Models of Higher Degree Supervision: Findings from a study of supervisors and students in a professional department

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Abstract: This paper reports on a study of post-graduate supervision in a professional field. It was designed in part to fill the gap in knowledge about supervision in disciplinary areas other than the sciences, and partly to look at supervision from both the students' and the supervisors' perspectives. Based on questionnaires and follow-up interviews, major issues are discussed, and a tentative model suggested to provide for better supervisor-student matching and further understanding of the nature of the higher degree process.

Research-based literature on the experience of higher degree studies and the process of undertaking it, from both supervisor and supervisee perspectives, is scant. In Australia, Moses has charted the field. In particular, she has distinguished personality, professional and organisational factors which can be problematic for students. The weighting of the importance of academic, including organisational, issues over personal ones was reported in Powles (1989) study. She went further, and examined both supervisor-student 'concordance' on issues such as level of preparedness for higher degree work and sequencing of meetings, finding in the latter in particular that students reported less frequent meetings than did their supervisors. She also found substantial sex differences in levels of dissatisfaction with supervision, and guidance on literature and thesis writing (women reported more dissatisfaction). She, like others (Parry, Atkinson and Delamont, 1994) also found differences between students in
the Arts faculty, and Science, with the Arts students experiencing significantly more dissatisfaction. This difference probably reflects differences in disciplinary cultures (Becher, 1981; 1989), which has been borne out in more recent work by Parry and Hayden (1994).

Work tends to focus on issues of supervisor accountability to students (Chapman, 1974; Welsh, 1978) or on the more general accountability of universities for throughput of higher degree students (Welsh, 1978; Dillon and Malott, 1981; Powles, 1989). There is also the work on identification of student problems (Simpson, 1970; Moses, 1984; 1985; Powles, 1989). The focus of most is on young, full time science students and these are assumed as the norm (Welsh, 1981; SERC 1983), although a recent UK study has charted the field in social sciences (Burgess, 1994).

It is argued here that major differences might be found in the conceptualisation and practice of higher degree work in professional fields. Here, there may be less emphasis on gaining a degree in order to enter the academic field of work, and students are likely more commonly to be part-time, older, and to bring to their research work professional experience, whether or not this impinges on their actual research topic. As part-time students, they have less opportunity to meet other students and staff, and as older students, they have other personal and work commitments and experience which are at least background factors during their higher degree candidature. Hill, Acker and Black (1994) have identified these students as often 'detached', and found them to be more common in Education.

The research to be reported is based in a professional department (education), which is not only characterised by the foregoing student profile, but where particular supervisor characteristics, based on their pre-academic professional experience, their prior experience as higher degree candidates, and their expectations of the reasons why students are undertaking a graduate degree in this field, are brought to the student-supervisor interaction. The field is further complicated by its lack of status as a clear discipline, so that it is in any institution composed of various mixes of expertise, from the root disciplines such as philosophy, psychology and sociology, as applied to educational institutions and practices, to curriculum, policy studies, administration and pedagogy, and meta-
fields such as comparative education. Even the pre-requisites for higher degree work are often unrelated to particular fields of educational inquiry, so that a much more disparate range of discipline backgrounds, research experiences, and intellectual traditions will be found both amongst staff and graduate students.

The present research sought to chart both student and supervisor expectations and experiences of higher degree work within this diversity, and to see if there were common elements of concern and of practice which could be the basis for the development of models of supervision taking both supervisor and student needs and perspectives into account. The research was part of a study of the higher degree experience in three professional fields: social work, health sciences [non-medical] and education. Since there is such a dearth of previous research, the major aim was to find out how higher degree students and their supervisors conceptualise the process of doing a higher degree and their respective roles in that.

**Research Design and Method**

A questionnaire survey was used to identify the characteristics of the graduate population, their rationale for further study and a self-evaluation of their studies in terms of their coping, pressures and satisfaction. The primary focus of the survey was on biographical and attitudinal characteristics of the students. The survey was developed and trialled by the research group which included researchers from three professional areas at the site university. Follow-up in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted individually with a sample of students and supervisors in order to elucidate their perspectives on supervision. The focus was on a qualitative exploration of the ways in which each perceived and experienced the process of postgraduate research.

