

An evaluation of the desirable characteristics of a supervisor*

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Abstract

In this paper we propose a model of postgraduate supervision which broadens the traditional focus on “expertise” to include support for the student and the capacity to balance creativity with criticism in supervision. Based on this model, we report results of a survey of postgraduate students in the Faculty of Agriculture at UWA investigating the desirable characteristics of a supervisor. We find that students clearly rank non-expertise-related characteristics of supervision which provide support and which balance creativity with criticism as more important overall than expertise-related characteristics. We use these results to argue for staff development opportunities to be enhanced to enable academics to receive training in these areas of supervision competence which are ostensibly unrelated to expertise.

Introduction

How do we determine the competence of an academic to supervise a postgraduate student? In most cases the answer would probably be “expertise in the area of research”. And by “expertise” would be meant one or more of a range of things such as: being up-to-date in the research area; having an active research programme in the area; having a track record of research output in the area (including having done a PhD in the area); having a network of colleagues in the area; and having a track record as a research supervisor in the area.

But is “expertise” enough to determine competency for supervision? Our view is that “expertise” is an important contribution of an academic to a student-supervisor relationship, but that there are at least two other components of the supervisor’s contribution which are also important and for which academics usually have no particular training in providing. Moreover, we report evidence from a survey of postgraduate students regarding desirable characteristics of a supervisor which supports our view that students desire much more from a supervisor than “expertise”. We then use this evidence to argue for enhanced opportunities for academics to

broaden their supervision skills beyond the confines of “expertise”.

SECTION 1: A Model of Supervision

Our model of supervision has developed from our appraisal of recent literature in the area of postgraduate supervision (Cullen, Pearson, Saha and Spear, 1994; Hall, Coates, Ferroni, Pearson and Trinidad, 1997; McCormack, 1994; McMichael and Garry, 1994; Parry and Hayden, 1994). It represents the contribution of an academic to the supervisor-student relationship as having three main components:

(i) expertise in the research area

As outlined in the Introduction, expertise can mean a range of things that could typically be characterised as one or more of the following: knowledgeable; specialist; teacher; influential; co-ordinator.

(ii) support for the student

There are times, particularly in the early part of the research, when the supervisor may need to build and support the student’s self-confidence as well as to reassure and motivate the student (Delamont, Atkinson and Parry, 1997). Support for the student also covers a range of other characteristics such as: enthusiastic, available, helpful, involved, attentive, caring.

Moreover, we think there are three key phases of a research project, and that the significance of the various types of support changes between these phases:

(a) settling-in and getting going

In this phase it is important to make the student feel confident that they have the intellectual capacity to complete the project (enthusiastic, involved).

(b) maintaining the impetus

In this phase students often suffer a “relapse” of self-doubt. They need to be reminded of all they have achieved already, and helped to develop a clear

vision both of what remains to be done and of how to achieve it (helpful, attentive).

(c) finishing-off

Students are often distressed at the prospect of having their writing criticised and having to rework chapters at a point when they feel intellectually exhausted. It is important to try to rearrange and rebuild their work rather than knock it down, so that they can see their efforts have not been wasted and feel that they have the stamina to finish after all (available, caring).

(iii) balancing creativity and criticism

In the "getting-going" phase a supervisor should contribute ideas to the project so that the student can clearly see their commitment (stimulating, active). In the latter phases the supervisor should shift more and more towards the critic. Here the student is typically developing their own ideas about where to go and what to do and it is the supervisor's job to react constructively (critical, objective). Therefore, "both advice and criticism need to be managed in order to encourage the competent student to develop sufficient self-confidence to embark on and sustain several years of demanding independent work" (Delamont, Atkinson and Parry, 1997).

SECTION 2: The Survey

For the survey, we made use of the list of twenty-two supervisory characteristics developed by McMichael and Garry (1994). In addition, we allocated each of the characteristics in the list to one of the three main components of the supervisor's contribution according to its best fit in our judgement. On this basis we allocated seven characteristics to "Expertise" (E), nine characteristics to "Support" (S) and six characteristics to "Creative/Critical" (Cr). Finally, we established a 1 to 5 scale between "Undesirable" and "Highly Desirable" for the students to evaluate each of the characteristics, and presented the survey to thirty-two Faculty of Agriculture postgraduates.

In evaluating the results of the survey, those characteristics which achieved a mean score from the student responses of 3 or more qualified as "desirable". This meant the exclusion of three characteristics: Detached (S: 2.22); Director (E: 2.56); and Passive (Cr: 1.72). Of the remaining nineteen, six were classified as "Expertise", eight as "Support" and five as "Creative/Critical". However, when grouped into those characteristics which scored 4 or more, and those which scored between 3 and 4, the general pattern of results was clear: the majority of the desirable support and creative/critical characteristics achieved a score of 4 or more, while the majority of desirable expertise characteristics achieved a score of

between 3 and 4. Moreover, desirable support characteristics not only dominated the set of characteristics achieving 4 or more (six of the ten), but also ranked as three of the highest-scoring five characteristics (Enthusiastic (S: 4.81); Helpful (S: 4.53); Attentive (S: 4.47); Knowledgeable (E: 4.47); Stimulating (Cr: 4.47)).

SECTION 3: Assessment of Implications

On the basis of the results of our survey, we can draw either of two possible inferences:

- (i) the students clearly view non-expertise-related characteristics as more desirable in a supervisor than expertise-related characteristics

or

- (ii) the students took the occasion of the survey to express their relative satisfaction with the expertise-related characteristics, and their relative dissatisfaction with the non-expertise-related characteristics, of their supervisors.

If we take the position that the students responded in a detached way to the survey, then in our view the main implication of our research findings is that the traditional focus on expertise as the determinant of supervision competence is too narrow. In particular, students clearly rank non-expertise-related characteristics which provide support and which balance creativity with criticism as more important overall than expertise-related characteristics. Consequently, given that academics typically have no explicit training in providing support to students they are supervising or in balancing creativity with criticism in their supervision, it would seem appropriate for staff development opportunities to be enhanced to cater to these needs. Gaining skills to supervise effectively has benefits for both the students and the supervisors (Graham and Grant, 1997). In particular, inexperienced supervisors will benefit from training opportunities as often supervisors are not adequately prepared for being supervisors.

If, alternatively, the findings of our survey are restricted to the Faculty of Agriculture, then the above comments still apply in this context. However, the need then arises to extend our research into other discipline areas in order to determine the robustness of our results. Recent anecdotal evidence from broadly-based student support activities at the University of Western Australia suggest that this is likely to be the case.

References

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Footnotes

1 Full details of the results of the survey are available from the authors on request.

*We are grateful for the helpful comments of anonymous reviewers. This research has been funded by a CUTSD grant.