Cat’s away —What to do when your supervisor leaves you

Tanya M Vernon

Science and Mathematics Education Centre (SMEC)
Curtin University of Technology
GPO Box U1987
Perth, WA 6845

tanya.vernon@student.curtin.edu.au

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Letter to John*

Dear John:

Thank you very much for the lengthy and insightful comments you made on my paper about the laboratory. Per your suggestion, I decided to put the work on hold, either to develop further into chapters of the thesis or to perhaps reduce and submit to a journal. Is this ok? As I said in my brief e-mail to you recently, I have been keeping busy with other things; joining a committee on campus and meeting with students. I didn’t mention there was some downtime? We try to hide these things. Take, for example, the day I spent organising my pencil case. Yes, you may laugh, but my black pencil case is my meta-organisational tool. First there are the fluorescent gel pens in pink, green, purple and orange. The pens colour co-ordinate with my Post-it® notes, which are also located in the pencil case, along with a small pair of scissors. The Post-it® notes colour code for what can be used for the thesis vs what can be used for the papers that I am writing. When I ran out of purple Post-its® one morning, I blamed my children for taking them, and couldn’t work for the rest of the day until I had mentally dedicated another colour to ‘thesis work’. Thinking that I would soon run out of the new colour, blue, I began cutting the Post-its® in half, and …later…into quarters. I reminded myself I had to re-use these. Looking over my stacks of books just read, I couldn’t remember what the pink Post-it’s® coded for, and had to re-read those pages of the books again. I think that code was for something else entirely. I was rapidly running out of my expensive Post-it’s®, so I decided to underline. Pencil means it is somewhat important. Blue roller ball is rather important and any fluorescent gel colour is extremely important! Pencil can also mean the book isn’t mine.

Was the Wolcott book yours?

To escape from my neon jungle, I skulked back to the office one day and tarried near the notice board so I didn’t have to climb the stairs up to my cubicle. I noticed the call for papers for AARE on the notice board. I attach for your review and comment my recent work and hope it was ok to have written it without discussing it with you first. As you mentioned, I have plenty of data, so it was only a matter of time before I had an idea for my paper. Was it you who told me to write about what I know best? I guess in your absence, what I know best is the isolation a student feels when their supervisor leaves.

I glanced down the corridor, toward the place where your door would normally stand open, light emanating. It is dark. Maybe I underestimated the reassurance of your presence here? I never once popped down to ask you the odd question, but somehow, not having you here now, I have a hundred questions I never knew I did not know the answers for. Maybe most importantly, I have discovered there are at least two types of supervisors – those who tow their students and those who impel them. Happily, for me at least, you are a supervisor who impels, rather than one who tows. On the other hand, if you were one who tows, it would have been much easier for me to spot when the tow rope broke.

You and I had a discussion about titles – what do you think of this title? - Cat’s away.

Best regards,

Tanya

*John is Professor John Wallace, my supervisor at the Science and Maths Education Centre. Names of participants are pseudonyms.
Cat’s away – what to do when your supervisor leaves you
Ms Tanya M Vernon

ABSTRACT
This qualitative study focuses upon one aspect of the postgraduate research student–supervisory experience rarely covered in literature and surveys. By juxtaposing effects of supervisor absence on laboratory-based students with effects on a student in humanities, I seek to highlight effects of supervisor absence on full-time postgraduate students. To do so, I ask three queries – Firstly, to what degree are Australian postgraduate students affected by supervisor absence/departure? Secondly, what are the manifestations of the phenomena? and finally, what is the recognition level of the supervisor of the effect? In conclusion, I suggest some student-centred coping strategies for ‘when a supervisor leaves you’.

