

Resource Pack on Supervising Postgraduate Students



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Supervision is often regarded as the single most important variable affecting the success of the research process (ESRC, 1991)

The supervisory process is crucial to the success of graduate students; it is complex, subtle, pivotal and responsible (Zhao, 2003)

Purpose of Resource Pack

There are a range of emergent issues and practices in the supervisory role over the past number of years. This academic resource pack is research-informed and focuses on development needs for supervisors of postgraduate students.

Research supervision has previously been regarded by academics as a private space (Stehlik, 2001). It has been seen as an intense, individual relationship between a research supervisor (master) and a research student (apprentice/protégé). More teachers now acknowledge the teaching aspect of their role as a supervisor and attempt to act as a mentor, facilitator and coach (Pearson & Brew, 2002).

Introduction

There are two main categories to consider at the outset of the supervision process:

Supervision philosophy - the principles considered to be relevant to the postgraduate research student supervision practices.

Supervision practices - current and recent responsibilities and practices in postgraduate research student supervision. Evidence of excellence in supervision practices, including the practical implementation of the supervision philosophy. This category could include evidence of negotiated frameworks for supervision activities, scheduling of activities, accessibility, sharing of knowledge, sharing of enthusiasm, mentoring, encouragement of independence of thought and inquiry, encouragement of analysis and problems solving, quality of interaction, clear and effective communication, development of generic skills with students, assistance with career development of students.

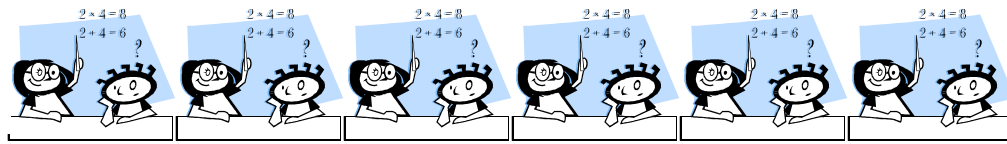
Questions to encourage your students to ask:

- What is supervision?
- What help do I need?
- What should students and supervisors expect from each other?

Reflection, analysis and communication of supervision practices - evidence of evaluation and improvement of supervision practices, enthusiasm for and commitment to professional development in supervision within the school or institute, mentoring of colleagues, encouragement of collaborative activities, development and communication of materials, tools or techniques to improve the supervision and training of research students.

Nature & Process

Graduate student supervision involves a lengthy personal and professional relationship between student and supervisor that includes selecting a research topic, planning the research, identifying and acquiring the necessary resources, managing the project, actively conducting the research, carrying out the literature review, analysis and interpretation of the



data, writing the thesis, defending it, publication of the thesis, and finding a position. This demanding process, usually stretching over several years, is made more complex by the increasing numbers and diversity of graduate students. Consequently, the supervisory process requires constant adjustment, great sensitivity, and interpersonal skill on the part of both lecturer and student.

Given the length and complexity of graduate student supervision, it is understandable that various difficulties may arise (Brown & Atkins, 1988; Moses, 1995) due to organisational, professional, or personality factors.

Organisational factors could include policies and procedures established (or not established) for graduate student supervision, the manner in which these are communicated to supervisors and students, the number of students being supervised, the supervisor's inability to manage a research group effectively, and inadequate support services and/or equipment.

Among the **professional factors** would be a misinformed or inadequately prepared supervisor or a supervisor whose research interests are different from those of the student.

Personality factors might involve personality clashes, barriers to communication from age, cultural, or language differences, or personal differences in approach to work.

Brown & Atkins (1988) have suggested that graduate student supervision is probably the most complex and subtle form of teaching in which lecturers engage. To supervise effectively, one has to be a competent researcher, and be able to reflect on research practices and analyse the knowledge, techniques, and methods that make them effective. The supervisor must help students acquire research skills without stultifying their intellectual and personal development.

Supervision and Scholarship

There are three necessary characteristics that a successful supervisor can possess:

A value characteristic (Barnett, 1994): this cluster encompasses such things as honesty, integrity, open-mindedness, breadth, analytic skill, carefulness, skepticism and intellectual humility.

