

University of Adelaide
Board of Research Education Development

Discussion Paper: *Evaluating Supervision*

1. Introduction: Why measure the quality of supervision?

In the prevailing climate of higher education, the provision of quality education is widely accepted throughout the community as a major role of universities. We need to show that we provide value for money to our students, not to mention to the Commonwealth. We believe that we imbue our students with a spirit of curiosity and the necessary qualities to make a useful contribution in the outside world post-graduation. However, we need to be able to document that we are generating a quality product and that our graduates have had a first class university experience. These sentiments apply to both undergraduate and postgraduate teaching.

Agencies outside the University collect information on the quality of supervision, for example DEST administers the PREQ to all graduating postgraduates. Increased scrutiny of the University's performance in postgraduate education, such as through the annual Research and Research Management Training Plan (RRMTP) and the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA), mean that it is in our interest to have in place processes for the evaluation of supervision that are rigorous and convincing to all interested parties within and outside the University, and that are practical and acceptable within the University.

In the Exit Survey completed by our graduating students, and in surveys at various stages of their candidatures, students express high levels of satisfaction with supervision, and with the quality of their postgraduate experience, yet currently only two measures of postgraduate supervisory practice are reported in public documents such as the RRMTP, these being completion rate and completion time.

BRED has therefore commissioned this Discussion Paper for circulation among Faculties to stimulate debate on these issues. It is important to ensure that any evaluation of supervision which may arise out of this debate meets the criteria of rigor, transparency and practicality.

In its discussion of this matter, the Board of Research Education Development (BRED) has already recognised that:

- important indicators of what constitutes a good supervision, such as the quality of the relationship between supervisor and student, may not be easily quantified
- ultimately the quality of supervision is the responsibility of the relevant discipline
- the criteria and process of evaluating supervision may differ from discipline to discipline.

2. Problems in evaluating supervision

The discussion of the evaluation of supervision will be helped if we are clear about how this evaluative data will be used. There are several possible purposes:

- to satisfy stakeholders external to the University, eg AUQA, DEST
- for use in strategic planning, resource allocation or enterprise bargaining purposes by internal stakeholders, eg VCC, Deans and Heads of Schools, NTEU
- for use in internal, formal processes, eg promotion, Career Development Reviews, disciplinary or grievance processes
- for use in internal, informal processes, eg strategic planning at the School/discipline level, professional development courses.

These purposes are not mutually exclusive, but they do mean that information about supervision will be defined, collected and used differently by different people.

We know from experience and the research literature that 'supervisory style' differs from one supervisor to another, particularly in terms of the degree of independence expected of the student. There is no generally accepted approach to 'correct' supervision, other than that 'good' supervisors do certain things. For example they:

- Establish reasonable and agreed expectations, a research plan, and the resource requirements of the project with their students
- Maintain regular contact with their students throughout their candidatures
- Provide critical and prompt feedback to their students on the quality of their work, particularly their writing
- Monitor the final production of the thesis and the examination process.

Experience also suggests that supervisors in different disciplines will approach supervision differently, with the strongest differences being between laboratory- and non-laboratory based projects, and between science and humanities. Given these differences, it is not possible to specify one evaluative process that will apply equally to all supervisors in all disciplines. What this Discussion Paper does is to list a range of possible sources of data that will need to be interpreted differently by individual supervisors in different disciplinary contexts.

It may be that individual supervisors are not the best focus for the evaluation of supervision. Responsibility for the quality of research students' experiences is probably best located at the discipline level. A number of resource, infrastructure, administrative and research environment issues that impact on student progress and satisfaction are more the responsibility of the discipline group as a whole rather than of individual supervisors. In many disciplines a significant number of people other than their supervisors contribute to the quality of the postgraduate experience – post-docs, laboratory managers, technical assistants, Faculty and School administrators. Heads of Schools, Discipline Heads and postgraduate coordinators may be in the best position to collect some data and to comment on the quality of supervision in their areas of responsibility. If this is the case, however, their role in the evaluation process needs to be recognised and supported.

