Supervisory Practice: A Qualitative Study

Milind Sathye

Abstract: Timely completion of doctoral and masters dissertation has assumed increased importance in Australia since the Federal Government introduced in 2003 a system of financial grants to Universities which, among others, emphasised timely completion of research by higher degree students. One of the Australian Universities responded to this need by introducing learning plans for all commencing research students. The purpose of these learning plans was not only to improve supervisory practices but also to identify the knowledge and skill gaps among research students at an early stage. The purpose of this paper is to document the experience of two supervisors and two students in the first year of the introduction of learning plans. On the basis of this information, it may be possible to draw lessons for supervisory practices as well as offer recommendations for improvements in learning plans.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction

This paper documents supervisory practices based on interviews with two supervisors and two students of one of the Australian universities. The motivation for the study comes from the fact that timely completion of dissertation has assumed importance in Australia after the Federal Government introduced in 2003 a system of financial grants to Universities that puts premium on completion of research degrees. One of the universities responded to this by introducing learning plans for all research students. The learning plan is an inventory of knowledge and skill level of the student. It identifies the knowledge and skill gaps and suggests a way to bridge those gaps by undertaking suitable courses. The aim is to ensure timely completion of research. The student is required to prepare a learning plan and rate his/her knowledge or skill level on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 stands for well versed in that particular aspect of knowledge or skill and

5 stands for completely novice in that area. The student rates himself / herself against each of the knowledge and skill level. The learning plan was designed by the Centre for Learning and Teaching after much deliberations. A committee was constituted to determine what set of skills and knowledge are expected of research students and based on the deliberations of the committee the plan was finalised and made mandatory for all research students. A scale was used to assess the skill and knowledge inventory of the student not only to facilitate students' own assessment but also enable the supervisor to quickly assess the skill and knowledge gaps. These plans after signed by the student and the supervisor were then to be signed by the administrative head of the school and then reviewed at the divisional research committee. The plans also gave an opportunity to the student to express administrative or other impediments impacting his/her research progress. Progress in submission of learning plans by students was also reviewed by the University research committee. The intention was to know what actions are required on the part of the student, supervisor, and administrative managers to facilitate completion of research thesis in time by the student. This self-rating is then vetted by the supervisor. For example, a student may rate his or her skill in qualitative methods at 3 but a supervisor may rate it at 2 or 1 and may ask the student to do relevant course work. Where such discrepant evaluations are found, the supervisor is in the first instance expected to discuss this with the student and they mutually agree on the rating. Where they don't the head of school would negotiate a satisfactory outcome. It may be insisted upon the student to do certain course units if he/she desires to continue the research degree. Rarely, issues go to this level and are largely resolved between the student and the supervisor. The learning plan is an annual exercise that attempts to identify and then rectify, with suitable intervention, the identified knowledge/skill gap. [1]

The purpose of the study was to document the experience of students and supervisors in the first year of the introduction of learning plans. After the learning plans are well grounded (say after three years) a follow up study is proposed. The paper is organised into the following sections: a summary of discussions with supervisors and students, a comparison of the possible lessons learned from above (that is, how these interviews catch up with existing theory of postgraduate teaching and learning), a series of suggestions on how the practice of supervision could be improved based on these interviews, and finally some comments on how this study can help the development of learning plan for prospective students. [2]

2. Discussions with Supervisors and Students

In an effort to give quality supervision to research students so that they are able to complete their research degree in time, one of the Australian universities introduced the system of learning plans. The present study reviews the implementation of the system in its first year of operation and documents the experience of students and supervisors about the system and the supervisory practice in general. Two supervisors and two students who started in 2003 when the learning plan system was introduced were chosen. The choice of supervisors and students was based on the basis of students who started under the

supervision in 2003. Also because of resources constraint the interviews were limited to two supervisors and two students. The author's role was to make the student and supervisor narrate their experience. No set questionnaire was used. The supervisor and the student were interviewed separately and were requested to tell their story of supervisory practice experienced by them. As the interview were telling their experience, the author took notes with their permission and asked questions following from the narrative. [3]

2.1 Discussions with Supervisor A

I met Supervisor A on 20 February 2003 at 2.40 pm to know about the supervision practices followed by him while supervising a Ph D student. The meeting lasted for about an hour. Supervisor A indicated that it was his first go at supervision and he had no prior training in supervision. The student was a full-time doctoral student and completed his work in three and half years instead of usual three years prescribed by the University guidelines (called Gold Book). The Australian Agency for International Development makes funds available for students from developing countries for study abroad. The student was funded under this arrangement and as such finance was not really a constraint. [4]