A pragmatic characteristic: governs how the supervisor will tend to operate and comprises deference to and respect for the academic community.

A motivational characteristic: this is the ethic of inquiry (embodies the spirit of curiosity, the desire to know, to understand, to discover).

Support for Postgraduate Supervision

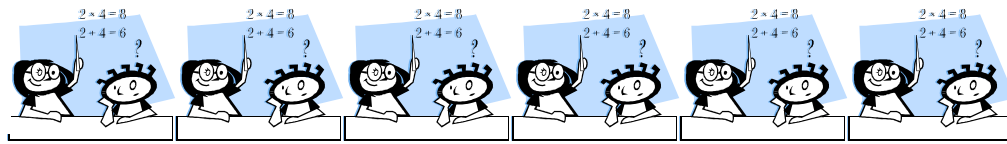
Within a School, it is recommended to organise workshops and discussion sessions focused on graduate student supervision each academic year. The purpose is to foster communication and mutual understanding of all aspects of supervision and to develop and clarify a framework for supervision and learning which will facilitate student development and enhance supervising practice.

Models of Good Practice in Postgraduate Research Supervision

Postgraduate research encompassing all its aspects involves many people, processes, relationships and resources. In order to build a conceptual framework to develop and describe models it has been necessary to "declare a set of parameters". These parameters comprise processes, individuals and committees, interaction rules, resources relationship interactions, players, structures and stages relevant to postgraduate research supervision in your School.

Role of the Supervisor

The Cullen et al. (1994) Report commented that there are certain key generic processes in supervising students effectively that constitute a form of facilitation; that variations across disciplines and student-supervisor relationships need to be taken into account; that the **indicators of supervisory effectiveness** include supervisory style (correct level of direction, regular meetings, making time for students, interest in project, encourage ideas/individuality);



supervisor competence with respect to the student project; personal characteristics and attitude of the supervisor (approachable, supportive, positive, open-minded, prepared to acknowledge error, organised, enthusiastic); academic and intellectual standing of the supervisor; that students view their supervisors as mixtures of strengths and weaknesses; and that student-supervisor relationships are highly complex, dynamic and relational.

The Student-Supervisor Relationship

It is obvious that *each relationship is unique* but there are some *common procedures* that may help promote the health of that relationship:

1. *Enter the relationship with your eyes open* as early as possible, gain as much information about the student/supervisor, the nature of the project, and the nature of the supervision process. Recruitment, selection, and especially induction procedures should serve to optimise the initial *matching of expectations* between student and supervisor. There should be early written agreements between supervisor and student, and clear statements of the responsibilities of students and supervisors.
2. *Check the harmony and growth of the relationship on a regular basis* have clear steps/procedures for checking on the *progress* of the project. There is a need for flexibility, but also firm procedures to deal with lack of progress. There is a need to assess student, supervisor, and project *independently*, with an emphasis on working out problems in the *first year*. There should be internal 'complaint resolution' procedures.
3. *Know your resources!* from the time of enrolment, the student and supervisor should establish a support system (i.e., supervisory panel, external units, procedures, infrastructure etc).
4. *Be realistic* every student/supervisor/project/administrative structure has its *limitations*. If these limitations cannot be changed, learn to minimise their impact (and maximise the strengths), or leave it behind.

Relationship Interaction: Parameters

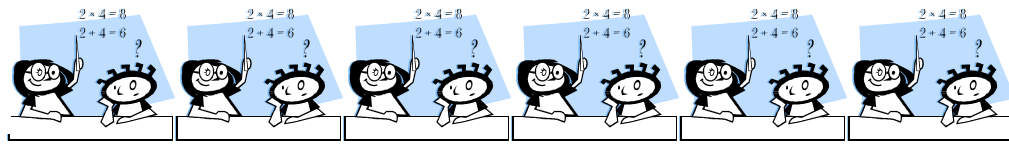
Moses (1985) states that most supervisory problems can be overcome if there is clear and open communication on all aspects of the project, and if there is structure without a straightjacket (a framework for supervision which facilitates rather than hinders, the development and creativity of the student).