Introduction
Cat’s away – what to do when your supervisor leaves you, is based upon qualitative inquiry into full-time student (PhD) experiences of a laboratory-based group of electronic/engineering students, as well as my own experience as a relatively new PhD student in education. My paper considers three questions--firstly, to what degree are Australian students affected by supervisor absence/departure? Secondly, what are the manifestations of supervisor separation in laboratory-based versus humanities students? and finally, what is the recognition level of the supervisor of the effect? The introduction outlines the three data areas used in the paper to address these queries. I conclude the paper by suggesting possible student-based strategies for ‘when a supervisor leaves you’. The three data sets are:

1. Laboratory-based students. The first data area is based upon 26 sets of notes collected over a period of three months of participant observation where I was situated in a laboratory in a Western Australian university along with eight full-time PhD students who study related aspects of digital signal processing. The lab particularly focuses on statistical signal processing which is heavily mathematics based. Following the observation period, I devised semi-structured interview questions to elicit information about the complex nature of the community in which the students work. The students are in various stages of progress -- from new student to nearly ‘completed’ students. Three of the eight students are Australian and the remaining five are international students. All students have undergraduate degrees in Electrical/Electronic Engineering.

2. Interview with laboratory leader (former supervisor). The second data area is an interview with the laboratory leader which was undertaken a year after the he had departed from the laboratory to take a position in a European institution. It should be noted that this interview has somewhat more perspective in that the views of the supervisor have had over 12 months to achieve maturity, whereas the focus of the student experiences are nearly as they occurred.

3. Personal experience. The final data area is derived from my personal experience. I am a second year, full-time PhD student in a Western Australian university. I am studying a laboratory of PhD students in consideration of the question ‘how do postgraduate students in Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) innovate?’ My feelings of separation emerged after the departure of my supervisor for study leave early in 2004. The introductory Letter to John and the narrative in the second query below were written one month after John’s departure.
In considering the three queries, I call upon data from each of the data areas. Relevant Australian scholarship underpins the first query and relates the extent to which the phenomenon of supervisor absence manifests itself in Australia. It duly serves as background and literature review. The second query attempts to get at the heart of supervisor separation by juxtaposing student experiences in order to arrive at common manifestations of the phenomenon among students. The interview material presented in this section makes it the most lengthy. The final query, to what extent does the supervisor realise the effect of his/her absence on the student, is answered more briefly as it draws from a single interview with the laboratory supervisor. The conclusion provides a way forward in dealing with supervisor separation – from the point of view of a student, for students.

**To what degree are students affected by supervisor absence?**

Nearly two decades ago, Powles (1988, p. 32) survey at the University of Melbourne found that nearly one fifth of full-time PhD candidates were dissatisfied with aspects of their supervision. A 1992 survey by Moses (1994, p. 12) of a ‘new’ university indicated supervisor availability as being the most frequently selected response to the query ‘Do you consider that any aspects of your supervision are seriously impeding your progress?’ Two nation-wide quantitative studies, the *Postgraduate Research Experience Questionnaire (PREQ)* (Graduate Careers Council of Australia & Australian Council for Educational Research, [2002]) and, *The Australia Postgraduate Research Award Scheme: an evaluation of the 1990 cohort* (Baker, Robertson, & Toguchi, 1997) targeted a number of issues relating to the postgraduate experience in Australia. Both surveyed for supervisor satisfaction. The 1990 survey, using pair-wise matching of APRA award holders and non-holders, contained a question relating to a change of supervisor. 25% of the PhD students surveyed (n=574) indicated a change of supervisor. The statistics further breakdown the reason for change of supervisor with 13% of the students indicating the loss of a supervisor (due to supervisor leaving, on leave, sickness or death) as the reason for supervisor change (Baker et al., 1997, p. 95). The 1990 study presents a table indicating ‘Aspects of research training perceived as most in need of improvement, all respondents %’. The highest percentage given – at 12%, indicates supervision, feedback, encouragement, collaboration among supervisors’ (Baker et al., 1997, p 165). The PREQ does not test this level of detail, but a single question, ‘Supervision was available when I needed it’ may proxy supervisor absence or presence at the moment when the student perceived the need for it. The PREQ is administered to students who have graduated, so it may not account for the numbers of students (as many as 25% as indicated above) who had switched supervisors prior to completion. Kam’s (1997) more recent empirical study *Style and quality in research supervision: the supervisor dependency factor* is a significant contribution in highlighting aspects of the student-supervisor relationship, notably focusing on dependency of students based upon gender, discipline and background. It does not survey for aspects of the relationship that would include the departure or absence of a supervisor, however.