All students enrolled in Masters and Doctoral programs in Education in first semester, 1993, were mailed a questionnaire, with reply-paid return envelopes, with two follow ups for non-responders. 370 graduate students were approached, and a total number of 314 replied (85%). The high response rate indicates the extent of interest of the respondents in the investigation.
In order to identify both ‘best practice’ and more problematic aspects of supervision, as seen from the students' perspective, the questionnaire respondents were divided into those who were ‘satisfied’ or ‘very satisfied’ with their current higher degree studies, and those who were ‘not so satisfied’ or ‘not at all satisfied’ (only two selected the latter). A sampling frame was then developed incorporating the following inclusion criteria: gender (male or female); level (Masters or PhD), age grouping (26-35; 36-45; 46-55; 56-65), enrolment status (part-time or full-time), and stage of candidature (first or second year, or last anticipated year or two). In addition, one overseas student on a scholarship was included.

Ten staff interviews were undertaken. Each of the supervisors of the students selected was supervising a large number of students (two supervisors are normally appointed for each research post-graduate student). Staff were selected from different research areas within the School, all of whom supervised at least 10 research students. Seven were male and three female. Finally, the findings were offered for discussion at a post-graduate workshop in the School, and also presented at a staff seminar, and additional material raised at these meetings is also included.

Before identifying elements for the construction of models of supervision, the student experience is outlined, based on the questionnaire and interview findings, and the nature of supervision is described from both student and supervisor perspectives, based on the interviews. On the basis of these analyses, three different orientations to the supervisory process are discerned and presented as identifiable models of the task.

**The Student Experience**

(i) Who are the students? Of the 314 who responded to the survey, 62% were enrolled in MEd coursework or EdD degrees, while 38% were enrolled in research MEd or PhD degrees. Eighty-three percent were part-time candidates, and of the full-time students, just over half were studying with the aid of a scholarship or grant (10% of all candidates). Sixty-three percent were in full-time work in 1993, and 16% were undertaking their studies on some form of leave from employment. They came to their studies with an average of 15 years' work experience (the range was 2 to 35
years). For the majority of students, entry to a higher degree was from a pass degree and the professional qualification, DipEd, together with either a BEd or an MEd Preliminary. Only 14% entered with honours degrees. Most of the students did not continue directly from undergraduate courses; some came to their studies after retrenchment or during family leave. The majority of students were women (68%).

Higher degrees in Education have been predicated on school teaching or counselling as the main employment fields of their students. Those fields constitute the backgrounds of nearly all academic staff in the School. However, the students come in from more diverse professional fields and employment experiences. The majority of the respondents worked in education, broadly defined, but only 58% were currently employed as school teachers. Over 20% of candidates had changed directions since their original employment. For this group in particular, it may be that further study is undertaken to secure a career change rather than to initiate it. The satisfaction of the activity itself, and anticipated intellectual stimulation, were cited as major reasons for undertaking a higher degree.

Most students are mature, and undertake their studies with a significant amount of life experience. The number of years in their professional field suggests that these people are frequently competent and knowledgeable in their own area of expertise and have often attained positions of responsibility and status. These graduate students may view themselves as competent professionals with heavily committed work lives. In addition, given their age and life stage, they frequently experience competing demands of work, family and other commitments: 74% reported being at least 'somewhat pressured' balancing the competing demands of home, work and study. It is argued that the older professional presents two challenges in the higher degree supervision field: firstly, negotiating the self perception of both competent professional and student, and secondly, establishing a satisfactory working relationship with the supervisor(s). The students reported feeling at least 'fairly well prepared' to undertake their studies (87%), a view not always shared by their supervisors and constituting part of the difficulty in clarifying roles and expectations in the supervisory process (Burgess, Pole and Hockey, 1994).
(ii) How do they experience supervision? Only 32% were 'very satisfied', while 51 percent considered that they were 'fairly satisfied'. Each of the measures taken were correlated with students' reported level of satisfaction. Seven of the 13 measures were found to correlate significantly with being satisfied (p<.01; Pearson product moment correlations varied from .27 to .10): having effective staff contact, being a teacher (all levels), feeling better prepared, having support from work, having time, having more interest in the topic, and not being advised by employer to do the degree. Further analysis to see how much each variable could uniquely predict satisfaction indicated that higher degree students considered that effective staff contact is most related to their satisfaction with their studies.

