Work Based Research: Supervision and Supervisory Practices

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There is no doubt that Educational Institutions who offer doctorial supervision are accountable for the quality of the learning experiences of their enrolled students and have an obligation to create a culture and environment to which these learning experiences can be enhanced and maximised. The role of the supervisor is a critical link and often dictates the quality of student experiences.

Given the fact that this is such an essential component, the development of supervisors is a relatively new and under researched subject both within the United Kingdom (UK) and internationally. As a result, there is comparatively little body of knowledge/evidence in the way of development for practice supervisors. Although this is now changing with the realisation of its importance and recently the body of knowledge on supervisory practice has started to grow. Previous research on PhD programmes has largely focused on the capabilities required of candidates (Vitae, 2010).

A significant driver in the growth of doctoral theses is their contribution to training individuals who are 'creative, critical and autonomous intellectual 'risk takers' capable of contributing to all sectors where deep rigorous analysis is required.' (ERA, 2013). The aim is to develop and grow independent researcher practitioners and to develop the doctoral students' capacity to make a significant original contributions to professional practice through research. Therefore the emphasis is targeted at the experiences of individuals and within the workplace. This involves an examination of the quality of the Student's supervisory experience.

One outcome resulting from the change in the demography of students going into higher education has been that institutions now need to focus on students and their learning, rather than mainly on teaching processes and the syllabi. Within this context, it is now understood that the assessment of student learning plays a powerful role in higher education studies. Not only is it a means through which students can be guided as to appropriate approaches for their study, but it is also seen to drive student learning. There is now a significant emphasis on the learning experience and a close examination of teaching methodologies and supervisory practices.

This remit of this particular article is to examine the characteristics of education via Work Based Learning (WBL) and Work Based Research (WBR) particularly in relation to supervisory experiences from the student perspective and supervisory practices.

Approaches to research supervision are variable but generally have three main stages from the beginning to completion of the project: This should be a student led process with the supervisor's role being that of support and facilitation.

1. **Negotiated learning** —The student will clearly develop aims, objectives and purpose of the project. An outline of support and resources (including supervisory) required.
2. **Action**—Actions that are required to meet the research objectives are discussed and worked through. Further support needs (from other sources, for example, practice experts) are determined. There should be a formulation of clear definitions and expectations regarding the roles and responsibilities of the academic supervisor, workplace supervisor (if in place) and student. Time lines should also be negotiated and agreed at this stage.

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3. **Progress**—This is the longest stage. The supervisor facilitates and supports the student towards their goal (research aims and objectives). This is generally achieved through a process of reflection, reviewing where the students is within their project, providing direction and support and if required re-directing the student (this may arise through new knowledge, discoveries or it may be that the exact nature of the project has already been researched). An evidence/theoretical based approach should be adopted. The relationship between the student and supervisory should be that of collaboration.

Students Experiences from the literature

The student experiences fitted into five main themes:

1. Students perceptions of quality supervision
2. Power and knowledge production
3. Ways of working and communication
4. Student and supervisor as social subjects
5. Influences on supervision

Student Perceptions of Quality Supervision

Experiences were mixed with some students having a positive supervisory experiences whilst others did not. Students frequently have an 'image' of their ideal supervisor of which acts as a benchmark to compare experiences. Often the 'ideal supervisor' may never become a reality. If the student perceives that they are not receiving quality supervision, this may become a source of frustration and anxiety particularly if the project has a time limit with a (often quite short) for the student to work towards. Time limits may be dictated by the student's employers.

Equally, from an academic perspective, frequency of meetings may be challenging for the supervisor in the instance of short time frames. With many students, the level of support never stays static. The degree of support provided to students will be responsive and adaptive to their work and sometimes personal needs. For example there may be periods of 'crisis' where the student may require concentrated periods spent within the workplace (and very little academic work being produced, some students may suspend their studies for a period of time) or due to this a focus on academic work—where frequent supervisory meetings will be required/requested.

This section highlighted the importance of developing a positive working relationship with students with no ambiguity regarding roles (although it may be necessary to evaluate this periodically throughout the project).