Dinocolo and Pope (1994, p. 121) suggest that relatively little qualitative inquiry has addressed the area of interpersonal encounters between those engaged in the supervisory relationship. My paper aims to address but one aspect of the relationship, in situ, as it were, namely the issue of ‘when a supervisor leaves’. Moreover, I contrast the feelings of those students working in a laboratory with my own, a student in education (in this study education is classed as a humanities based discipline). It has been a commonly held belief that those
students working in laboratory-based disciplines are ‘better off’, and relatively sheltered from impacts which may effect the solitary researcher in the humanities (Deem & Brehony, 2000; Moses, 1988; Whittle, 1992). It is my hypothesis that this is not entirely true.

**What are the manifestations of supervisor separation in students in laboratory-based settings versus humanities?**

This second section is divided into two parts – the first part explores, from the point of view of the student, effects of supervisor departure. In juxtaposing two types of students – laboratory-based and humanities based, I seek to determine common features that serve to typify student behaviour surrounding the phenomena of ‘when a supervisor leaves’. The findings are presented in the second part.

I joined the postgraduate signal processing lab a few months after the departure of the supervisor/leader, Professor Yahia. During my observations, which lasted for three months, I got the impression that laboratory life moved somewhat slower and perhaps freer than previously. As I had worked with the laboratory in an administrative role prior to my PhD candidature, I was in a position to make some observations of the ‘before and after’ effect. For example, I had known that Professor Yahia preferred a routine 9-5 work day. Now, daily arrivals fluctuated from 8.00 am to 10 am, with departures from as early as 2.30. Some days, certain students did not come in at all. However, when I interviewed the students some months after my field-work in the laboratory, I avoided consideration of the effect of the missing supervisor. In my semi-structured questions I covered a realm of topics, from why students chose to do a Phd, to projected employment to what is meant by engineering design. I wanted to be cautious not to shift student thinking from phenomena of interest (mine) to phenomena of concern (theirs!). In the interviews I asked two complimentary questions a) what was the most rewarding experience of the PhD? and b) what was the most disappointing experience of the PhD? In response to the second query, only three of the eight students did not mention either the isolation of working alone or the supervisory relationship directly. One of the three has now left the group, another was not principally supervised by the former laboratory leader, and the third reported no disappointment. Tom’s experience as lone researcher, detailed below, highlights the isolation he felt working through a sticky problem.

**Tom**

Tanya: So…what is the most disappointing thing about your current work that you are most sort of unhappy about?

Tom: Uhm…it could be just the fact that I …probably one of the things, because I am not really working closely with anyone sometimes when I try or…when I am working through something and it is not working, and I am not sure why it is not working…because no-one is so intimately familiar or working with it on a daily basis…you just think…is the idea totally, like wrong….or have I implemented it wrong or….and you sort of start to doubt yourself a lot more….at one stage, with the thing I was working on in the communications area, my previous topic, uhm, I had made a very very small error uhm in some code that I wrote…it was because it wasn’t in the actual algorithm code, but it was in the code that I used to verify the accuracy, or whether it was working or not….I did not notice it for probably two months….and so for two months, I had gone through the theory over and over again, made sure that I hadn’t done anything and yet, what should have worked just wasn’t working. And I had gone through my code…and it was all laid out perfectly, and you start to just try anything to try to get it to work, cause when you are sure when the algorithm should be working and it

*Tom Vernon, Science and Mathematics Education Centre, Curtin University of Technology*
just doesn’t, you start...to think, maybe it is something I haven’t thought of…and you start looking everywhere for the answer and in that sort-of scenario it really is very frustrating…and what I finally found ...I happened to be looking at something for something else…the error, to give you an idea of how simple it was, when I cut and pasted a line in code from somewhere, I actually pasted it twice...so it was a duplicate line…and that was all it was…and even when I used to scan through it and say ‘yep’, that makes sense, that makes sense...because it was a duplicate line, it did the operation twice and so what I was comparing it to was sort of the benchmark I was comparing it to was wrong...so the error was large…and it showed the algorithm wasn’t working…once I deleted that line...everything worked just as it should have done the first day...if I had noticed that two months ago I would be two months better off now.