Cullen et al. (1994) makes similar points, and argues further (on the basis that no supervisor, student or project is perfect) that:

- (i) supervision should be conceptualised to encompass a broad view of postgraduate education that includes more than the one-to-one interaction of student and supervisor, and
- (ii) there is a need to go beyond individual supervisory interaction and restructure practice to ensure that responsibility for quality is shared and co-ordinated.

Three distinct stages of supervisor involvement are identified: helping the student choose a viable topic and initiate data collection (intensive), monitoring student progress (less intensive) terminating data collection and writing up (intensive). On the basis of this stage analysis, Cullen et al. (1994, p. 69) report a model of supervisory process which is common to all disciplines:

- "Negotiating/guiding the move from dependence to independence which involves different degrees of direction at different stages that is, it can become very directional in the final stage to force a student to complete, or if a student is floundering and losing confidence the supervisor may break the task down for them, and there is an effort to get them to write up their research to full advantage-so that the student's move to independence is coupled with a bi-modal pattern of time allocation from the supervisor."
- "Varying the supervisory approach to suit the individual student's needs and personality, disciplinary differences and so on even though some [supervisors preferred] a particular approach and preferred students who suited that"
- "Recognising that a key to the process is the formulation of the problem/topic/question because it is that which ensures focus and engagement. The tension comes from providing enough direction to stop students going down paths which are non-



productive (which is a problematic judgement in itself), without taking over. In other words the student has to 'own' their thesis."

Relationship Interaction: Outcome

For the student, the outcome is the degree and the career opportunities afforded by the supervision/research process. For the supervisor, the outcome is publications, the recognisable achievement of bringing a student's candidature to completion, and the satisfaction during/after candidature of fostering an independent scholar. The candidature itself hopefully will be remembered by both student and supervisor as enjoyable and stimulating.

Despite the obvious importance and complexity of graduate student supervision, only recently has there been substantial analysis of issues surrounding this topic.

Recommended Reading

Kamler, B. and Thomson, P. (2006) *Helping Doctoral Students Write. Pedagogies for Supervision*. London: Routledge.

Gough, M. and Denicolo, P. (2007) *Research Supervisors and the Skills Agenda: Learning Needs Analysis and Personal Development*. Issues in Postgraduate Education: Management, Teaching and Supervision. Series 2, No. 1. London: SRHE.

Lee, A. (2008) *Supervision Teams: Making Them Work*. Issues in Postgraduate Education: Management, Teaching and Supervision. Series 2, No. 6. London: SRHE.

McCulloch, A. and Stokes, P. (2008) *The Silent Majority: Meeting the Needs of Part-time Research Students*. Issues in Postgraduate Education: Management, Teaching and Supervision. Series 2, No. 5. London: SRHE.

Okorocho, E. (2007) *Supervising International Research Students*. Issues in Postgraduate Education: Management, Teaching and Supervision. Series 2, No. 4. London: SRHE.

Brown, G. & Atkins, M. (1988) *Effective Teaching in Higher Education*. London: Routledge. The 'Effective Research and Project Supervision' chapter explores graduate supervision and reviews research and official reports on supervision, and their implications. They provide a model of factors involved in supervision and consider the role of supervisors and the problems faced by students.

More recent is an edited volume:

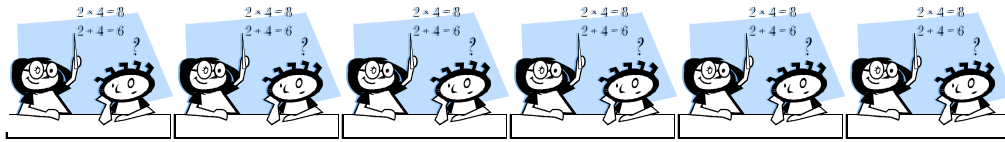
Wisker, G., & Sutcliffe, N. (Eds.). (1999) *Good Practice in Postgraduate Supervision*. Seda Paper 106, Birmingham: Seda Publications.

