

Valentin Bacher

DPhil Student in Computer Science

University of Oxford

Department of Computer Science

Oxford, United Kingdom

✉ valentin.bacher@cs.ox.ac.uk  [vbacher.github.io](https://github.com/vbacher)

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Student Letter

The student letter below are written by the students I have supervised during my DPhil at the University of Oxford.

1.1 Yuhuai Gao - *Undergraduate Student - 2026*

I first met Valentin while working on my undergraduate research project at Oxford. He was my co-supervisor, and over the course of the project, he became the person I spoke to most often and came to trust most.

One of the things I valued most was that, when discussing research with him, I never felt afraid to admit that I did not know something. At the beginning of the project, I was still struggling with questions that felt very basic: how to interpret the alignment parameters used in data preprocessing, or how to map labels back onto the original ultrasound data. Valentin never made me feel that these questions were too simple to ask. He made it easy for me to be honest about what I did not understand, rather than pretend that I had already figured it out.

Quite often, I would come to him with a research idea that I had not fully thought through, sometimes without even being sure whether the question was worth asking. He would listen carefully as I tried to explain it, then work through it with me until we gradually arrived at the real question.

Valentin also never made decisions for me simply because he had more experience. If he disagreed with my judgement, he would tell me so directly, but he rarely jumped straight to telling me what I should do instead. When I showed him preliminary results from cross-domain experiments and downstream tasks, for example, he did not simply tell me whether the results were good or bad. Instead, he kept asking questions: What assumptions was my interpretation based on? What other explanations might there be? Very often, I would leave a discussion not with an answer he had given me, but with an answer I had finally worked out for myself.

Looking back, I think this was the way in which he influenced me most. He taught me that good supervision is not about telling a student what to do at every step, but about helping them gradually develop the confidence and judgement to make decisions of their own.

Valentin gave me a great deal of freedom, but that freedom never felt like being left on my own. Whether I wanted to discuss an idea, ask him to read a draft, or arrange a meeting, whenever I genuinely needed help, he was there and always willing to make time.

Of course, I learned a great deal from Valentin about research methods and academia more broadly, but

those are not the things I most want to write about here. What mattered more to me was that, the first time I seriously tried to do research, I had someone who made me feel respected and trusted, and who showed me that I did not have to solve every problem by myself.

I feel incredibly fortunate that I met him at such an important stage of my development as a researcher.

Yuhuai Gao was my first undergraduate research student at Oxford.