

Postgraduate Research Supervision: the students' viewpoint

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Abstract

As doctoral students progress through their studies they will have developed very specific ideas and opinions about postgraduate supervision. To identify what students thought were necessary for a supervisor to consider when undertaking postgraduate supervision, students enrolled in a Faculty of Education's doctoral programs were surveyed by an open-ended questionnaire.

Students' responses were analysed qualitatively and 6 themes emerged. These were: Meetings with the Supervisor, Feedback, The Supervisor's Characteristics, Having Two Supervisors, Special Circumstances and Other. The theme 'Meetings with the Supervisor' included two areas relating to the timing and conduct of the interviews. The theme 'Feedback' related to the frequency and type of feedback given to postgraduate students. The theme 'The Supervisor's Characteristics' included discussion about the supervisor's experience and their mentoring role. Students discussed their concerns when they have two supervisors in the appropriately named theme 'Having Two Supervisors'. International students described having specific difficulties whilst others students mentioned personal problems in the theme 'Special Circumstances' and the last theme 'Other' included students' comments on areas such as study leave, supervisors workloads, sharing research findings, and guidelines for written work.

Introduction

Supervision is an important aspect of a postgraduate student's candidature. It has been the authors' experiences that when postgraduate students congregate, at some stage the conversation will inevitably turn to the topic of their supervisor and the supervision being provided by that supervisor. To some students, the quality of their supervision is seen as crucial to their academic success. To other students, however, it is just one of the many factors that they see as linked to success.

Focus groups conducted to assist in the development of postgraduate research experience questionnaire (PREQ; ACER 2000) found that supervision and infrastructure were the two main areas of concern to postgraduate students. The quality of the supervisor student relationship was also discussed as pivotal for postgraduate research (ACER 2000: p8). Whilst students were likely to have strong opinions about postgraduate supervision, the majority of postgraduate students were likely to be satisfied with the quality of their postgraduate supervision (ACER 2000; Moodie 2000). Cullen et al (1994) found that the characteristics of good supervision range from being friendly to assisting students to prepare for an academic role.

Background to the study

In the second semester of 2000, the Graduate School of Education was conducting a series of seminars related to postgraduate education and postgraduate students were invited to conduct a seminar titled 'Graduate students' perceptions on research supervision'. The authors (who were postgraduate students at that time) voluntarily agreed to conduct the seminar and sought input from other postgraduate students through the use of an open-ended questionnaire. The seminar was conducted in the later part of the second academic semester.

The authors felt that students, irrespective of whether they were in the first or the latter years of their doctoral program would have developed some ideas and opinions about postgraduate supervision. An open-ended questionnaire was used to give students the opportunity to discuss their ideas and opinions. The survey was designed to be constructive, in that the objective of the seminar was to convey, to supervisors, in a positive manner, the insights that postgraduate students have developed with regard to postgraduate supervision. It should also be stated that many students expressed satisfaction with their postgraduate supervision and the questionnaire findings, which are discussed in this paper, reflect the aspects of their postgraduate supervision that they have come to value as important.

Aim of Research

The aim of the research was to establish students' views of the criteria that they considered important for supervisors to consider when undertaking postgraduate supervision and to present these views to postgraduate students and academics involved in postgraduate supervision.

Method

Conduct

An open-ended questionnaire was distributed to students enrolled in the Graduate School of Education doctoral programs. The questionnaire asked students to give five points that they considered very important for supervisors to consider when undertaking postgraduate supervision and to discuss these points. The questionnaires were anonymous, and in the covering letter students were asked not to identify either themselves or their supervisors. The snowball technique was used for the distribution of the questionnaires. The questionnaires were handed out to doctoral students in the postgraduate research rooms and these students were asked to distribute the questionnaires to other doctoral students who did not regularly use the research room (ie because they may study at home).

Participants in Study

Approximately 15 questionnaires were given out to doctoral students and 10 were completed and returned. The 10 participants were postgraduate students enrolled in doctoral programs in a Graduate School of Education. The students came from varying backgrounds with both local and international students participating in the research.

Analyses

The coding techniques described by Miles and Huberman (1994 p58-76) and derived from Strauss (1987), Strauss and Corbin (1990) and Lincoln and Guba (1985) were used to analyse the questionnaires. Students' points were coded into categories and sub-categories and these codes were revised frequently. Six categories or themes emerged: meetings with supervisors; feedback; the supervisor's characteristics; having two supervisors; special circumstances and other. These themes are discussed in the following section of the paper.

Findings

1 Meetings With Supervisors

Most students made comments about the meetings that take place between postgraduate students and supervisors and their comments in this theme can be sub-divided into two areas: *timing and conduct*.

Timing included comments students made about the regularity of meetings with supervisors and the punctuality of supervisors. It also included students' being notified when supervisors were unable to attend a scheduled meeting. Notification was seen by students as: indicating that students' time was also valuable; demonstrated a respect for students and treated them like colleagues or indicated their importance.