This publication considers good practice in supervision from the students' and supervisor's viewpoints, as well as issues and programmes for the training of academics new to supervision. There are also essays on working with overseas students or those for whom English is not a first language. One chapter focuses on the ethical underpinnings of graduate supervision.

Wisker, G. (2005) *The good supervisor: supervising postgraduate and undergraduate research for doctoral theses and dissertations*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Covers: supervision differences, supervisor development programmes, establishing and maintaining good supervisory practices, how to assist students in research practice and writing, working with and supporting students, non-traditional supervision, completing the research process and beyond.

Ryan, Y., & Zuber-Skerritt, O. (1999) (Eds.) *Supervising Postgraduates from Non-English Speaking Backgrounds*.



Provides insight, guidance, and suggests strategies for universities and individual supervisors in effectively supervising non-English speaking students.

Bartlett, A., & Mercer, G. (2001) (Eds.) *Postgraduate Research Supervision: Transforming (R)elations*.

Focuses on one-to-one British model, 26 chapters by different contributors.

Theoretical perspectives: feminism, poststructuralism, deconstruction, Foucault, Jung, discourse analysis, psychoanalysis, but mostly draws on practice and critical reflection

Attempts to go beyond “Best Practices”, get at the “dirtiness” of the power relations of supervisor-student.

Books

Black, D. (1994) *A guide for research supervisors*. Dereham: Peter Francis publishers on behalf of the Centre for Research into Human Communication and Learning.

Boden, R. (2005) *Academic's support kit*. London: SAGE.

[Building your academic career --- Getting started on research -- Writing for publication -- Teaching and supervision -- Winning and managing research funding -- Building networks.]

Cryer, P. (2000) *The Research Student's Guide to Success*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Delamont, S., Atkinson, P., & Parry, O. (2004) *Supervising the doctorate: a guide to success*. Berkshire: Open University Press.

Eley, A.R., & Jennings, R. (2005) *Effective postgraduate supervision: improving the student/supervisor relationship*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Evans, L. (2002) *Reflective Practice in Educational Research. Developing Advanced Skills*. New York: Continuum.

IUQB (2005) Good Practice in the Organisation of PhD Programmes in Irish Universities.

Lester, J.D. (2000) *Writing Research Papers. A Complete Guide*. New York: HarperCollins College Publishers.

Lewis, V. & Habeshaw, S. (1997) *53 Interesting Ways to Supervise Student Projects, Dissertations and Theses*. Melksham: The Cromwell Press.

Moses, I. (1995) *Supervising postgraduates*. Australian Capital Territory: HERDSA.

Nightingale, P. (2005) *Advising PhD candidates*. Milperra, N.S.W.: Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia (HERDSA).

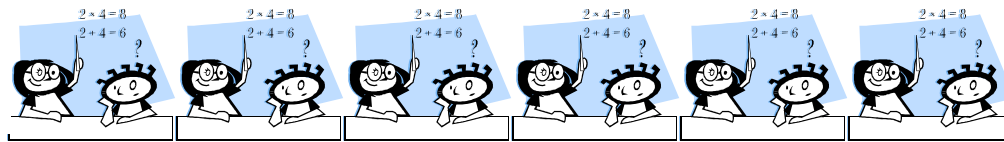
Phillips, E., & Pugh, D.S. (2005) *How to get a PhD: a handbook for students and their supervisors*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Though useful for both students and supervisors, the main focus is to advise students on how to succeed in their studies.

Rudestam, K.E., & Newton, R.R. (2000) *Surviving your Dissertation. A Comprehensive Guide to Content and Process*. London: Sage Publications.

Taylor, S., & Beasley, N. (2005) *A handbook for doctoral supervisors*. London: RoutledgeFalmer.

Tinkler, P., & Jackson, C. (2004) *The doctoral examination process: a handbook for students, examiners and supervisors*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.



Wisker, G. (2001) *The Postgraduate Research Handbook*. New York: Palgrave.

Wisker, G., Exley, K., Antoniou, M., & Ridley, P. (2008) *One-to-one teaching: supervising, coaching, mentoring and personal tutoring*. London: Routledge.