So...that is...and maybe if someone else was working on it...and they had said...we’ll check through that and they might have seen the error or something like that...That is the price of working alone.

To date, Tom has spent two years working on his PhD and the above incident has remained vivid in his memory. Säif, on the other hand, is a newer student and the shift in supervision most certainly one of the most remarkable experiences he has had:

**Säif**

Tanya: What about the most disappointing thing since you started?

Säif: [My supervisor leaving] This one is disappointing for me...I don’t have a supervisor o.k. .... For these small little things...maybe I don’t know here the policy or the University, or how this one is done, o.k. But this is the main thing that I don’t like...the University...they have to care about the students...But when they change the supervisors, o.k., you need time to be more friends with him and uhm... I will have a new supervisor, so it was difficult...but we have to do [it]...even if someone is gone. After my PhD, I will just get out o.k., I will not stay here forever ...[supervisors] they need to get a better salary, a better life. The life...as you know, if you want a bigger salary, you have to go...

Though Säif’s distress at the time of interview is palpable, he obtained appropriate supervision and successfully submitted his confirmation of candidature in March 2004. Of the remaining three students, one stated his relationship with the supervisor was the most disappointing aspect and requested details be confidential. This student, like Säif, values the personal aspects of the student–supervisory relationship, at least as much, if not more than the technical supervision. Kam might typify these students as supervisor-dependant:

Non-native English speaking male students from the ‘hard sciences’ or those pursuing a PhD on a full-time basis...are particularly prone to depend on their supervisors during the research preparation stage. Students in this category tend to appreciate a caring attitude, frequent meetings and long contact hours with the supervisor...(Kam, p 101).

Kam orients supervisor dependency/independency on four variables; work organisation, problem solving, research preparation and communication. However, he does not seem to acknowledge changes in the dependency/independency dichotomy over time as students progress. Ideally, a longitudinal survey would track supervisor dependency changes over time.
The final two students in the laboratory indicated both changing supervisor arrangements and isolation as major disappointments. These students are well progressed in their research and should complete by the end of 2004. One of them speaks for both when he notes:

Yasir

Tanya: So what about the most disappointing thing since you started?

Yasir: The supervisory arrangements, because lets say… for me and Bishr’s case, because we change supervisors …the associate supervisor supervise[s] us but we…didn’t receive any much guidance from that…here…we must work independently.

So, while maintaining the disappointment over the arrangement, this student and his colleague have perhaps come to a realisation that independence is required by the situation. The students in the laboratory I studied felt isolated. In interviewing them, I queried a number of other issues that sought to typify the laboratory environment in which they produced their work. As noted above, it is a widespread belief that students working in laboratories are privileged. Whittle suggests:

Science departments can be described as highly motivating and intellectually stimulating research environments. Postgraduate research is collaborative and candidates’ thesis projects are highly structured and closely correspond to either the department’s or supervisor’s research program. There is daily contact between students and supervisors, and research work is typically carried out in large, busy laboratories… Academics tend to avoid lengthy absences from the university while they are responsible for postgraduate supervision, and most keep in regular contact (usually weekly) with their students by telephone or fax when they are overseas or interstate…(Whittle, 1992, p. 95).

It is true that my study evidenced a stimulating laboratory research environment, so much so, in fact, it was pivotal in my ‘becoming’ a student, in those days when I transitioned from my career life to student life. But the laboratory-based research I noted was neither collaborative nor was it carried out with daily contact with the supervisor (past or present!). Firstly each student had come to the laboratory because of the known expertise of the supervisor. They expected to work in the area that he worked, but all of them had topics of their own choosing. Nor did the supervisor spend time with the students daily – the rigours of academic life in Australia require teaching, research, meetings, committee membership, all of which demanded time from the supervisor and did not allow for daily meetings with students. As Whittle’s rather idealistic depiction notes, the theses are fairly structured but this is an international standard, not an Australian one. By the same token, ‘a large busy laboratory’ is a group leader’s dream, but fairly uncommon, at least in information and communication technologies in Australia. I was very lucky indeed to have a laboratory with as many as eight full-time PhD students all working in related areas.