From the student interviews, it was evident that students experience a very wide variation in the quality of supervision provided for them by individual supervisors. The main dimensions on which they commented were the supervisor's commitment to them and to their project, their expertise in the substantive and methodological aspects of the work, and their guidance in relationship to procedural aspects and departmental information. The respondents reinforced the questionnaire finding that personal interest, coupled in a number of cases with feeling professionally 'stuck', was the major reason for commencing a research higher degree. In three instances the supervisor was known, and the expertise of the supervisor was a major drawcard; one said that there was no expertise available in Australia for his topic, and another said there was no expertise available for him in Education.

In all cases, students found the work challenging and rewarding, and some mentioned their growing sense of competence. Some focussed on the structured thinking, planning and writing, others on the reading, the introduction to new ideas, professional networking, learning what they perceived as the academic culture and the freedom to "be my own boss" in undertaking the work. Another expressed a sense of "being in control and understanding other things around me." One talked about having a sense of wanting to make a contribution to her field by combining her long professional experience with her research. Most mentioned writing as one of the skills they were acquiring or improving, and most of the doctoral candidates talked about branching into new areas, gai-
ning confidence to undertake research, even to take risks by looking at their topic from different disciplinary perspectives.

A number of the students perceived their allocation to a supervisor or supervisors as somewhat haphazard. Personal compatibility was named as a pre-requisite for supervisor choice by two candidates. There seemed to be some confusion about second supervisors. Conflict between supervisors was a concern for several students, though it had different manifestations.

All students had chosen their own research topics. Some had been initially counselled regarding topic choice by their supervisor. And several had changed topic, and in some cases this was resisted by their supervisor. Some were very clear about a topic right from the beginning, and others have taken several years to clarify this. Some felt a lack of initial framework and found it hard to get started; the preparation of a formal proposal was considered a useful if initially daunting task. Most students were responsible for initiating contact with their supervisor(s), and only one supervisor made regular, forward appointments with his student. One, in his first year, noted that it was "an anxiety producing environment" working so independently; another noted this independence as a reason for choosing the particular supervisor. Most received at least some written feedback from their supervisor(s), though this was not always considered helpful, or prompt enough.

As would be expected given the age and experience of the students, none felt that they were too dependent on their supervisors: one in fact noted that her supervisor needed to learn to "let go". Few said that they received input from other staff or students at the university. For those on campus, moral support from others was considered important, and the overseas student had organised a regular seminar with other students from his country especially to check cultural interpretations. Students felt they needed more encouragement to participate in things on campus, and most complained about lack of information about procedure, facilities and the like. They felt that supervisors should take the initiative to tell them things they ought to know.

A number commented that their supervisor was committed to their research topic, but lacked detailed knowledge, es-
pecially knowledge of their professional field and experience. It would appear that a number of professionals are finding it convenient and congenial to undertake a higher degree in education, but there are negative consequences of this in terms of matching their experience and interests with appropriate staff expertise.

The Nature of Supervision: Supervisor Perspectives

Staff in general believed themselves to be competent, very adequate supervisors, albeit some admitted to small areas of their practice that were less than perfect. They generally considered that they had good relationships with their supervisees, as defined in their own particular terms.