Journal Articles

Altbach, P.G. (2002) Research and Training in Higher Education: The State of the Art. *Higher Education in Europe*, 27 (1-2), 153-168.

Armstrong, S. (2004) The Impact of Supervisors' Cognitive Styles on the Quality of Research Supervision in Management Education. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 74, 599-616.

Boucher, C., & Smyth, A. (2004) Up close and personal: reflections on our experience of supervising research candidates who are using personal reflective techniques. *Reflective Practice*, 5 (3), 345-356.

Clarke, H., & Ryan, C. (2006) Research Supervision as a Conversation. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Higher Education*, 19 (4), 477-497.

Cryer, P. (1998) Beyond Codes of Practice: dilemmas in supervising postgraduate research students. *Quality in Higher Education*, 4 (3), 229-234.

Delaney, A.M. (2001) Institutional Researchers' Perceptions of Effectiveness. *Research in Higher Education*, 42 (2), 197-210.

Dysthe, O., Samara, A., & Westrheim, K. (2006) Multivoiced Supervision of Master's Students: a case study of alternative supervision practices in higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*, 31 (3), 299-318.

Fletcher, C. (2002) Supervising Activists for Research Degrees: responsibilities, rights and freedoms. *Active Learning in Higher Education*, 3 (1), 88-103.

Green, P., & Usher, R. (2003) Fast Supervision: changing supervisory practice in changing times. *Studies in Continuing Education*, 25 (1), 37-50.

Green, B. (2005) Unfinished Business: subjectivity and supervision. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 24 (2), 151-163.

Hammick, M., & Acker, S. (1998) Undergraduate Research Supervision: A Gender Analysis. *Studies in Higher Education*, 23 (3), 335-347.

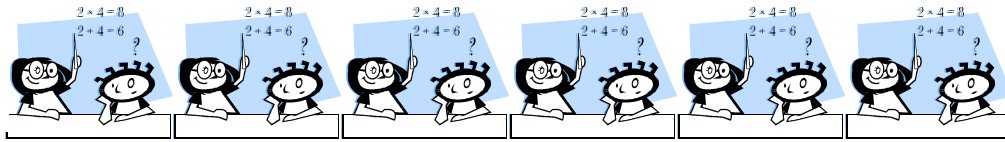
Kam, B. (1997) Style and Quality in Research Supervision: the supervisor dependency factor. *Higher Education*, 34, 81-103.

Manathunga, C. (2005) Research Supervisor Educational Development: Turning the light on a private space. *International Journal for Academic Development*, 10 (1), 17-30.

Morrison, J., Oladunjoye, G., & Onyefulu, C. (2007) An Assessment of Research Supervision: A Leadership Model Enhancing Current Practices in Business and Management. *Journal of Education for Business*, 212-219.

McCormack, C. (2004) Tensions between student and institutional conceptions of postgraduate research. *Studies in Higher Education*, 29 (3), 319-334.

Pearson, M., & Brew, A. (2002) Research Training and Supervision. *Studies in Higher Education*, 27 (2), 135-150.



Wisker, G., Robinson, G., Trafford, V., Warnes, M., & Creighton, E. (2003) From Supervisory Dialogues to Successful PhDs: strategies supporting and enabling the learning conversations of staff and students at postgraduate level. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 8 (3), 383-397.

Wilson, M. (2008) Snakes and Ladders: Reflections of a Novice Researcher. *Nurse Researcher*, 15 (3), 4-11.

Woolhouse, M. (2002) Supervising Dissertation Projects: Expectations of Supervisors and Students. *Innovations in Education and Training International*, 39 (2), 137-144.

Zhao, F. (2003) Transforming Quality in Research Supervision: A Knowledge Management Approach. *Quality in Higher Education*, 9 (2), 187-197.

Because of the international interest in supervision, resources are also included from various countries.

International Perspectives:

Australian

Moses, I. (1985) *Supervising Postgraduates. Green Guide No. 3*. Australia: Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australia, c/o University of South Wales.

Reprinted in 1991, 1994, and 1995, this classic resource identifies problem areas in research supervision, and discusses the supervisor's role and the responsibilities of students within an Australian context. It also contains a useful, if dated, bibliography.