The quality of supervision need to be 'measurable' in the sense that it should be possible for stakeholders to determine whether performance targets are being met. This does not mean that all the data will be 'quantitative' as strictly defined. Indeed many of the descriptors of 'good' supervisors listed above can only be 'measured' by checklist or by some form of satisfaction rating. To restrict the evaluation of supervision to quantitative indices would lead to supervisory performance being narrowly and inadequately defined. It will be necessary to adopt a wide range of indicators in order to reflect the complexity of supervision as a mode of academic performance, and to take account of the range of supervisory practice across the University.

However, the evaluation of supervision also need to be 'manageable' in the sense that the data can be collected and maintained without adding significantly to the workload of supervisors and Discipline Heads. Another management issue concerns how the introduction of new evaluative processes may be perceived by academic staff. Unless the process is seen as assisting individual supervisors and their colleagues to improve performance in a developmental way, the collection of data will be regarded as an administrative burden eliciting minimal compliance. The University also relies heavily on affiliate supervisors to maintain its HDR load. These people may well object to being audited in the discharge of a voluntary task, unless they see the process as helpful.

3. Possible sources of information about the quality of supervision

What follows is a list of possible data sources which would serve some of the purposes listed in (2) above.

History of Supervision (to be considered relative to level of appointment and opportunity of individual supervisors)

- Total number of students supervised to completion as principal supervisor¹
- Total number of students supervised to completion as co-supervisor¹
- Proportion of students completing
- Mean completion time

Faculty/School/Discipline Support

- Evaluation of Induction and Structured Program
- Delivery of commitment agreed to in the Minimum Departmental Resources Proforma
- Evaluation of discipline or student seminar program
- Student satisfaction expressed in the Exit Survey and in Mid-candidature surveys²

Student Outcomes

- Average number of publications/conference presentations per student (in different DEST categories) *or* equivalent in the areas of visual, performing, literary and media arts
- Examination success by students without re-submission
- Complimentary examiners' comments
- Proportion of students gaining post-doctoral positions³
- Development of academic and professional networks by students
- Employment of students in a field appropriate to their degree⁴
- Employment of students in area of students' own choosing

Quality of student-supervisor relationship

- Record of regular meetings⁵
- Student comments in Annual Reviews⁶
- Absence of grievance complaints.
- Evidence of assistance to students in the areas of:
 - * Growth towards research independence
 - * Career guidance
 - * Professional & transferable skills development
- Positive results of Supervision SELT⁷

¹ There may be equity issues raised in the use of this indicator: supervisors might be discouraged from taking on students in certain risk categories.

² This data is collected anonymously and under the condition that aggregations will only be reported at School or discipline level if there are at least five responses.

³ This indicator will only be valid for those disciplines in which there are a reasonable number of post-doctoral opportunities.

⁴ This indicator will only be useful for those disciplines in which there is a strong relationship between field of employment and field of study.

⁵ This indicator would need to be interpreted differently in different disciplines, particularly as regards laboratory- and non-laboratory based research.

⁶ This would require a change in the current 'culture' in which criticisms of supervisors are seen as inappropriate in the Annual Review.

⁷ A new set of questions relevant to postgraduate supervision is under development by LTDU. However, the need to maintain student anonymity makes SELT-type evaluations difficult to obtain over a short (2-3 year) period.

Staff Development

- Record of provision of or involvement in professional development activities in the area of postgraduate education
- Involvement in significant areas of supervisory practice eg. postgraduate coordination, member/convenor of HDR committee, member/ convenor of postgraduate advisory panels
- Invitations to examine theses from other universities
- Stephen Cole or PGSA award or commendations

4. What next?

In summary, we need to gather grass roots opinion on three questions:

First, do we need measures of the quality of postgraduate supervision?

Second (and depending on the responses to the first question), how do we measure such quality?

Third, how useful would such indicators be?

We would be grateful if this Discussion Paper is considered at all academic levels in the University and thus we are sending it, in the first instance, to postgraduate coordinators and Associate Deans (Postgraduate) so that responses can be aggregated on a Faculty-basis. We welcome input from Higher Degree Committees, Heads of School and any others with an interest in postgraduate research training. Please forward your comments to your Associate Dean (Postgraduate) or the Convenor of your Higher Degrees Committee by 30 November.

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