In parallel with the students I studied, my supervisor also left me. However, my feelings, as revealed below and in the Letter to John, are perhaps more emotional than the engineers in whose daily life I immersed myself. However, the common and persistent feelings of isolation are inescapable.
Tanya

25 February 2004 --My supervisor departed late in January 2004. I had one final meeting with him on the 25th of January. When he first announced to me in October of the previous year that he would be away for all of semester one 2004, my first words, perhaps incautiously leaving my mouth thus allowing room for my foot, were “Well, it is not like I am writing up...then I would really be stressed.” My thoughts were for my colleague, Ariel, who was doing just that – writing up. But no, for me, I could not see how my supervisor’s departure would have even the slightest ripple in the placid ocean which was the timeline for completion of my PhD. But after a brief holiday with my family at the end of January, I returned to find a full page of comments on the 20-page paper I had written and submitted to him. What did it mean? I read it several times. I think what he meant was that I was writing sections of my PhD when I was supposed to be writing a paper, and the 20 pages may need to be shelved for later use. But I could not ask him, not that he said he wouldn’t respond if I wrote him. But, I was an independent researcher and I was sure I could navigate the situation; after all, he would be only be away six months, and indeed I had another supervisor.

At first I revelled in the knowledge that I wouldn’t have to report on my ‘next steps’. I felt free from working judiciously toward my next meeting with John, usually every fortnight or from him popping up to say hello. I helped my son write and print résumés, took my daughter to her first day at pre-primary and her paediatrician at Princess Margaret Hospital, I made school lunches and attended parent meetings—all things I never did when I was working the career woman treadmill. Guilt stricken after such indulgences, I rushed in a frenzy to make up lost time. I shelved the work I had done before John left and began reading, reading, reading. I wouldn’t say I deviated. No…I was enriching my background. Yes, that is what I was doing – making my knowledge deeper. During the first few weeks after John’s departure, I chased up and read four or five articles and books about engineering, innovation and education. My other supervisor recommended a book The steel master (Blainey, 1971) about Essington Lewis, the stalwart leader of BHP whose motto was I AM WORK. I finished reading it the silence of the postgraduate room one Friday afternoon, and as Blainey recounted the death of the great man, I burst into solitary tears.

After I collected myself, I dragged home, porting a great tome entitled Australian Technology 1788-1988 (Australian Academy of Technological Sciences and Engineering, 1988). There was no way I would get through the 1017 pages! Dark clouds appeared on my horizon. The wind once gently blowing my sails so silently I barely took any notice, now ceased. I felt alone and adrift, rudderless.

But, within a week I accepted an offer to become involved in a campus postgraduate group. Now, it seems a life-line thrown to me at just the right moment. With renewed interest, I began to read about postgraduate supervision in Australia. No, it was not another deviation. I knew I needed to write. But I needed a topic with which I was very familiar – then the idea for Cat’s away came.

Both the laboratory students and I had feelings of sadness and isolation. Equally, many of the students in the laboratory may have initially been quite relieved when Prof Yahia left the group, as I was when I knew that I wouldn’t turn around one day and find John standing behind me. The students in the laboratory may have benefited from discussing supervisor related issues amongst themselves, but I did not witness this in my observations. In terms of the phenomena of separation, therefore, I don’t believe the laboratory students were ‘better off’ than me. In fact, after my observations of the students, and in parallel with my own experiences, I have identified three stages of behaviour that students progress through as they cope with the cessation of the supervisor – student relationship. Dualistic emotions range
from initial relief/guilt through anger/sadness, to frustration/isolation. The process ends ideally and the next phase of the researcher’s career can begin with acceptance/-
independence. The following descriptors highlight the both the duality and range of emotions
students may feel when dealing with supervisor separation:

Relief/guilt  Students may have initial feelings of freedom and relief--even perhaps happiness
at not needing to account for their every moment. Equally, they may be happy that their
supervisor won’t be ‘popping in’ to ask them for something – ie take a tute, lecture, or help
with a paper to review, etc. Students may find themselves on the beach at noon when they are
normally in the lab or office, or may be knocking off at 2.00 pm rather than 5.00 or 6.00 –
what does it matter?…no one is checking up on them, or even expecting them to be around.
Successful free afternoons may then result in free days! The euphoria of those first few
weeks may shift to guilt as the student realises that more sand in the hourglass that is the
candidature has fallen to the bottom, never to be regained. The guilt may bring on a frenzy of
work ‘to catch up’. This can be a period time when students work through nights and
weekends, attempting to mask the time spent at the beach. After all….when the Cat’s away,
the mice play!

Anger/sadness  In this stage the student may become angry. They may consider leaving the
program ‘just to show’ the supervisor. Equally, students may look to blame others – perhaps
in the way Säif wonders why the University does not better care for their students. Some
students may become depressed, as I did – wandering aimlessly, or perhaps crying for
relatively minor reasons. I don’t think I was really that sad that Essington Lewis died in 1961,
I think I was sad that I was alone and felt isolated at my desk, with no-one to share my
feelings about this great innovator, as once I may have done with John when I met with him.

Frustration/isolation  Frustration ensues when the student knows they must get on with the
work but they are stuck, or perceive they are stuck. If only your supervisor were here to get
you ‘unstuck’. Perhaps you feel adrift and need someone to put you back on course. Tom’s
frustration and subsequent feelings of isolation are a good example of this phase. The more
frustration you feel, the more this feeds the feelings of isolation – you feel further and further
pushed to the periphery, as if truly, there is no one. If only your supervisor were there to help
you!

But they aren’t. The supervisor is not there, and aside from the emotions the student may be
feeling, he or she may, during any of the three phases, get completely off task. When I could
not face the 1017 page volume about Australian technology, and had obsessively colour
coded all of my reading with flouro-coloured writing and Post-it’s®, I began reading Nevil
Shute’s fascinating biography Slide rule (1954). I did not finish it because I realised I had
drifted significantly off task, though I had earlier and repeatedly denied this to myself. Ideally
a student self-identifies the supervisor separation anxiety and can move away from
unproductive thoughts and deeds (!) to the acceptance/independence phase of their research
career. Acceptance can begin with small steps--perhaps going to visit another (or new)
supervisor, or sharing feelings of isolation and frustration with others. Acceptance is typified
not only by a renewed feeling of control ‘I can do this’, but also generally by some action –
writing, getting on with the study, the candidacy proposal, the interviews, etc. Some students
may, I believe, revert again to supervisor dependency, but this is dictated as much by the
phase of the program in which the student is engaged, as it is by individual styles in the
supervisor-student relationship. As noted, a longitudinal study may highlight supervisory
dependency phases over the course of student candidature.
To what extent does the supervisor realise the effect of his/her absence on the student?

Professor Yahia, the former (principle) supervisor of the students in my laboratory-based study, ushered 17 PhD students through to completion in Australia since 1994. Additionally, he supervised five master’s students and seven international exchange student theses since 1990. The numbers above do not include current students. By the time I was able to interview him, I had the benefit of having interviewed the laboratory students and suspected his absence had, indeed, quite an effect upon them. He had been away for nearly a year, though had visited the students on several occasions. Also, Prof Yahia had worked with them ‘virtually’ via e-mail and fax. Thus, I was able to focus some interview questions on his impression of how his absence was felt among them. The following dialogue relates my initial query:

Tanya: Uh. In terms of leaving students, going away from students which I know you have done when you had a study leave and obviously when you left these students, what do you expect they actually go through, what do you expect happens with them?