Positive Experiences	Negative Experiences
· Developing a **positive relationship** with their supervisor. · Clearly **clarifying and agreeing role expectations** right at the beginning (for both supervisor and student) · A balance between **academic and emotional support**. · **Frequency of meetings** (regular contact with supervisor was seen as essential in the early stages of the project). Students welcomed monthly meetings. · Students also liked to **start their writing early** as they felt that this was the most challenging aspect. Students are largely expert within the subject discipline but lack recent experience of academia and academic writing.	· **Difficulties in receiving timely and effective feedback** (some supervisors were not answering emails, students had to wait for weeks before receiving feedback). · **Lack of communication/ access** · **Difficulty in building a positive working relationship** with their supervisor.

· **Appropriate feedback**—this needed to be detailed and constructive with points as to how the work could be enhanced. · The importance of having the **same topic and supervisor throughout the project**.	

Power and knowledge Production

Inequitable power structures and knowledge production can interfere with the quality and communication of the student's supervisory experience. Power and identity (negative) can provoke anxiety which then becomes counterproductive in the student's work.

Many students undertaking their doctorate studies are experienced and expert practitioners within their discipline, often having senior positions within their workplace. They may struggle with an inflexible academic dominated power structure. The student may also be using a methodology that is chosen by them and specific to the context of the work and in which the supervisor is not expert. The supervisor may no longer the 'expert', that is, they may not be fully conversant with the form of practice of the candidate and may also be unfamiliar with the methodology within that work place context.

Therefore, instead of being an expert in a particular subject area and method of research the supervisor must become an expert in the process of critical engagement with aspects of practice and have the meta-analytical skills in relation to research methods, activity and interpretation to creatively support their candidates' diverse and contextualised research designs. That is, developing critical and analytical thinking, synthesis and critical evaluation and by doing so, fostering a deep curiosity about practice. The further development of the student's expertise from the supervisor allows the generic aspects of professional work to emerge and become clear. This enables students to achieve the requirements of doctoral study for authenticity, dependability, confirmability and transferability at the discipline and multi/trans-disciplinary level allow them to work with candidates to adapt methodologies to diverse practice contexts without compromising the rigor of their work.

In addition, the supervisory process will enable a deep reflection from the student relating to their own practices. This could either lead to feelings of being uncomfortable because they may be scrutinising and criticising practices that they themselves have implemented or they may view it as an illuminating and educational experience.

Positive Experiences	Negative Experiences
· **Expertise of the supervisor**—students felt reassured by the supervisors level of knowledge and degree of expertise. Many supervisors will have expertise about the academic component, for example, research methodology. Whilst others may have both academic and discipline knowledge. Some students will have a work place supervisor that has discipline expertise. So, there are a number of supervisory models in existence. · **Empowerment of the student**—students should develop resilience that will put them in good stance for future challenges.	· **Unequal power structure** and autonomy of the student. If the power structure is towards the supervisor, this can interfere with the quality and communication of supervision. Some students in the beginning may feel 'safer' with this power structure but it becomes problematic if the power does not shift towards the student during the time of the project. The power inequality may also be cultural with some cultures being comfortable with dominance and will not confront the situation. · **Lack of clarity** for the research design/ research question. This can promote anxiety and frustration.

	· **Poor rate of completion.** Students felt neglected and marginalized because of persistent feelings of isolation. Some students because of their negative experiences will withdraw from their studies.

Ways of Working and Communication

Students who are studying part time programmes and are in employment, may undergo challenges which takes their attention away from the high level of demands from study, work and personal commitments. Sometimes these challenges all occur at the same time and compete for priority attention. As stated earlier, this group of students are often in senior positions within the workplace and may experience high levels (often sustained) work challenges.

Positive Experiences	Negative Experiences
· **Accessibility and Communication** · **Flexibility versus predictability of meeting times** —some students liked the fact that not all meetings had to be face to face, some were remote (for example, Skype, Zoom). This also enhanced their accessibility to the supervisor.	· **'Blurred boundaries'** —this emerged from a lack of clarity regarding roles agreed at the beginning of the supervision process. This is a critical part of the supervisory relationship as the process is unfamiliar to students, expectations should be clarified and agreed for both the supervisor and student. · **Low level of contact** —some supervisors were seen to be very difficult to make contact with and arrange meetings. · **Difficulty in adapting to new teaching and learning methods** — this was dependent upon the students prior educational experiences and culture. Depending on the culture, some supervisors were seen as confrontational whilst other students viewed them as being facilitative.