Supervisor A met with the student once a week initially and thereafter once a fortnight. The student was self-motivated and met the supervisor as scheduled. Supervisor A had not prepared a formal learning plan as envisaged under revised Gold Book guidelines. However, he did informally assess the knowledge and skill level of the student. The student had published in refereed journals a few papers about the research topic. The supervisor had a look at these publications. He also verified whether the student has undergone prior education/training in research methods, statistics and econometrics. The student had undergone such training. This facilitated supervision. However, the student was very weak in written English and this matter came to light rather late, that is, when the student started writing the thesis. The problem was overcome by hiring a professional editor with financial assistance from the University. [5]

The student was required to make an initial presentation within first six months of enrolment. It was attended by about ten school academics; two of them submitted a written report on feasibility and appropriateness of the research. These comments were taken on board. There were some administration issues that needed to be sorted out for this student. [6]

Before submission of thesis, the student and supervisor went through the research policy and procedures handbook issued by the University and complied with various requirements. Supervisor A appointed three external examiners in consultation with the student. Two of the examiners didn't suggest that any major revisions were necessary but the third examiner suggested substantial changes. The supervisor stated that to carry the changes suggested by the third examiner was hard since by then, the student had left overseas and also desired to receive his degree in ensuing ceremony. This put a great strain on supervisor to network with student and ensure compliance. Major problem was communicating by e-

mail with the student and explaining him what was required to be done to make the thesis acceptable. The supervisor and student had not visualised this situation at the beginning (stage of preparation of learning plan). Fortunately, the student had the material on disk and he could make necessary changes. Had the material been not saved on a disk, it could have become problematic. [7]

2.2 Discussions with Supervisor B

I had a discussion with Supervisor B about the supervision practices followed by him on 11 March 2003 from 14.00 to 14.45. Supervisor B mentioned that he has supervised five masters and two honours students so far. [8]

Supervisor B said that he did not prepare any formal learning plan as envisaged by the University, however, he ascertained the competence of the student with respect to the key learning areas at the initial stage itself. According to him the first meeting (an informal assessment) is very important to ascertain student enthusiasm, knowledge of general area of research interest and competency. He often required students to do some course work like statistics for researchers, research methods, psychometrics etc. What this supervisor was doing informally, the mechanism of the learning plan seeks to do formally. If a learning plan was to be prepared then it would have identified that there are knowledge and skill gaps which the student needs to rectify by undertaking courses as above. [9]

Supervisor B was very careful at the proposal stage. The research question, relevant theory, data, models, statistical techniques to be used were all thoroughly verified at that stage itself. This avoided problems that the student may face down the track. Supervisor B required students to present workshops every six months. He said he worked as a "devil's advocate" picking up errors in thinking, or writing or with methodology etc. raising questions and letting the student to find answers. Supervisor B addressed the issue of English language proficiency at the outset. Students without good spoken and written English were not accepted in the first place. English competency was an essential condition for admittance. [10]

Supervisor B assumed that ethical practices would be covered in course work undertaken by the student but did clarify the relevant position when the issues arose. As per University norms ethical clearance is required when human subjects are to be interviewed. Similarly, research requires knowledge of various ethical considerations. The supervisor assumed this knowledge otherwise he could have advised the student to undergo a short course on "ethical considerations in research" run by the University. [11]

Supervisor B was of the view that his students would complete their work in time mainly because at initial stage he screened them well. He did help students to resolve administrative issues. For some students part-time tutorship was given as financial assistance. [12]

The supervisory panel consisted of two to three persons with relevant background. There were two external examiners appointed by Supervisor B for each student. These were not appointed in consultation with the student. There were no problems with examiners. [13]

2.3 Discussion with Student X

A student doing PhD programme in Law was interviewed. No set questionnaire was used however the questions asked referred to his experience as a research student. Questions included whether he had initial interview with the supervisor, whether learning plan was prepared, how was the topic and research question decided, whether the supervisor directed him about the literature to be looked into and other relevant resources, what administrative support was made available etc. Following from the responses given by the student, further questions were asked. The discussion was conducted in a very informal manner at staff club. The purpose of the interview was clarified and the student was told that information including his name will be kept anonymous and he can narrate his experience of being a research student at the University without any fear. [14]

The student informed that in the first instance he prepared a draft research proposal. It was approved but the University wouldn't admit him as formal student for reasons not known. After sometime he was asked to apply and admitted. He was assigned a supervisor who didn't meet him even for a short time (of five or ten minutes) to discuss the proposal further. He was not given a room or computer or other facilities for nearly four months. The supervisor's apathy towards him continued for nearly three years. Meanwhile, he continued to work on his own and is nearing completion of his thesis in the next six months. Recently, after new Head of School took over, proper supervision has been made available. [15]