Andresen, L.W. (1997) *Highways to Postgraduate Supervision: A Compilation of Resources for Those Who Supervise Postgraduate Research Students at the University of Western Sydney*, Hawkesbury. Hawkesbury, Australia: The Staff Development Centre, UWS.

Issues in graduate supervision are reviewed and resources listed for those who supervise students. Useful for students, is:

Powles, M. (1988) *How's the Thesis Going?* Melbourne, Australia: Centre for the Study of Higher Education.

USA

Madsen, D. (1992) *Successful Dissertations and Theses: A Guide to Graduate Student Research From Proposal to Completion (2nd ed.)*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

This practical volume offers examples of outlines, research proposals, and bibliography cards. It is most suitable for students and supervisors in the humanities and social sciences.

Useful for the graduate student, who is a teaching/research assistant, and his/her supervisor:

Nyquist, J.D., & Wulff, D.H. (1996) *Working Effectively with Graduate Assistants*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

The following volumes are student-oriented, but can profitably be read by supervisors too:

Locke, L.F., Spirduso, W.W., & Silberman, S.J. (1993) *Proposals that Work: A Guide for Planning Dissertations and Grant Proposals (3rd ed.)*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Ogden, E.H. (1993) *Completing Your Doctoral Dissertation or Masters Thesis in Two Semesters or Less (2nd ed.)*. Lancaster, PA: Technomic Publishing.

Rossmann, M.H. (1995) *Negotiating Graduate School: A Guide for Graduate Students*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

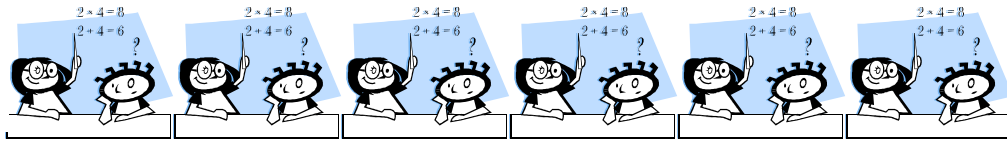
Rudestan, K.E., & Newton, R.R. (1992) *Surviving Your Dissertation: A Comprehensive Guide to Content and Process*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Web Sites

Useful websites concerning graduate student supervision include:

<http://ctl.stanford.edu/Tomprof/postings/145.html>

An entire section of the postings on this listserv/website, Tomorrow's Professor, is concerned with the supervision and direction of graduate students and would interest both supervisors



and students. Tomorrow's Professor can help you stay abreast of developments in the area. The other is:

<http://www.geocities.com/SiliconValley/Lakes/6007/Survival.htm>

This website provides a graduate student survival kit of value to both student and supervisor.

Video

Murray, R. (2004) *Research supervision* [video recording]. UK: AV Media Services. [Accompanied by notes]

A useful resource on graduate supervision is an excellent series of videotaped scenarios on aspects of supervision that promote discussion of issues and problems in graduate supervision. The video entitled *Supervision Scenes: Identifying Keys to Success* is available from: Centre for Teaching and Academic Growth, University of British Columbia.

Web-based Resources

Guide to Graduate Supervision

http://www.uwo.ca/tsc/pdf/PG_1_Supervision.pdf

Handbook of Graduate Supervision, UBC

<http://www.grad.ubc.ca/students/supervision/index.asp?menu=000,000,000,000>

[Eleven Practices of Effective Postgraduate Supervisors](#) (PDF) -- University of Melbourne

<http://www.cshe.unimelb.edu.au/pdfs/11practices.pdf>

[Supervising Graduate Students](#) (PDF) - McMaster University

<http://www.mcmaster.ca/cll/resources/nifty.notes/Supervising%20Graduate%20Students%20Revised.pdf>

[Supervisor Development Workbook](#) (PDF) RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia

<http://mams.rmit.edu.au/cb5wkf9pdc62.pdf>

[Quality in Postgraduate Research conferences website](#) (Australian Universities)

<http://www.qpr.edu.au/>