



Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia, Inc

Learning for an Unknown Future

Proceedings of the

26th HERDSA Annual Conference

6-9 July 2003

Christchurch, New Zealand

Conrad, L. (2003) Five ways of enhancing the postgraduate community: Student perceptions of effective supervision and support, in *Learning for an Unknown Future, Proceedings of the 26th HERDSA Annual Conference, Christchurch, New Zealand, 6-9 July 2003: pp 108.*

Published 2003 by the
Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia, Inc
PO Box 27, Milperra, NSW 2214, Australia
www.herdsa.org.au

ISSN: 0155-6223
ISBN: 0 90 8557 55 8

This research paper was reviewed using a double blind peer review process that meets DEEWR requirements. Two reviewers were appointed on the basis of their independence, expertise and experience and received the full paper devoid of the authors' names and institutions in order to ensure objectivity and anonymity. Where substantial differences existed between the two reviewers, a third reviewer was appointed. Papers were evaluated on the basis of originality, quality of academic merit, relevance to the conference theme and the standard of writing/presentation. Following review, this full paper was presented at the international conference.

Copyright© 2003 HERDSA and the authors. Apart from any fair dealing for the purposes of research or private study, criticism or review, as permitted under the Copyright, Design and Patent Act, 2005, this publication may only be reproduced, stored or transmitted, in any form or by any means, with the prior permission in writing of the publishers, or in the case of reprographic reproduction in accordance with the terms and licenses issued by the copyright Licensing Agency. Enquiries concerning reproduction outside those terms should be sent to the publishers at the address above.

Five ways of enhancing the postgraduate community: Student perceptions of effective supervision and support

Linda Conrad

Griffith University, Brisbane, Australia
L.Conrad@griffith.edu.au

***Abstract:** How do students understand ‘especially effective supervision and support’? Do they think primarily in terms of a one-to-one relationship with a supervisor – or effectiveness in the context of a community of support? These questions, among others, were the basis for a study in which RHD students were surveyed in 1999-2000 in one institution (as a pilot for a national study). The survey showed, as expected, dissatisfaction with the social and intellectual climate for postgraduate research that is reflective of nationwide results of the Postgraduate Research Experience Questionnaire for graduates. However, students pointed to positive initiatives taken by supervisors and schools to enhance the climate and create a research community. What was most interesting about student responses to an open-ended question about effective supervision and support is that they were (in the largest plurality) calling attention to the **climate** for study. Students emphasised the positive initiatives taken by supervisors (and schools) to enhance the RHD community. A powerful underlying understanding of supervision and support was that of the extended family of scholars and peers, not just that of the nuclear family of supervisor and student. This paper is based on data derived from an ARC-funded national project conducted collaboratively with Prof. Paul Ramsden, University of Sydney.*

***Key words:** Postgraduate education; peer support, supervision; research community*

Introduction

A 1999-2000 pilot survey of RHD students at one Australian university was intended, among other things, to identify particular examples of ‘especially effective supervision and support’ for future exploration. The questionnaire itself to some extent ‘defined’ supervision and support through the quantitative items – but these items spanned a variety of aspects of supervision and support, including infrastructure support, opportunities for skills development, and intellectual and social climate, as well as questions about the relationship between an individual student and a supervisor or co-supervisor. The larger national study of which this was a part centred on the context for RHD study.

It was intriguing to consider how students might respond when asked to freely indicate what they saw as ‘especially effective supervision and support by the department or faculty’. Would students focus on the single supervisor and student? Would they highlight the department or faculty? The question of how students conceived of ‘especially effective supervision and support by the department and faculty’ is central to this paper.

Relevant literature

Much literature on postgraduate supervision has to do with the supervisor-student relationship. However, there has been increasing recognition in the last few decades of the need for postgraduate students to have support from a larger community, since isolation has been seen as a persistent problem (e.g., Brown, McDowell & Race, 1995; Dorn & Papalewis, 1997; Johnston & Broda, 1996; Phillips & Pugh, 1994; Powles, 1989). In Australia the Graduate Careers Council of Australia Postgraduate Research Experience Questionnaire has confirmed that nationwide RHD students in Australia are dissatisfied with the intellectual and social climate. (Ainley, 2001). The literature concerning attempts to enhance this climate is most relevant to our study.

