



Identifying, Developing and Disseminating Best Practice in Supporting Honours and Coursework Dissertation Supervision: Phase 1 Feedback

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Introduction

Dissertations are an essential component of some undergraduate, honours and master's coursework degrees. While most universities provide policy and procedural documents governing dissertations, limited information is provided on the *practice* of supervision at these levels. The overall aim of my fellowship is to address the paucity of materials available to support supervisors of dissertation students in coursework degrees in Australian universities through the development of a key resource on best practices in dissertation supervision. The first phase of my fellowship was to identify conceptions of good supervision and issues associated with supervision in coursework degrees.

Phase 1 Methodology

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 24 undergraduate, honours and masters students, 7 new supervisors and 7 dissertation coordinators and 3 academics/professionals in student support roles. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. Thematic analysis was used to analyse transcripts.

Phase 1 Findings

Models of student and supervisor conceptions of good supervision developed from the interviews are presented on the following page. While there may be some differences in perceptions of good supervision by supervisors and students, both students and supervisor acknowledge that each party contributes to good supervision. That is, good supervision is a negotiated practice between supervisor and student.

Student Model of Good Supervision

Positive supervisory relationships were described as based on a shared passion for the topic, clear expectations and open communication. Good meetings occurred within a relaxed space where the student felt they were listened to, their concerns were not dismissed and they received support, guidance and reassurance. In some circumstances, the synergy of ideas resulted in better research. Students described supervisors' contribution to positive supervisory experiences in terms of approachability and availability, support, interest in the student as a person and sensitivity to the student's emotions. Students described their own contributions as coming to meetings prepared, taking ownership of the research project, and in some cases managing the supervision process. Where supervision meetings went well, students reported feeling re-motivated, with increased focus and clarity about the project. They knew what they had to go on and do next, and felt less stressed.

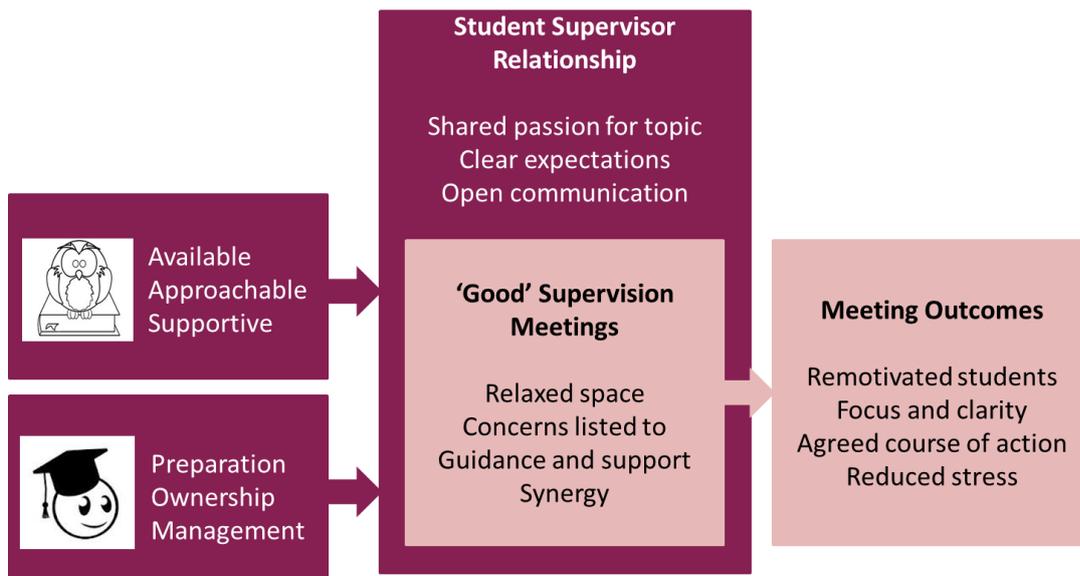


Figure 1. Student Model of Good Supervision

Supervisor Model of Good Supervision

Positive supervisory relationships were described by supervisors in terms of shared passion for the topic, clear expectations and a positive group dynamic or dyadic relationship. Good supervision meetings were characterised by discussion, guidance, clarification and positive feedback. Supervisors described their own contribution to good supervision in terms of providing structure and research knowledge, being about to explain concepts in everyday terms the students could understand and being supportive. Students were viewed by supervisors as contributing to positive supervisory experiences through being interested in the topic and taking ownership of the project. The outcomes of good supervisory meetings were described in terms of seeing the personal growth and skill development of students, and student satisfaction.