When questioned why he didn't go to another university, the student indicated that he found that mobility of students doing research is hard in Australia. This is consistent with previous studies which report that students are not as mobile in Australia as those in some other countries due to reasons such as lack of recognition of qualifications by other institutions, financial barriers, personal relationships, lack of time to make enquiries about alternatives, familiarity with current location and lack of awareness of benefits and opportunities gained from moving (AUSTIN, 1996; AUSTIN & KILEY, 1998; PEARSON & FORD, 1997; POWLES, 1995). [16]

As for the learning plans he stated that he did prepare one and found it to be quite useful. He wished such a plan was prepared when he started his research and suggested that an item "quality of supervision received" needs to be added in the learning plans, so that at least annually the University would come to know if there are any barriers to completion of research work. [17]

2.4 Discussion with Student Y

This student is doing a PhD programme in electronic commerce. The student said that she generally received good cooperation from her primary supervisor. She did have occasional meetings with the supervisor, which was useful. The supervisor was very helpful and was available whenever she sought an appointment. The supervisor also directed her to various relevant sources. He would make copious notes on her drafts and raise thought provoking issues. She did find the learning plans useful and thought that if these were introduced earlier when she began her research it could have helped her more. The plans made it possible for her to know what skills and knowledge levels she currently has and what is expected of her to successfully complete her degree. She didn't find any particular difficulty in preparing the learning plans. [18]

3. Theory of Postgraduate Teaching and Learning and the Lessons of this Study

The lessons for supervisory practice that flow from the above interviews are summarised below. Wherever appropriate, references to relevant literature are given. These lessons help explain what factors help timely completion of research degrees. The formal learning plans are a systematic way to capture the likely risk factors that could delay completion and do something about it in advance. [19]

Importance of proper selection of research students: As stated by EVANS (2002, p.156) "[t]he current government policy on research training, in effect, punishes universities for their withdrawals by counting completions as the major component of future research training places". Proper selection of research students is the principal lesson that comes out of discussion with two supervisors interviewed by me. In the present case study, the supervisor who did a thorough screening of research students could ensure timely completion. It seems that good screening appears to generate a better learning process and a better final product. The other supervisor who didn't do such screening had to face with problems. In the literature, we find a support for proper selection of students. PARRY and HAY-DEN (1994, p.78) found that "the matter of helping students write, particularly students from Non-English Speaking Background (NESB) proved a contentious issue with some supervisors expending large amounts of time assisting students and worrying over how much of a contribution the supervisor should make". [20]

Importance of meetings with supervisors: HEATH (2002, p.44) provides evidence that "more candidates who completed their theses met with their supervisors at least fortnightly than did those who withdrew". Both the supervisors in this case study insisted on regular and frequent meetings. In one case they were weekly (initially) and thereafter fortnightly. The experience of Student X is not very encouraging. It appears that he suffered from supervisory neglect. Student Y seemed to be lucky in this respect that she had occasional meetings with her primary supervisor and he was available when requested. [21]

Submission of written work by candidates: HEATH (2002, p.46) found that "... those who required to submit written work earliest in the candidature were also the most satisfied with the feedback that they received". In this case study while one supervisor ensured quality of written work at selection stage, the other didn't and had to face problems down the track. Student X didn't have a single meeting with his assigned supervisor and was not given research facilities initially for nearly four months. Fortunately, he is now assigned to a good supervisor and is making good progress. Student Y was happy with her supervisor who provided required guidance. [22]

Frequent presentations: HEATH (2002, p.49) found a "significant relationship between the level of satisfaction with feedback and advice on oral presentation ...". One of the supervisors I interviewed insisted on presentation once in six months. This appears to have helped in student progress and completion. Student X had not made any presentation of his thesis so far while student Y had made at least three presentations. [23]

Choosing of examiners: MULLINS and KILEY (2002, p.377 quote "everyone knows that in choosing examiners people don't choose examiners who will have all their buttons pushed". In this case study one supervisor found that one of the examiner's gave a "hard time" to the student and indirectly to the supervisor. The supervisor stated that the examiner did give some very useful insights but found him to be too picky. The other supervisor who was interviewed stated that he chose examiners "very carefully". He ensured that they have published in the area of research and have a long experience as examiners. An adverse report by examiners at the final stage delays the completion of thesis. While one supervisor appointed examiners in consultation with student the other didn't. The Gold Book requires that examiners should be appointed in consultation with students. [24]

3.1 Lessons for supervisory practice

From the above qualitative study following lessons could be drawn.

1. It is important to carefully screen prospective research students before accepting supervision. In particular, check their language and writing skills, (this is particularly important if the student is writing a thesis in a foreign language), critical thinking skills, prior published work and research training, and initial research proposal. Supervisor B followed this practice.

2. Learning plans are considered useful by research students. Interestingly, the supervisors didn't seem to be familiar with them. This highlights the need of proper communication between research office and training of supervisors. Also given the comments of the students, revision of learning plans seems necessary so as to make these very focussed. Comments of student X are pertinent to note so as to catch any friction between student and supervisor at an early stage.