In response to questioning about the role of supervisors, all considered that their main task was to ensure that students "get through", while several mentioned induction into scholarly culture. They also said that it was "part of the job", but that they also got satisfaction from it, with one stridently dissenting. They were all vague about what other expectations the School had about supervision. There appears to be some positive regard for supervisors who have large numbers of candidates and it would seem to be advantageous to have had a large number of students attain higher degrees with a staff member's supervision. There is however no direct acknowledgment for additional effort or lack thereof. An enormous disparity exists between supervisors in terms of the number of students supervised at any one time and teaching load. None seemed to think that the profession had any expectations from higher degree work, though one commented that graduates could be "counter productive because they're less prominent and they're less easily hoodwinked"!

The supervisors all said that supervision was probably deleterious for their own careers, since each had at least 12 postgraduate students, and they spent their time reading other people's writing, not doing their own. However, they all said they gained job satisfaction from supervising, except when students "can't write", or appear to have low motivation. They varied on how much practical help they thought they should give. They also varied in the patterns of interaction with their students and their ideas on the nature of supervision.
Staff expectations of students differed with regard to the initiation, nature and frequency of meetings, and whether or not written work should be presented. All but one expressed some reservations about the preparedness of some students to undertake higher degree work: poor writing skills were most often noted, but lack of methodological preparation, lack of substantive content knowledge, lack of theoretical knowledge and lack of conceptual clarity were also mentioned. They acknowledged that some of these were barriers to successful student completion, and added low motivation, and part time student status, coupled with work and family obligations, as further barriers. One mentioned that poor supervision also contributed in some cases, and another named as a problem the lack of professional support and recognition for higher degree work.

Only one specifically said he encouraged students to attend and give papers at relevant professional conferences. Joint publications were seen to be unacceptable by peers in the School. It is believed that students at that academic level should produce their work alone, and that they should have sole ownership of their material. This is reflected in the insistence by most that students choose their own topics.

Supervisors differed in how they handled concerns about non-intellectual aspects of their students' difficulties, though most were prepared to listen but reluctant to encourage them to talk about personal issues. All considered that they would deal openly with any interpersonal conflict that arose with a student, and that the issue of having both to support a student and criticise the work did not lead to any major conflict of interest for them, even if they had to tell a student his or her progress was unsatisfactory. However, the latter did appear to be problematic for at least some supervisors who felt extremely reluctant to confront a student about poor progress or perceived lack of ability, choosing rather to "string them along".

The interviews with supervisors indicated how they were inducted into the supervisory culture. Two sources are available: the School's guidelines (a xeroxed manual) and their own experience, both as a student and on the task. The most influential factor in supervision seems to be a person's own student experiences of having been supervised. Essentially those who enjoyed very positive, worthwhile graduate experiences have a
model whereby they appear to measure their own behaviours. This acts as a yardstick for the supervisor. Those who did not value their own experiences have a sense of what to avoid but have to formulate their own set of practices. For many supervisors it is a case of 'learning on the job', involving trial and error and evolving practices over time. Some joint supervision experiences have proved valuable for beginning supervisors, as has getting ideas from more senior staff. There was little indication that supervision is discussed regularly with colleagues.

**Student and Supervisor Concerns**

The most commonly articulated student issues were collegiality, isolation and loneliness, the need for support and validation, and for structure and direction.

"I needed someone to tell me it was worth it"

was a common refrain. Candidates want to know and be reassured periodically that their project has value. The effect of what was seen as predominantly negative comment was that they weren't really getting anything 'right'. Supervisors feel that they need to correct and refine, but they assume that no comment means that the work is satisfactory. They may even say that orally, but the effect of multiple corrections, especially in red ink, is negative, as one student exclaimed:

"Supervisors need to tread softly, and use a green pen!"

Closely related to the notion of validation and support for ideas is the issue of support for the individual:

"In the middle darkness you need support. I got very depressed."

