” and “mentee” for the corresponding roles of the student.

The BMS assigns to each student admitted to Phase I a faculty member who will serve as the initial advisor, attempting to match academic interests when possible. This advisor is expected to be familiar with the study regulations of the BMS and the university, and should give guidance and advice throughout Phase I, while providing perspectives for Phase II.

Phase I students may choose at any time to change their advisor and/or to choose a separate mentor in addition. Any member of the BMS faculty, including postdoctoral faculty, can serve as advisor and/or mentor.

What is the role of the advisor?

The Phase I advisor follows the student’s study plans and progress, discussing these with the student and giving recommendations. The BMS wants all of its students to be successful. For this, it is important to plan studies fitting with the student’s interests and strengths and to set ambitious but realistic goals for the study plan. The advisor should note not only successes but also possible problems, in order to discuss appropriate measures needed to overcome these.

It is the student’s responsibility (and also in his or her best interest) to meet with the advisor on a regular basis. Meetings should take place in particular both before the start of each semester (in order to discuss the study plan) and shortly after the end of each semester. The student is expected to contact the advisor to arrange these meetings, typically by email.

The student takes minutes of each meeting, preferably on the form provided by the BMS for this purpose. (Any personal issues discussed, which more properly form part of the mentoring relationship described below, should be left out of the minutes to protect confidentiality.)

First meeting of advisor and student

The first meeting should take place at the beginning of the first semester, or earlier if possible. The advisor should:

- discuss courses that seem particularly suitable for the student, reminding him or her that it is possible and common to audit courses for a couple of weeks before making the final decision about which ones to stay with,
- inform the student about the BMS Study Regulations and the Qualifying Exam,
- ensure that the student takes classes from different areas in order to broaden his or her knowledge, remembering that Basic Courses from at least three different areas are required.

Semester reports

Before each end-of-semester meeting, the student prepares a written semester report, which:

- reflects on the previous semester, listing courses taken, grades, and study progress,
- lists possible courses for the coming semester, including alternatives,
- mentions possible additional activities like soft-skills training, conferences and summer schools,
- includes any further comments and questions.

The report is to be emailed to the advisor before the meeting, discussed at the meeting, signed by the advisor, and sent to the BMS office.

Duties of the advisor

The advisor

- meets with the student on a regular basis to evaluate study progress,
- ensures that the student's plans are realistic and in his or her best interest,
- checks that the courses taken align with the student's long-term goals,
- describes the Qualifying Exam and ensures that the student prepares for it suitably,
- discusses possible research directions, supervisors, and funding sources for Phase II, mentioning how these affect the choice of courses and seminars in Phase I,
- recommends taking on an "extended" seminar project, which may serve as a stepping-stone to finding a supervisor and research project for Phase II,
- checks that a supervisor for Phase II is lined up before the Qualifying Exam,
- gives advice about long-term prospects, depending for instance on whether the student wants to pursue a university career or one in industry or elsewhere,
- asks whether the student is picking up "research skills" as well as mathematical knowledge.

What is the role of the mentor?

Mentoring is a tool for professional and personal development as well as for career advancement. It is based on the pairing of a mentor and a mentee. These pairings are formed across hierarchies and generations. A person with more professional life experience (the mentor) supports the development and career of a younger, less experienced person (the mentee). One purpose of mentoring is to detect possible difficulties early on, so that additional support and guidance can be offered and countermeasures can be taken if necessary.

Mentees learn from their mentors and benefit from their experience. Mentors pass on their personal experience based on their own career, and give access to their professional network and contacts where appropriate. The mentor offers honest advice and support on personal issues.

In the context of BMS Phase I, the mentor should provide insight about the Berlin mathematics landscape and the various research groups, including how they fit into the international mathematical community. This is especially important with regards to selecting a supervisor for Phase II. Before the student decides to apply for Phase II, the mentor should initiate a moment of reflection:

- What does it mean to be a PhD student? (Following courses as a student and doing original research require different sets of skills.)
- Can the student succeed in research? Is it in his or her best interest to pursue a doctorate?
- Is this the right career path for the student?

Mentee and mentor meet at least once per semester – and whenever issues for discussion arise. Mentoring meetings are confidential, so that personal issues can be discussed. In particular, no record is kept except for possible private notes by the mentee or the mentor.

The role of the BMS Office

The BMS Office supports the advising and mentoring process by:

- keeping a record of the matches between students/advisors and between mentees/mentors,
- providing online the BMS course program for each semester, including a "course dictionary" to translate between the offerings of the different universities and the BMS Basic Courses,
- keeping records of students' grades and semester reports,
- keeping advisors and mentors informed about changes to the BMS Study Regulations.