3. It is important to monitor the progress regularly once the candidate is taken on board. Periodic meeting with the student helps in this and "at risk" students

could be identified early. Supervisor A and the supervisor of student Y also followed this practice.

4. Frequent presentations are yet another way to build confidence and clarity about issues among students. Depending up on the method of inquiry two or three presentations during the course of research would considerably help the student. In appointment of examiner, supervisors need to be very circumspect. It would help if they probably have informal chat with the examiner. If it appears that the examiner is positive about the thesis, he/she could be short-listed. This doesn't mean to choose examiners who are "soft". It is certainly expected of them to contribute their knowledge but examiners who are too picky are better avoided. Supervisor B followed this practice.

5. Supervisory neglect is inexcusable. It needs to be ensured that once a student is accepted, supervisor must find time. The situation in which student X was caught up was unfortunate. It could have come to light if learning plan system was in vogue. [25]

4. Impact of this Study on Development of Learning Plans

Learning Plans will have to be designed to identify skill and knowledge gaps and making systematic effort to overcome these. It needs to be ensured that students do an honest inventory of their skills and knowledge and generic attributes and discuss these with others to identify areas that need to be overcome. What students have assessed as skills/knowledge gaps needs to be vetted by the supervisor separately and an agreement will have to be reached so as to overcome these in a systematic manner. Also it may be necessary to write some of the terms in the learning plan in plain English. As the plans were prepared by "educationists" some of the terms they use are "technical" in nature. For example, there are six key learning areas and under each of those three attributes are rated. The six key learning areas against which a student has to rate himself/herself are knowledge, inquiry, communication, organisation, creativity, and ethical practice. In the key learning area knowledge, for example, students find it difficult how to rate themselves against the key attribute conceptualise, contextualise and exhibit a systematic understanding of knowledge in the research field within the wider framework of society and the profession. Similarly, for key learning area "creativity" a key attribute is to understand basic principles of originality and creativity in research and be able to use original approaches to produce works that critique and extend current forms of knowledge and understanding which students find difficult to rate. In rating themselves against some of the attributes in other key learning areas, students too face difficulties. As stated earlier, some of the students—in particular international students— found it difficult to understand technical terms used in the learning plans (e.g. contextualising, cognitive etc.). Questions framed in every day language could help. Currently, skill set is couched under key learning area "knowledge" which is rather confusing for students and supervisors both. [26]

5. Conclusion

This report documented the lessons for supervisory practice based on interviews with two supervisors and two students. The lessons that came to the fore include care in initial selection, development of proper learning plans, monitoring of progress, frequent presentations, and care in appointment of examiners. It is felt that the lessons will help improve supervisory practice considerably so as to ensure that the objective of timely completion is achieved. The learning plan documents will be reviewed periodically after the University receives a feedback thereon. The present research will directly help the University in this. [27]

References

Austin, Andrew (1996). *The stay-at-home students lack of postgraduate student mobility between Australian universities*. Paper presented at the Quality in postgraduate research: Is it happening? Conference, April 18-19, Adelaide.

Austin, Andrew & Kiley, Margaret (1998). *Postgraduate perceptions, preferences and mobility among Australian universities*. Paper presented at the "Quality in postgraduate research: Managing the new agenda" Conference, April 23-24, Adelaide.

Evans, Tim (2002). Part-time research students: are they producing knowledge where it counts? *Higher Education Research and Development, 21*(2), 17-25.

Heath, Trevor (2002). A quantitative analysis of Ph D students' views of supervision. *Higher Education Research and Development, 21*(1), 42-57.

Mullins, Grant & Margaret, Kiley (2002). It's a Ph D, not a Nobel Prize: how experienced examiners assess research theses. *Studies in Higher Education, 27*(4), 12-22.

Parry, Simon & Hayden, Matt (1994). *Supervising higher degree students: An investigation of practices across a range of academic departments*. Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1994.

Pearson, Mark & Ford, Leslie (1997). *Open and flexible Ph D study and research (Evaluations and Investigations Program)*. Canberra: Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs.

Powels, Mark (1995). *A longitudinal study of participants in the Australian Postgraduate Research Awards (Industry) Scheme (Evaluations and Investigations Program)*. Canberra: Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs.

Author

Dr Milind SATHYE is Associate Professor in Finance and Banking at the University of Canberra, Australia. He recently completed the course Graduate Certificate in Higher Education and has since developed interest in qualitative research methods. He has already published a paper that follows qualitative approach and one more paper using the approach as work-in-process.

Contacto:

Dr Milind Sathye

University of Canberra
Canberra, ACT 2617
Australia

E-mail: Milind.Sathye@canberra.edu.au

Citation

Revised 6/2008