



Issues Facing New Supervisors

Undergraduate, Honours and Masters by Coursework Dissertations

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Introduction

- Dissertations are an essential component of some undergraduate, honours and master's coursework degrees
- Most universities provide policy and procedural documents for coursework dissertations but limited training or information on the *practice* of supervision
- Research and resources on the practice of supervision focuses on HDR students and may have limited applicability to supervising non-HDR students
- In 2013 Lynne Roberts was awarded an OLT National Teaching Fellowship to identify, develop and disseminate best practices in supporting dissertation supervision in coursework degrees

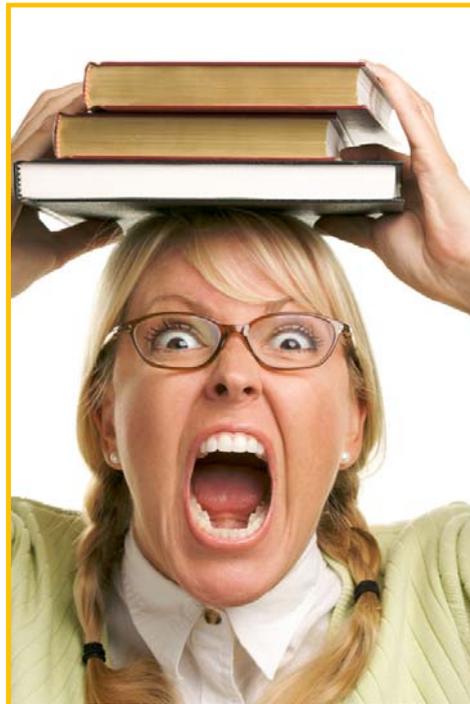
Methodology

- Interviews conducted with 8 new supervisors, 25 students, 7 dissertation coordinators and 3 Student Guild/University employees dealing with student issues
- Thematic analysis of interview transcripts to identify issues associated with supervising coursework dissertation students, with composite vignettes developed
- Existing materials on best practice in supervision identified through literature searches, invitations to coordinators across Australia and web postings
- Best practice materials and ideas further developed through a series of workshops with experienced supervisors in Western Australia and South Australia

Supervisory Practice Issues

- **Differing expectations**
"I've been surprised at how much hand-holding my students expect."
- **Project Issues**
"Sometimes new supervisors have unrealistic expectations as to what can be achieved in an undergraduate or honours dissertation project. I think when they start that don't really understand/remember the limited research skills and experience students have and the limited space of time that a student has to get the research done."
- **Reducing power imbalance**
"As a supervisor I'm in a position of authority, because that's just what the role is, but I don't want it to be so hierarchical that my students end up feeling that they're reporting to their boss. I don't think that works and the times where my supervision hasn't worked, I think the students have thought that they're reporting to their boss."
- **Guidance versus directing**
- **Establishing the boundaries**
- **Needy students**
- **Interpersonal issues**
- **Cross-cultural issues**

Findings



Systemic Issues

- **Insufficient workload allocation**
"Presumably, there's also teaching and research and other stuff which I should be doing in the meantime, not bloody supervision ... it has a spill-over effect into your other responsibilities ... Do we just turn a blind eye to that and overwork ourselves...?"
- **Lack of training/mentoring**
"It's really one of those things you learn on the job. I never had a single training course. I never had a single session where someone told me what I should do wrong, what should I do right."
- **No allowance for student differences**
"We are working in a much more bureaucratic style of university management where everything is time-budgeted to a razor's edge. How does this actually influence when it comes to supervision: do we basically say, 'I'm sorry, you used up your X hours with me. I can't talk to you about your project anymore.'"
- **Unrealistic supervisory loads**
"there are few of us to supervise a growing number of students and I don't – there's absolutely no way, next year, I'm gonna be able to supervise as many students as I have."

Discussion and Future Directions

- While most new supervisors reported enjoying supervision, they were faced with a range of systemic and supervisory practice issues
- Interviews indicated a clear need for supervisor training and the provision of best practice materials
- Training course for new supervisors is currently in development
- Best practice guide for new supervisors is currently being developed for piloting
- Best practice tools will be added to the project website