Student and supervisor as Social Subjects

Positive Experiences	Negative Experiences
· **Technical and social support** · **Safe and supportive learning** · **Social positioning**—Some students may adopt a more submissive role at the beginning of the supervisory process until they achieve confidence and knowledge of the processes involved in supervision and of their own academic abilities. A skilful supervisor will facilitate this and be more directive at the beginning but will know when to adjust along with the student and adopt a more facilitative style of supervision. Expectations of the supervisor and student should be realistic.	· **Cultural 'mismatch'** between supervisor and student. For example, some cultures do not like to challenge and may feel intimidated but a supervisor who does challenge (this is actually seen part of their role). Problems arising from this could be avoided by having a discussion at the beginning in relation to agreeing expectations right at the beginning of the relationship.

Some Influences on the supervisory experience

There are a range of influences on the success or not of the supervisory relationship including institutional processes and changes in competition, employment market, funding and demands on time. Time allocation for doctoral supervision is not often adequate to fulfil the requirements of the role impacting quality, satisfaction, retention and completion. Students often face challenges to time, being tired due to supplementing their fees with extra jobs or, in the case of professional doctorates, working full time in professional roles. The following are some of the more common influences on the students supervisory experiences, often dictating whether it is an overall positive or negative experience.

- ➢ **Disciplinary pedagogy**—this dictates the level of expertise of the supervisor, for example, expert within the research methodology versus discipline expertise.
- ➢ **Departmental practices**—this relates to the model of supervision used (discussed later)
- ➢ **Conceptual approaches of the supervisor**—this is often influenced by the supervisors background, area of expertise (usually their own doctorate/PhD, level of knowledge and understanding.
- ➢ **Use of supervisor or co-supervisor**—students should have access to all the supervisors allocated to them. It is imperative that the supervisors meet together to discuss approaches and areas of discussion/actions plans made with the students. In an ideal situation, all supervisors should meet with the student together. This way there should be no problems with communication or contradictory information given to the student. That being said, it is part of doctoral work for the students to become tolerant or even enthusiastic to working with ambiguity and conflict but if this comes from dispute between supervisors at the start of the relationship it can be the source of considerable anxiety and tension for all involved.
- ➢ **Codes of practice**—this relates to the supervisory styles of supervision
- ➢ **Employer/funder's requirements**—this is often seen in the UK where students are being seconded by their employer. Employers may have their own agenda in relation to what should be studied/type of project. This may impose restrictions in relation to choice and focus of topic. There may be different priorities between the student and their own employers
- ➢ **Full or part time students**—this may influence work load pressures, time scales etc.
- ➢ **Experienced or inexperienced students**—as discussed previously, this may dictate the level of dependency/ independence from the student. The supervisor should adjust to these needs and be adaptable/flexible in the promotion of student autonomy and independence during the supervisory relationship.
- ➢ **International or home students**—expect cultural differences and challenges in relation to practices and expectations. These should be discussed at the beginning and discussions on how students can be supported to develop the skills and knowledge required and outlined by the home educational institute.

Models of Supervision

It is important to remember that no one model or indeed one approach of supervision 'fits all' situations. This concept is situational and so dependent upon facets such as context, history of the students, relationship between the students and supervisor, learning styles of the student etc.

Individual supervision—one single supervisor – will have limitations as the single supervisor very often as limitations to areas of expertise. For example, either methodology or subject discipline but rarely both. This model is not adopted widely with the UK.

Team supervision—a team of more than one supervisor (often two). Usually one supervisor has expertise in the research methodology and the other had their expertise within the subject discipline. This is the preferred model within the UK. If the student has been allocated a workplace supervisor, there is a tendency for this person to prefer the academic supervisor to take the lead.

