

Supervision of postgraduate research higher degrees – *designing a professional development program for a clinical setting*

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Background

- Quality of supervision for PG research students variable
- USYD mandatory program for accrediting new PG research supervisors
- Generic – for all Faculties
 - 7 on line modules with optional “central campus” workshops
 - Equivalent to one unit of study (28 hrs)

Rationale for new program

- Email survey suggested limited uptake
 - Those who did not do program
 - *too busy; didn't need it / done similar program*
 - Those who accessed program:
 - *Clarified goals, structure; forced to reflect on issues and develop some "tools"*
 - *Too generic, too basic; too much emphasis on philosophy of education*
- Need for a discipline specific, readily accessible program, suited to the busy academic in clinical setting

Aim

- To identify the important elements of a postgraduate research supervisor development program for staff based within a clinical school
 - From postgraduate supervisors
 - From postgraduate research students (see Poster)
- Research informed the design of a professional development program for PG research supervisors (clinical and laboratory-based postgraduate supervision in a clinical setting)

Methods

- Qualitative, individual semi-structured audio-taped interviews
- Purposive sampling (gender, type of research, experience)
- Participants invited to respond to prompt questions. Issues explored via open questioning until saturation (grounded theory)
- Independent analyses of the de-identified transcriptions

Results

- Fourteen supervisors (19%) participated
 - 57% males,
 - 29% lab based, 57% clinical, 14% both,
 - variable length of experience with supervision
- 20 themes identified (four groups):
 - Features of best supervisory practice
 - Problems encountered by supervisors
 - Supervisor training related issues
 - The experience of being a supervisor

1. Features of best supervisory practice

- Time commitment/ time management
- Planning/ preparation for candidature
- Managing expectations



1. Features of best supervisory practice

MANAGING EXPECTATIONS

“...And I think supervisors also need to be aware of expectations and not reflect their own expectations on their student, but to be aware of, one, what is an expectation of a PhD and two, what are the expectations of that student ...”

1. Features of best supervisory practice

- Time commitment/ time management
- Planning/ preparation for candidature
- Managing expectations
- Communications
- Monitoring progress/ candidature meetings



1. Features of best supervisory practice

MONITORING PROGRESS

“... one of the essential things is to have a framework on which you can base your planning ... you could take them through a timeframe to define what outcomes are needed to complete the thesis in a timely fashion...”

1. Features of best supervisory practice

- Time commitment/ time management
- Planning/ preparation for candidature
- Managing expectations
- Communications
- Monitoring progress/ candidature meetings
- Motivating the student/ managing feelings
- Mentoring/ encouraging academic development



2. Problems encountered

- Student problems
- Failure to progress
- Conflict resolution
- Writing



2. *Problems encountered*

WRITING

“...Some people really struggle to write. They find it very difficult to write in a different way to what they are more familiar with... It’s also quite scary to start writing what might turn out to be a fifty to a hundred thousand word document – so a lot of people struggle to get going – they just find it too daunting...”

2. Problems encountered

- Student problems
- Failure to progress
- Conflict resolution
- Writing
- Types/ range of students
 - Supervising physicians
 - Part time candidates

2. *Problems encountered*

TYPES OF STUDENTS

“One I wanted to raise is this issue of supervising people at an equivalent level or even more senior – it is potentially quite a problem...there was a level of embarrassment...”

2. Problems encountered

- Student problems
- Failure to progress
- Conflict resolution
- Writing
- Types/ range of students
 - Supervising physicians
 - Part time candidates
- Project issues



3. Issues Surrounding Supervisor Training

- Desired features of Supervisor Training course



3. Issues Surrounding Supervisor Training

DESIRED FEATURES OF SUPERVISOR TRAINING COURSE

“... they need to know... how often should you meet, how should you meet, how should you record your meetings, how should you deal with conflict, how should you deal with failure to progress etc...”

3. Issues Surrounding Supervisor Training

- Desired features of Supervisor Training course
- Giving feedback to supervisors about their performance



3. *Issues Surrounding Supervisor Training*

FEEDBACK TO SUPERVISORS

“... I find it’s difficult for them to tell me if there are things that are negative...but I value feedback. I acknowledge that negative feedback might be difficult to accept, but that’s something that’s part of learning ...”

3. Issues Surrounding Supervisor Training

- Desired features of Supervisor Training course
- Giving feedback to supervisors about their performance



4. Experience of being a supervisor

- Positive aspects of supervision
- Needs of the supervisor
- Institutional support of supervisor/student
- Role of co-supervisors



Conclusions

- Generic issues of PG research supervision identified- but also aspects of unique to supervision in a clinical setting
 - Time poor supervisors- unreliable due to clinical commitments
 - Reluctance of some supervisors to be trained to *“teach the craft of research”*
 - Need identified for ongoing process for feedback to supervisors of their performance

Conclusions

- Concordance of themes and responses with student focus groups
- Both
 - Expectations
 - *Supervisors saw strong need to establish goal posts early, few considered students expectations*
 - *Students felt that they are perceived as doing the work to achieve a paper for the supervisor. The need to teach not always evident.*
 - Developing writing skills
 - Importance of communication
- One group more strongly
 - Career concerns and autonomy- students
 - Importance of planning/ preparation- supervisors

Outcome: new accreditation program

- Themes used to develop three face to face workshops (*meeting expectations; monitoring progress; getting students to write*) + an accreditation seminars + 3/7 online modules.
- Enhanced uptake of pilot program
 - 23 newly accredited/enrolled primary supervisors
- Program accredited by University; features adopted by central program.

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