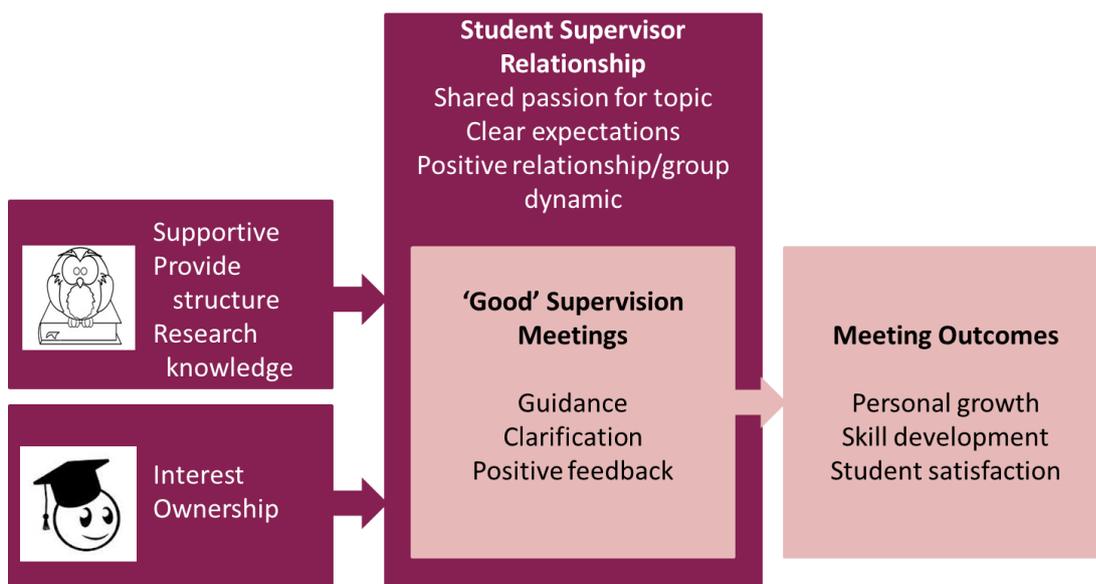


Figure 2. Supervisor Model of Good Supervision

Supervisory Issues

A range of issues related to dissertation supervision in undergraduate, honours and coursework masters degrees were also identified. These include:

- Differing expectations of students and supervisors
- Perceived inequities in relation to supervision time, statistical advice and feedback
- Power imbalance
- Differing advice from supervisors, co-ordinators, markers and methodological advisors
- Cross-cultural issues
- Interpersonal issues
- Non-availability of supervisors
- Difficulties in managing group projects
- Issues related to co-supervision
- Motivating students who are not progressing
- The boundaries of supervision
- Meeting students' needs
- Systemic issues in relation to supervisor workloads and pressure to publish

Future Directions

Over the next three months workshops will be conducted with experienced supervisors to share and develop a range of best practices to address the identified issues. A toolkit of resources for supervisors and an online training module for new supervisors will be developed.

All resources and presentations from this fellowship will be freely available from the project website: <http://www.dissertationsupervision.org>. On the website you can currently find blog posts and copies of presentations (see Project Materials), information on related projects and an annotated bibliography.

Website: <http://www.dissertationsupervision.org/>

The screenshot shows the website's interface. At the top, there is a search bar with the text "Search this site:" and a "Search" button. Below the search bar is a navigation menu with links for "Home", "Blog", "Project Materials", "Bibliography", "Related Projects", and "Contacts". The main content area features a blog post titled "Identifying, developing and disseminating best practice in supporting honours and coursework dissertation supervision" by Lynne Roberts. The post includes a list of tags: "academic, course, writing, supervision, expectations, student, dissertation, learning, research, understand". The text of the post begins with "There is a paucity of material available to support supervisors of honours and coursework dissertation students in Australian universities. Most universities provide policy and procedural documents relating to undergraduate, honours and master's dissertation supervision, but limited information is provided on the practice of supervision. Previous research suggests a mismatch between supervisor and student expectations of the supervisory relationship and uncertainties surrounding good supervisory practice." Below the text, it mentions that in 2013, Dr Lynne Roberts at Curtin University was granted an Office for Learning and Teaching National Teaching Fellowship to identify, develop and disseminate best practice in supporting honours and coursework dissertation supervision. To the right of the main content, there is a profile picture of Lynne Roberts, her name, and her credentials: "B Sc(Hons)(CU) PhD(CU) GradCertTeach(CU) School of Psychology and Speech Pathology Curtin University". Below her profile, there are social media icons for Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn. A yellow box contains the text "How to get involved" and "Calling students, supervisors and coordinators!" followed by a list of three actions: "1. Email Lynne with your stories, questions and comments", "2. Subscribe to updates to this website", and "3. Join the discussion by leaving a comment on the blog". At the bottom of the page, there is a yellow box with the text "Recent blog posts".