Group supervision—a group of students being supervised at the same time. Advantages are peer learning and an opportunity to exchange ideas and experiences. There is a sense and development of a community of learning. There should be a rich range of diversity, experiences, knowledge amongst the students. The group is facilitated by a group supervisor,

Supervisory Styles

Once students have started their programmes, the supervisory relationship becomes the main source for supportive engagement with the higher education institution. The importance of how this relationship was started and on what basis was consistently referred to by supervisors; namely the need to 'contract' (that is, make an agreement about how supervision would be conducted) at the start of the process. This is often documented and kept as a record for both the supervisor and supervisee.

Matching the supervisory style to the needs of individual students is critical. This is a dynamic model that changes due to the stages of the projects but also in the students circumstances both academic and within the work place.

Dependent upon the student, but it is likely that the students will require more support and direction very early on in the relationship but as the student develops and become more confident in their own abilities, then less structure is required. Therefore a scaffolding approach should be undertaken.

➢ **Pastoral Style—Low structure / High support**

This approach assumes that students are able to manage their project independently but need support. Supervisors provide personal care and support. Personal socialisation occurs with relationships being more open and fluid and where identities can be negotiable. A negotiated type of model of supervision is adopted and where the expectations between the students and supervisor are open to change.

➢ **Contractual Style—High structure / High support**

Assumes that the student and supervisors need to regulate the level of support required. The supervisor is able to administer direction and exercise good management skills and interpersonal relationships

➢ **Laisser-faire style—Low structure/ Low support**

Assumes that the students is capable of managing the project and supporting themselves. The supervisor is non-directive and non-committed to high levels of interaction. However, the supervisor may appear to the student as being caring and non-interfering.

➢ **Directorial style—High structure / Low support**

Assumes that the students require help with managing and directing their project. The supervisor has a close and regular interactive relationship with the student, but avoids interpersonal relationships/pastoral care. The relationship here is where the supervisor manages and directs the students. The student is a passive recipient. Roles and identities are fixed and closed.

The supervisory relationship can take many forms but the general consensus is that attention needs to be on the relationship as a working alliance that will achieve a satisfactory outcome for both the student and their supervisor. For the supervisors, they should develop insight into resolving issues which arise in the relationship; and how these might be presented as opportunities for learning for you; to enable the student to progress; to assess and develop your style of relationality and its flexibility to meet the needs of the student.

Attributes required for a supervisor (Lee, 2008 and 2018)

The quality of supervision is linked to the quality for the research and the probability of completion

(Halse and Malfoy 2010)

・Good communication skills

・Methodological expertise

・Recognising and reacting to pressures and supportive strategies

・Constructively challenge students

・Allowing space for the identity and power shift

・Enable the development of social skills—crafting 'agents of change' and peer influence

・Supporting and not forming independence

A Framework for Supervision

It is imperative to manage expectations during the initial meeting and development a relationship and provides support and motivation for the student. Effective supervisors move through and combine a number of approaches. These should be dependent upon the situation faced with the student. The supervisor should offer opportunities to measure progress through the project by discussing and agreeing milestones/objectives and encourage the student to create a time table or Gant chart.

Supervisors should ensure that students are aware of their supervisory style and provide a sense of direction and a sense of belonging for the student and know when to intervene when the student is struggling and need help. Fostering an environment where the students can develop intellectual rigor and challenge thinking and develop new ways. Gate keeping is imperative, and it may be that if the student is not able to develop and study at this level, that they be advised to consider termination of the programme. This will also enable the student to develop and become more autonomous.

Students should be encouraged to take the responsibility in caring for their research and becoming more confident in the relationship with their supervisors. As the student's knowledge of research increases a confidence reflected in a more collegial relationship rather than one of 'pupil and teacher' as that confidence grows with accumulated knowledge which is shaped by conversations with their supervisor and the literature.

The central theoretical concept is that of andragogy where the emphasis is on the students' learning and not primarily the project output. The supervision process should be learner managed where the project is actively managed by the student – this may not be immediate, but should certainly be this way towards the end of the project. The role of the supervisor is that of a facilitator/guide. It should be remembered that doctoral students are experts with inter field of practice and therefore unless there are necessary risk considerations, students should not be directly supervised by close monitoring of their work. A realistic view should be adopted in where the influences, opportunities, constraints of context for the project are acknowledged. The student is central in identifying and using criteria to judge their work. Above all, it should be remembered that there is a need to have a balance between students autonomy ownership and the need for guidance and support.

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