Studies have focused on efforts to overcome isolation, often through supervisory or departmental attempts to create community. Various strategies have received attention: the use of dissertation partners (Monsour & Corman, 1991) and cohort support groups of various kinds (e.g., Phillips, 1989; Witte & James, 1998). Workshop approaches have been discussed: Zuber-Skerritt and Knight (1986) in relation to learning effects, Topping (2000) in relation to peer assessment of academic writing, Juniper and Cooper (2002) on generic skills workshops. Collaborative study groups have been documented (Abbey, 1997). At Berkeley, a three-day topical interdisciplinary dissertation workshop was implemented along with support structures such as workshops on dissertation writing and academic publishing (Nerad & Miller, 1997). Conrad, Perry and Zuber-Skerritt (1992) considered four different supervisory group models (the workshop model, directed team model, conference model, and a methodology group model) in some detail, identifying the numerous variations of supervisory groups that might be possible. Pearson (2000) discusses group supervision as a strategy for reducing isolation, supporting students, encouraging the exchange of ideas, and mentoring students in relation to publishing and job-seeking; and Pearson and Ford (1997) observe that postgraduate student groups need to be recognised “as significant in providing effective support to PhD students” (p. xii). Johnston (1995) outlines a range of strategies tried in an education faculty, emphasising the importance of trying a diversity of approaches to induct students into their academic community. While these strategies have tended on the whole to be considered successful by those testing them and to be welcomed by students, there is a question about whether students see this kind of activity as simply a useful ‘extra’ that stands alongside supervision or as a part of a *supervisory situation* or supportive *context*.

In their study of 36 students and 34 staff at one New Zealand university, using a questionnaire modeled on ours, Melrose, Reid, Parker and Daldy, (2001) found that students and staff diverged in responses to quantitative questions asking about their department’s provision of opportunities for them to *become involved in the broader research culture, appropriate financial support for research activities, and opportunities for interaction with other postgraduate students* (p. 31, italics mine), even though there was closer agreement in relation to supervisor availability, supervisors’ efforts to understand difficulties, and the provision of helpful feedback. This raises

the question of whether students not only have views divergent from the views of their supervisors concerning access to the broader research culture but whether students actually view supervision and support specifically *in terms of* that broader culture. Very close to one of the issues central to our survey was a finding reported by Cullen, Pearson, Saha and Spear (1994): that there was 85 percent satisfaction of students with their supervision *when supervision was 'defined as encompassing many aspects of the experience rather than focusing narrowly on interactions with individual supervisors'* (pp. vii-viii, italics mine).

In analysing our questionnaire for RHD students, then, we gave attention to finding out, through an open-ended question, what students perceived to be the 'most effective' supervision and support. It was of special interest to determine whether supervision and support would be seen in terms that involved the development of community and whether the creation of community was considered an aspect of 'especially effective' supervision and support. In some sense, the study was also an attempt to discover whether there was a positive 'side to the coin' of isolation - whether students not only expressed disappointment concerning the degree of isolation but also pointed to active efforts to overcome it - in a situation where their comments were elicited not on a specific strategy but generally on effective supervision and support.

The study

In late 1999 and early 2000, all RHD students in a total of 48 schools in one university were surveyed. Of the 967 students, 615 (63.59%) responded. The questionnaire, chiefly quantitative in nature, was used to collect demographic information (age, gender and citizenship), enrolment details (e.g., full-time or part-time status). Students were also asked for information about the nature of their supervision (e.g., the methods of contact with their supervisor, frequency of contact). Of concern also was how students perceived the availability of opportunities for peer guidance or assistance. Students were asked about the character of - and their satisfaction with - supervision, infrastructure support, skills developed, the social and intellectual climate, and social support (some of these questions were used or adapted, with permission, from the PREQ). A self-rating of students' research was also sought, as well as indications of overall satisfaction with various aspects of student experience. The sample of respondents proved to be very similar to the total RHD student population, with slightly greater representation of females, international students, and full-time students.

The focus of this paper, however, is the qualitative data collected. Of two open-ended questions, one was:

Are there any methods of RHD supervision or support available to you, or available to research higher degree students known to you in your department or faculty, that you find especially effective? Please briefly describe these methods and indicate the name of a staff member who could tell us more about this supervision or support.

Students were also invited to make other comments they wished, but the first question was of major concern to the study - as it is to this paper - because of its concern with student perceptions of effective supervisory methods and support that they had experienced or had observed in action.