Students generally felt a need for more pastoral care, more nurturing. Students want to be seen as people and they perceive the supervisory task as more encompassing than simply dealing with a thesis. Students believe they themselves are being supervised. Yet a number of students who enjoy and feel capable of independent work and are self motivated and directed still feel the need for structure and direction from the supervisor and frequently remarked that what was provided was inadequate. Too much independence was often seen as anxiety
provoking: they considered it important to achieve that balance between dependence and independence. It seemed that there was a very definite additional issue though not articulated overtly, namely communication between supervisor and supervisee. Communication about roles and expectations also includes the supervisory relationship, which may need to be reassessed or re-negotiated at various times during supervision. The importance of clarifying all these and other pertinent issues regularly to avert misunderstanding and time waste is crucial. Clearly the responsibility for adequate communication is both on the supervisor and the student. This is delineated in the literature by Phillips and Pugh (1987).

Some students feel alone with their dissertations.
Foto: Vidar Ruud, Nordlys.
Supervisors' concerns revolved around questions of time, matching of student and supervisor, and choosing examiners.

Time was mainly problematic in terms of reading and commenting on drafts rather than finding the time to meet with students. A number of staff lamented the time needed for editing, especially when it related to poor quality of writing. Many supervisors would like to see a more systematic way of matching supervisor and student. One concern is whether supervisors have adequate knowledge in the students' substantive area, a concern that was reflected by some students, and perhaps inevitable given the large numbers and varied interests of their students. Most supervisors admitted that they worked outside their immediate area of expertise and that each only had a very small number, if any, students in their own research field. This stretching outside one's field of expertise was one component in concern about examination, too, though the university procedures and processing of examiners' reports were also cause for distress to supervisors.

Models of Supervision

As can be seen, supervisors perceived their roles in rather different ways to the student perceptions of what being supervised entailed, and there are different perceptions amongst supervisors. Such diversity seems to spring in part from each supervisor's world view as well as his or her particular educational philosophy. As a consequence of the way they perceive their role, so do they vary in their expectations of their students, the nature of the supervision they provide and also the relationship they are comfortable in establishing.

Students also had distinctive perceptions of what is involved in being supervised. In terms of concerns, there is little overlap between supervisor and student perspectives. But they, too bring a world view to the supervisory situation, and while they may not have a well developed educational philosophy, they do have a sense of what they want from the staff member and the interaction, and of their role in it. Taking into account the various difficulties which arise in the process and the relationship, three distinctive orientations to the process of supervising and being supervised can be discerned: the thesis oriented, the pro-
professional development oriented, and the
person oriented. These apply to both su-

(i) Thesis oriented: the total focus of the
supervisor is on the thesis and helping
the student to produce this major work
in the most efficient and scholarly man-
ner, and within relevant time con-
straints. The primary interest of the su-

(ii) Professional development oriented:
the supervisor perceives the task as
more encompassing than supervising a
thesis - it is a kind of apprenticeship for
academic life. The supervisor motivates
students to write, present at conferences
and publish articles in appropriate jour-
nals, as well as facilitating arrangements
whereby students can meet other gradu-
ate students, colleagues, and experts in
the field. The student side of this orient-
ation is less clear, as few students, espe-

One of the most difficult aspects of su-

pervision, as outlined above, which ap-

plies particularly in this orientation, is the
student expectation that supervisors will
suggest and raise possibilities, whereas
supervisors may be more reactive, espe-

cially if they do not perceive profes-

ional as opposed to strictly thesis issues to
be part of their brief. A further area of

concern here is where the student is inter-

ested in applying their research, di-

rectly or consequently, to the practice of

their profession outside the university,

whereas the supervisor is either behind

in knowledge of the profession or disinterest-

ed. The reverse can also occur,

where the supervisor assumes the stu-

dent is doing a higher degree for profes-

sional advancement and the student is
doing it to change jobs or, as the questionnaire responses showed, for largely personal reasons!