Prof Yahia: What I expect is continuity, that is what I expect, but it is hard to achieve--continuity is very difficult. And in particular with those students in the group, I mean when I left them, I realise today still, and this is the second meeting since I have been here, and I realise they, they need that coaching, they need support and vision, they need it, they desperately need it, they are just alone and floating somewhere where they don’t know what to do and are glad to have the supervisor back, because I am back, in the usual way. So I expect continuity, but it is hard to achieve this continuity, so sometimes I delegate this responsibility to colleagues but you know supervision is a matter of style and colleagues may not do it the same way and students are not satisfied with the approach of the colleague in my absence, so it is a difficult one. I expect…to answer your question directly, I expect continuity, as though I were here. And when I was on sabbatical, of course we communicated via e-mail, of course, but I don’t see what they do physically here, so I expect them to do the same thing as if I were here.

Tanya: And have you had that demonstrated to you, that they are doing exactly what?

Prof Yahia: Of course not, and I know they don’t, they don’t because their progress has been slack for some of them. When I was here I had the ability, not the ability, but I could just insist on things and uh make them do it because I am present, and when I am present they can’t deviate, they just have to do it.

Tanya: They see you in the corridor…?

Prof Yahia: Yes, that is it.

When Prof Yahia answered in this way, I began to doubt my interviewing techniques. While I found this an extremely valuable response, I wanted to know more about what he thought the students actually felt. I then queried him further by asking him what he would have felt if his supervisor left during his study. He reported that he was an independent researcher, meeting formally with his supervisor only three times in the span of his five-year PhD program. He reported isolation somewhat akin to what Tom reported in the passage above. He spoke at length, as did Tom, about a particular unsolved problem. When he finally took the problem to his supervisor, he was told that the problem was intractable. Again, it was interesting to note parallels between the supervisor and his students’ isolation, but I was
slightly perplexed as to why I was not getting an answer to my query. I wanted to know what he thought they felt. I wanted to know, I suppose, if he perceived that his supervision was only a technical matter or was it also about a relationship? Finally, I rephrased the question and ask pointedly:

Tanya: So what do you think was their first reactions when they heard that you are going?

Prof Yahia: Very disappointed, very very disappointed--because it creates uncertainty in their life and in their PhD. I did the usual thing, I spoke with the students and I told them nothing will change, and I meant it too and this is why I visit them quite frequently, but obviously it is hard for them not to have a leader in the lab, what you said, in the corridor, walking and watching, because they need that.

Tanya: A presence.

Prof Yahia: A presence, the presence helped me…I come rushing in here unexpectedly looking at them and some may be sleeping there, some chatting, some may be doing, but they need that, they need it. Because sometimes their motivation drops and they are glad to have a supervisor wake them up and push them again and give them a kick, a vision, and they are back on track. They need it, but sometimes you have to realize there are some students simply work in excess, and from day one, ok, so they are a delight to supervise, but, but it could be very dangerous because they can deviate very quickly, so you always need to keep an eye on them, more actually than the others. The others are …a…not, they are difficult because you need to always feed them with ideas with suggestions and bring them to this and that work and so on. While the independent ones you don’t need to do this. All you have to do is correct them if they, if you feel they are going off course. I am not sure I answered your question?

I am not sure he did either! Certainly, I would have preferred if I had heard the word relationship. The passages above indicate to me that he did realise the impact of his departure, but perceived it basically in terms of the technical progress of the students, who need ‘coaching’ or ‘a kick’. This is a particularly pragmatic response, and perhaps in light of supervising a number of students, it is not wholly without warrant. Again, as noted above, it would be interesting to investigate both the supervisor and his students in 12 months to see how they have fared.

**Observations & Conclusions**

The quantitative and qualitative data presented here suggests that the student-supervisor relationship is, perhaps needless to say, extremely important to the student. If the statistics of the 1990 survey can be abstracted to year 2000 data, the number of students affected by supervisor absences is 13% of 34,775 enrolled students (Commonwealth Department of Education Science & Training, 2004a, 2004b), or 4,521 students. What about the part-time and external students who have, by comparison with their full-time ‘resident’ counterparts, much less contact with their supervisor in any case? What lessons can they teach us full-timers? What lessons can we teach them? Hopefully, one day this will be the subject of other work on the student-supervisor relationship.