Qualitative results and discussion

A total of 279 RHD students (about 45% of the total number of 615 respondents) answered either one or both of the open-ended questions. Of the 279, 121 (nearly 20% of all respondents) answered the first question on effective methods of RHD supervision or support.

In response to the question about supervision and support, positive responses were categorised as occurring in the major areas of

- features of individual supervisory relationships or assistance such as understanding, willingness to meet after hours if necessary, opportunities to be independent, the supervisor's suggestion to make notes on meetings, frequent supportive comments (outside normal meeting times), foreshadowing of possible problems, prompt feedback on submitted work, and regular meetings with written work associated with those meetings;
- infrastructure support generally experienced at the departmental level such as working space, hardware/software, funding for conferences, incentives for publishing, access to photocopying and stationery;
- University infrastructure (such as library support); and
- initiatives to enhance the research community.

Of these categories, the largest plurality of responses (about 43) concerned initiatives to enhance the research community. About twice as many comments as those on individual supervisory support were made with regard to what supervisors (or schools) had done to bring students together. These comments were by no means limited to the field of science, which is recognised as often providing a team environment, but to fields such as the humanities and business.

Students highlighted five ways of enhancing the social and intellectual climate and the research community in which they were working: group supervision, peer support, structured groups, teams, and 'collegialisation' in a broader sense. These five are not mutually exclusive, but the categories are a useful way of summarising student perceptions. Each strategy will be illustrated by referring to a very limited number of student comments on the survey.

Group supervision

Group supervision suggests meetings of RHD students that are usually initiated by the supervisor as part of the supervisory process.

Science groups that were highlighted included one student's reference to *weekly group meetings*, with each *student and the supervisor giving 10-minute talks on issues peripherally associated with our research*, which is *really helping me with increasing my general knowledge in the field*. Another student mentioned biweekly meetings of a *Research laboratory group (including peers and supervisor)*. . . *to present our research, ideas, difficulties*.

Other supervisor initiatives with groups were mentioned. For example:

A group of PhD students who are doing research in a similar area meet every fortnight to discuss a variety of topics: industry feedback on any written material, practice runs for

conference presentations or colloquia.... ____ was the main initiator of these meetings as he is involved in the supervision of most of the group's members.

Still another student explicitly describes his or her experience as *group supervision*, referring to advice such as *PhD programme management strategies, set tasks to achieve within set time frame* and also the opportunity for *peer review*. Implying informality and sharing of experiences, another student describes supervisor-initiated group as *regular get-togethers* allowing *discussion of various 'stages' you go through and 'issues' you face as a PhD student. Enables understanding of these and development of different approaches to dealing with them.*

Peer support

Respondents also describe groups initiated by students, taking a collaborative approach in meetings. It is significant that a few of these have assessed the assistance as the *Most effective* or *The best support*.

We have a PhD student group of 7 people who meet every 2-3 weeks and we review and discuss each other's work.

Discussion group organised & run by postgraduates at similar stages of thesis has been invaluable.... Small group of 6 people with 1 presenter of work at each meeting. Held every 2 weeks. Most effective assistance I have had since commencing PhD.

The best support has actually been organised by one of the postgraduate students rather than the supervisor.

Some students in response to the 'general comments' question mentioned that the university's postgraduate student organisation had provided valued support. Not all groups designed to elicit peer support involve only students, as suggested by the comment of a student who initiated a peer support group characterised as a *forum for both staff and students*.

Structured programmes

'Structured programmes' are defined here as those having what might be termed a 'curricular' character – focusing systematically on important topics, issues or skills in ways that are more directive than responsive, addressing 'typical' needs rather than needs of particular students or a particular group of students, such as a series of workshops. Again this category is not mutually exclusive of other categories but does have a particular character that is worth identifying and discussing.

More than one student refers to a Faculty of Arts induction programme that s/he has experienced or of which s/he has knowledge. The Faculty of Arts induction programme to which the student refers entails sessions led by a senior academic on topics crucial to the research higher degree experience (e.g., topic, literature review, data gathering and analysis).

Structured programmes may permit tracking of the research process, with clear milestones and mini-completions along the way. One student stated an interest in seeing this kind of structured 'foundation year' implemented more widely. Two important aspects of this student's comment were a) the emphasis on the critical importance of the first year and b) the need for feedback that will provide *a sense of achievement when doing a PhD*.