(iii) Person oriented: the supervisory role here is seen as dealing with a whole person with a range of needs, interests, fascination and expertise. The supervisor considers the task as being sympathetic and supportive to candidates with regard to both academic and non academic aspects of supervision. In general this results in a friendly relationship, or one of friendship. The person oriented approach requires the supervisor to provide intellectual, professional and pastoral guidance as the situation demands. Students may look for this, assuming especially as mature professionals that there will be a collegiality in the supervisory relationship that takes into account the person doing the degree. Many of the student difficulties experienced in the process of supervision can be related to the lack of fulfilment of such expectations, and it is clear that there are both personal factors which lie outside the realm of work and study, as well as ones intrinsic to both, which can be distinguished. This may in fact require two sub-models, one which deals with those personal and interpersonal factors necessary to productively advance the research, and those outside which nevertheless are perceived by one or other or both to impinge significantly on progress and process.

Discussion and Conclusions

A fundamental difference between students and staff that emerged from interviews and is consistent with the literature is that supervisors think they are supervising a thesis while students think they are being supervised. Essentially it appears that the ideal supervisor is perceived by most students to be the one who encompasses all three orientations. This suggests that in order to better understand the supervisory process it is necessary to incorporate both supervisor and student orientations. For compatibility between supervisor and candidate either both need to be able to articulate and to match their major orientation, or complementarity needs to be discussed and negotiated. The supervisor with his or her particular world view, personality type, educational philosophy and particular area of expertise could be matched to supervise a student with his or her own peculiar world view, educational philosophy, interests etc. There may be a
mismatch in any of these areas which will affect the supervision experience. Mismatch may lead to unmet expectations unless negotiation of purpose and process is undertaken.

The study has highlighted what had been found in earlier research, especially by Moses (1984, 1985) and Burgess (1994), that personality, professional and organisational factors can be distinguished, any or all of which can be problematic for students. Perhaps the most interesting finding is that student satisfaction is most associated with the nature of student contact with the supervisor(s). The level of supervisor interest in a student's topic, and the degree of supervisor commitment to the individual and to the research, is perceived by many students as very important to their higher degree experience. Even acute personal issues were experienced as less of a pressure when relationships with supervisors were satisfactory.

This study also contributes to the identi-
fication of specific differences both in the general, research and postgraduate cultures of different academic fields by showing some specific aspects of these in relationship to students undertaking higher degrees in Education. The interview sample was too small to distinguish sub-cultures within education, for example possible differences between supervisors with a science background and those with a social science one.

What is most clear from the present study is that student and supervisor perspectives differ. Even given the possible tendency of supervisors to smooth over difficulties, and students to focus on them, it is clear that students consider it difficult to find a supervisor, and are unclear about the protocol for establishing and maintaining a satisfactory relationship with that person. A number felt that too much onus was placed on the student in the whole process. This included knowing who else they could consult for detailed advice, and for what they should know administratively.

There was some agreement between staff and students in this study on recommendations for improvement. These revolved around two issues: the process of students establishing a topic and finding appropriate supervisors, and negotiating a supervisory contract by both parties, with an emphasis on better communication, clearer delineation of responsibilities, and the possible need for change at different stages of the higher degree process. When this is put together with the supervisory model that was developed from the research, the recognition of different perspectives, and the articulation of expectations, can be assessed as part of the process of better staff-student matching. A more open process for this is recommended. As Bob Connell (1985: 38) states, PhD supervision is:

...a genuinely complex teaching task. It requires a substantial commitment of time and energy. It involves grappling with a considerable range of problems, from technicalities of research design to the morale - and sometimes health - of the students. And it never stands still, as the character of the relationship changes markedly over the years of a candidature.

A collegial approach to higher degree problem-solving was not advocated, but re-writing of the present guidelines, together with further discussion on the results of this research, may provide a
process for this to be advanced.

Note

1. This research began as a collaborative process funded under CAUT, co-ordinated by the Academic Development Unit at La Trobe University and undertaken jointly with Simon Barraclough (Health Sciences), Bill Healy and Jan Fook (Social Work) in order to investigate aspects of higher degree supervision in professional fields. A separate grant was awarded from the ARC Small Grants in 1993 to identify major supervisory practices in order to recommend relevant staff development, and was followed up in 1994 by a School of Education Central Research Fund Grant; most of the supervisor interviews were undertaken from the latter funds.

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