Conduct concerned students' comments about the actual meeting. Students prefer meetings that are not rushed and dislike interruptions, in particular telephone calls, during meetings with supervisors. Students also expect meetings to be informative and constructive.

2 Feedback

The theme feedback relates to written feedback on students' doctoral research. Students comments related to the *frequency* of the feedback and the *type* of feedback they prefer. In *frequency* students mentioned the promptness of the return of written work and suggested that 'Having feedback is very crucial for the student to do the next step in [the] research'.

Students suggested that the *type* of feedback students receive from a supervisor should be reflective of the students' preparation.

3 The Supervisor's Characteristics

This theme contained students' comments about the characteristics that they felt were necessary for supervisors to have when undertaking postgraduate supervision. These characteristics can be discussed under two areas: *experience* and *mentoring role*.

With *experience* students' suggested a number of points in relation to supervisors including that they should be: experienced in the research area that they are supervising or be willing 'to explore other avenues of thought'; have experience or knowledge in a wide range of methodologies; be familiar with the most relevant/important literature in a students' topic; be aware of the university's policies in regard to postgraduate supervision, and authorship; be experienced in supervision; and have an awareness of the different learning styles of students.

With respect to learning styles students mentioned that they feel supervisors should have an awareness that different students learn/research in different ways and supervisors undertaking postgraduate supervision should be prepared to adjust their supervisory role accordingly.

In addition to supervisors' experience students made comments about the *mentoring role* of supervisors. Students felt that when undertaking postgraduate supervision a supervisor has a role to prepare the student for an academic position or research role (whichever is appropriate for the student) when the student has completed their research qualification. For example, to assist the student with attaining an academic position, students suggested that a supervisor should assist a student to obtain tutoring. To assist with preparing students for a research and/or academic role students suggested that supervisors guide students in the publication of their research.

4 Having Two Supervisors

It is the policy of the graduate school to allocate a student two supervisors, and students suggested that it is important for supervisors to clearly define, for students, the *role of both supervisors* and the *frequency of organised meetings* with each supervisor. For the *role of supervisors* students suggested that in addition to making it clear what the role of the primary and secondary supervisors, it should also be clear to students 'Whose comments [on written feedback] should take preference.'

With *meetings* student suggested that it was important, when students have two supervisors, to have information such as 'how often [a student] needs to see each supervisor' and whether a student 'should to see both supervisors together or not' clearly defined.

5 Special Circumstances

There were two areas contained in this theme: *international students' circumstances* and *personal circumstances*. This theme included suggestions that appeared to be specific to individuals or student groups. Whilst students were not asked any demographic questions some students clearly identified themselves as international students. *International students* suggested that it was important for supervisors to be aware of: the financial, visa and other problems that international students may encounter if they cannot finish their study on time.

For more individual or *personal circumstances*, a few students commented that they felt it was important that supervisors are aware that students may need more than academic support during their doctoral candidature, for example, a student may require help from a supervisor with personal problems.

6 Other

This final theme contained various comments/suggestions, made by only a few students, that were miscellaneous and did not relate to the other themes. The areas included in this theme were: *supervisor's workload; sharing research findings and guidelines for written work*. For *supervisor's workload* a student commented that a supervisor must consider 'whether the supervisor can be committed to provide the necessary support to all students equally.'

A student suggested that she/he would like to 'have discussions of research with other students in a similar area, for example, with those of the supervisor or hosted by the students' (*sharing research findings*).

Other students wanted supervisors to pressure students to produce written material 'Otherwise students leave too much writing to the end of their research' (*guidelines for written work*).

Discussion

Postgraduate doctoral students' ideas and opinions about the points that they consider important for supervisors to be aware of when they undertake postgraduate supervision were varied. The six themes that were identified included: meetings with supervisors; feedback; the supervisor's characteristics; having two supervisors; special circumstances and other. Most students mentioned points that were contained in the theme *meetings with supervisors* indicating that students believe that this is one of the crucial areas that supervisors should be aware of when undertaking supervision of postgraduate students. Feedback of written work was another area seen as important by postgraduate students. Although students were not asked for any demographic details, some students identified themselves as international students indicating that they had specific concerns that they felt needed to be considered when undertaking their postgraduate supervision.

One of the findings from the PREQ (2000) focus groups was that "Departmental ethos was seen as central to the quality of the experience of the course for full time students'(p8). The seminar series for which this research was developed actively sought the inclusion of the students and therefore incorporated them into the departmental activities. The particular seminar, which was the focus of this paper, allowed students to share in a positive and constructive manner their ideas and opinions about postgraduate supervision.

Conclusion

There are many and varied factors that academic supervisors need to consider when undertaking postgraduate supervision. Allowing students to present their views on postgraduate supervision is one way of communicating some of these factors to actual and potential supervisors.

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