Teams

Although relatively few comments explicitly referred to 'teams', two examples indicate the value some students place on feeling a part of a team. The first example below emphasises the student's feeling that s/he is being supervised (as are other students) by a number of people offering assistance, not just one or even two supervisors. The second example refers to the specific experience of being in a funded research team in which all are working toward individual goals within the larger project. Both examples are from students in the sciences.

Although only two staff members from the section are my supervisors, all five team lecturers support and assist me. Always offering relevant texts, advice at monthly seminars and a willing ear. This team approach and crossover of students/supervisors has been most valuable.

Effective method of support is undertaking PhD as part of team research that has received grant funding. The student gets to experience working with and supervising a research team and progress is good because there's always someone achieving their goals even if some are experiencing momentary set-backs.

Whereas gaining leadership experience (*supervising a research team*) was seen as a benefit in the second example above, another student comment referring to a research centre, specifically mentions help in relation to *research budget management* as well as *guidance throughout the process*.

Collegialisation

This category of responses suggests a situation in which RHD students feel part of a research community, whether in a circumscribed (departmental/school) or broader sense (national/international or extra-university sector).

In response to the question on especially effective supervision and support, one student pointed to assistance that focused more on the researcher than on the research itself – an environment in which the student could feel a member rather than a stranger. This student concluded by saying:

I found I could cope with my own research, even if supervision is minimal (luckily not the case) but could not work in an alienating environment.

In my school I feel a valuable member. Head of the School makes sure that we have additional/sessional work. Supervisors involve us in the various additional research projects/teams and provide us with advice when it comes to survival in academia.

Another student called attention to 4-6-weekly School colloquia that had a substantial social component.

This is an excellent opportunity for postgraduates to share the progress of their work and to hear from other visiting academics. The meetings are relatively informal, followed by social drinks and organised into a programme over several months. We are kept posted via e-mail of the programme.

Opportunities for collegial interaction with those outside the University – either in other universities or outside the university sector, whether arranged by the University or the student – received some attention. One student, for example, expressed appreciation for introductions *to outside academics in my field by my supervisors. These contacts are proving very useful and help me to expand on queries about points in their journal articles.* Contacts with experts working in industry were also valued: *My ‘acclimatisation’ at... University has been accelerated and facilitated by the support of staff and fellow students and workshops organised by industry staff.*

Effective supervision and support, then, are seen in terms of a variety of methods that are supervisor-initiated, student-initiated, or department/faculty/university-initiated. They include group supervision with the presence and leadership of the supervisor; peer support groups in which students initiate, organise, or coordinate meetings to share experiences and practice presentations; structured programmes in which a series of topics is dealt with in a systematic way with students; research teams, whether seen in terms of a ‘sense of a team’ or a more structured team; and ‘collegialisation’ – a variety of ways in which supervisors, departments, and the university support students, making them feel a valued part of the community and enabling them to make contacts with a larger community within the scholarly world and the world of practice.

Conclusion

What is significant about this study is not the identification of startlingly new approaches to enhancing the postgraduate research community. A second look at the literature referred to earlier shows that structured groups, teams, group supervision, peer support and other attempts at providing support to students in a community setting are highlighted by scholars exploring strategies to enhance the postgraduate research community. However, the present study indicates how aware students are of such efforts as ‘especially effective supervision and support’ and how much they value these initiatives. Students conceive of ‘supervision’ not only in terms of strategies experienced in a close one-to-one relationship with a supervisor but also in relation to supervisors’ efforts to bring students together – and especially effective support is perceived more often in terms of efforts to enhance community than in, for example, one-to-one supervision or infrastructure support, though these categories are not completely independent. Student-initiated groups are more often mentioned – and more highly valued – than expected. Students also acknowledge the importance of the scholarly world (and the world of practice) beyond the department or university as a source of valuable support.

Although the question asked student for examples of ‘especially effective supervision and support’, there was no specific probe on WHY students perceived the support to be effective. Often students offered a simple assessment of value: ‘outstanding’, ‘excellent’, ‘helpful’. However, some students also indicated specific benefits: expanding their general knowledge of the field as a complement to the specialised knowledge of the research project; developing skills such as time management, budget management, and project management; gaining access to scholarly discussion – through, for example, references to the literature from other students or staff or direct access to the scholars themselves through introductions that facilitated later interpersonal interaction; or enriching their understanding of the diversity of possible approaches to problems. Not to be underestimated was the affective impact – the feeling of belonging and being a valuable member of a research group, the opportunity of sharing with others both socially and intellectually.