But in the interim, what can be done? In the case of supervisor departure, supervisors do have their students accompany them – across country or to other countries. If this is not feasible, or in the case of a leave of absence, students may rely upon co- or associate supervisors for
assistance. Next, it would be rare that an academic would ‘cut-off’ their former students (or current students if they are on leave), allowing them to drift aimlessly for months without some guidance. Many may greatly curtail their student contact, but keep in touch via e-mail. But these are initiated by the supervisor and there are student-focused coping strategies arising from my own and the laboratories’ experience. The list is not discipline based and includes a balance between reflection and action:

I Reflection
1. Plan supervisor absences as a matter of course at the beginning of candidature\(^1\)
2. Plan on distractions—keeping these close to topic area will keep the PhD tracking (ie upskilling in a technical area).
3. Plan on ways to get unstuck
   a. Visit the supervisor if this is feasible
   b. Get advice from another supervisor (this suggestion is made very cautiously…if the supervisor is not close enough to the topic, the student may actually waste time in educating the surrogate supervisor, or worse, the PhD may get sidetracked by the interests of the alternative!)

II Action
1. Write
   a. Research reports
   b. Research diary (feelings about supervisor departure, etc)
   c. Technical updates
   d. Papers
2. Discuss
   a. Supervisor absence early in candidacy
   b. Separation issues with students in a similar position
   c. Issues with campus counselors or groups
3. Undertake activities
   a. Enroll in relevant unit
   b. Join campus groups or discipline relevant associations
   c. Visit supervisor (as above)
   d. Consider small amounts of relevant employment

I therefore suggest to students four do’s & don’t’s of supervisor separation

- Do not assume the supervisor won’t expect progress
- Do not assume anything about the separation, ie that the absence WILL or WILL NOT effect you.
- Do balance planning and action
- Do plan on loneliness and self-directed work.

To summarise, while very valid concerns may exist surrounding a supervisor’s departure or absence, the end place (wherever that may be) need not be negative, particularly if the student is aware of what is occurring and assumes a greater role in planning and action from the beginning of candidature.

\(^1\) Students must plan supervisor absences as part of their candidacy. This is because academics in Australia are generally entitled to study leave every three years, and long service leave after 10 years service and then every seven years. All students should expect at the very least, one study leave in addition to annual leave, and of course international conferences, workshops and lecture/business tours that take the supervisor away.
Epilogue

What has eventuated since I wrote *Cat’s away* early this year is that one student in the laboratory left the PhD program in March, one returned to Indonesia in July to be remotely supervised by the associate supervisor, one student submitted in October and three have been or are planning trips to visit and spend time in the new laboratory of the supervisor.

Writing *Cat’s away* became a turning point for me in that it not only helped me quantify my feelings (and those of the laboratory students) but in writing I began to think about re-interviewing the students a year after the first interview. After discussion with my supervisor, John, I have now embarked upon a follow-up round of fieldwork, including interviewing the original students. Many of the 23 questions are the same as a year ago, but some have changed to focus more closely on the process of getting a PhD and on the student-supervisor relationship. I have already completed three interviews and it is interesting that Tom, despite the fact that he actually visited the new laboratory and worked with the supervisor for several months over the last year, still cited the lack of weekly appointments with his supervisor as a major disappointment in his work. This, of course, fully supports Kam’s findings as noted previously in this paper.

Taken from a personal perspective, writing of *Cat’s away* became transformative for me. Writing in February and now (November—in response to reviewer comments) mirrors an inquiry based, narrative driven knowledge acquisition process which begins with writing, followed by self-reflection, and further inquiry. It is knowledge acquisition which is iterative and alive. It is shown me that supervisors and students alike test the boundaries of the relationship. Where the supervisor has departed, it is up to the student how to play it—to evolve as an independent researcher or play *Cat’s away*…

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Reference List