While isolation continues to be recognised as a serious problem nationally (and students in this university in the quantitative part of the survey indicated their general dissatisfaction with the intellectual climate), we know that supervisors and departments or faculties have developed strategies to counter that isolation. This survey shows that, when students are able to freely respond to a general question on ‘especially effective supervision and support’ either experienced or observed, they point conspicuously to efforts to contribute to the intellectual and social support of a scholarly community.

References:

- Abbey, S. (1997). Multiparadigm voices of doctoral students: Shifting the boundaries of learning through a collaborative study process. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 10 (1), 101-115.
- Ainley, J. (2001). *The 1999 Postgraduate Research Experience Questionnaire*. Canberra: Australian Council for Education Research Evaluations and Investigation Program, Higher Education Division, Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs.
- Brown, S., McDowell, L. & Race, P. (1995). *500 tips for research students*. London: Kogan Page.
- Conrad, L., Perry, C. & Zuber-Skerritt, O. (1992). Alternatives to traditional postgraduate supervision. In O. Zuber-Skerritt (Ed.) *Starting research: Supervision and training*. Brisbane, The Tertiary Education Institute, University of Queensland, 137-157. This is a reprint of an article by the same title originally in *Zeitschrift für Hochschuldidaktik* (Austrian Journal for Research and Development in Higher Education), 15 (4), 24-39.
- Cullen, D.J., Pearson, M., Lawrence J., Saha, R & Spear, H. (1994). *Establishing effective PhD supervision*. Canberra: AGPS.
- Dorn, S. & Papalewis, R. (1997). *Improving doctoral student retention*. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Chicago, Illinois, March 24-28.
- Johnston, S. (1995). Building a sense of community in a research master's course, *Studies in Higher Education*, 20 (3), 279-291.
- Johnston, S. & Broda, J. (1996). Supporting educational researchers of the future. *Educational Review*, 48(3), 269-281.
- Juniper, S. & Cooper, G (2002). *A workshop approach to postgraduate research training in generic skills and strategies*. Paper presented to the Quality in Postgraduate Research: Integrating Perspectives Conference, Adelaide, 18-19 April.
- Melrose, M., Reid, M., Parker, L. & Daldy, R. (2001). *The staff and student experience of thesis supervision at AUT 2000*. Auckland, Institutional Research Unit, Auckland University of Technology.
- Monsour, M. & Corman, S. (1991). Social and task functions of the dissertation partner: One way of avoiding terminal ABD status. *Communication Education*, 40 (2), 180-186.
- Pearson, M. (2000). Flexible postgraduate research supervision in an open system. *Proceedings of the 2000 Quality in Postgraduate Research Conference – Quality in Postgraduate Research: Making Ends Meet*, Adelaide.
- Pearson, M. & Ford, L. (1997). *Open and flexible PhD study and research*. Canberra, DEETYA - Higher Education Division, Evaluations and Investigations Program.
- Phillips, E.M. (1989). The PhD cohort as a recommended alternative to conventional doctoral programmes. *The Psychologist*, 6, 226-227.
- Phillips, E. M. & Pugh, D. S. (1994). *How to get a PhD*. London: Kogan Page.
- Powles, M. (1989). *How's the thesis going? Former postgraduates and their supervisors' view on lengthy candidature and drop out*. Melbourne: University of Melbourne Centre for the Study of Higher Education.
- Nerad, M. & Miller, D. S. (1997). The institution cares: Berkeley's efforts to support dissertation writing in the humanities and social sciences. *New Directions for Higher Education*, 25 (3), 75-90.
- Topping, K. J. (2000). Formative peer assessment of academic writing between postgraduate students, *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 25 (2), 149-169.
- Witte, J. E. & James, W. B. (1998). Cohort partnerships: A pragmatic approach to doctoral research. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 79; 53-62.

Zuber-Skerritt, O. & Knight, N. (1986). Problem definition and thesis writing: Workshops for the postgraduate student. *Higher Education*, 15 (1-2), 89-103.

Copyright 2003. Linda Conrad assigns to HERDSA and educational non-profit institutions a non-exclusive licence to use this document for personal use and in courses of instruction provided that the article is used in full and this copyright statement is reproduced. The author also grants a non-exclusive licence to HERDSA to publish this document in full on the World Wide Web (prime sites and mirrors) on CD-ROM and in printed form within the HERDSA 2003 conference proceedings. Any other usage is prohibited without the express permission of the authors.