

Supervisory Power and Postgraduate Supervision

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Abstract

The supervision of postgraduate Master's Degree dissertations has attracted little attention in the academic literature and is an under researched area of supervisory activity. This research was a response to generate new knowledge concerning the praxis of supervisors who supervise Master's Degree dissertations within the area of Continual Professional Development (CPD). As such, this study set out to gain insights and generate new knowledge into the strategies and approaches that supervisors use to deal with a diverse range of students and subject specialisms. The findings from this study will be useful to supervisors as a means to inform policy, practitioner-based knowledge and practice, in an under-researched area of academic activity.

An insider practice-based ethnographic research methodology was used to study the praxis of fourteen Master's Degree dissertation supervisors located in the Continuing Professional Development curriculum area in a UK business school. The fieldwork for this study consisted of fourteen semi-structured interviews given by supervisors concerning their supervisory practice. The results of the study indicate that supervisors work within subject and methodological silos when supervising their students. However, the findings also show that supervisors give both academic and pastoral support to their students during the process of supervising dissertations. The conclusions of the study advocate the need for supervisors to exchange ideas and best practice, more readily regarding their professional praxis of the supervision process. They also identify that supervisors need to be aware of the different types of students who present themselves to the dissertation process in terms of their individual learning styles and pastoral needs. These evidence-based outcomes are captured within a model of supervisor-student relationships that contain the potential to influence practitioner-based practice and development.

Keywords: Power relationships; Expectations; Supervisory styles; Master's degree

Introduction

According to Sharp and Howard (1996: 159):

research supervision of postgraduate taught Master's Programmes should resist the temptation to proceed with its execution until an acceptable plan has been formulated... and that...in large part, avoidable problems should be highlighted by the systematic planning process.

However, a successful supervision experience given by tutors to students in their charge according to Sharp and Howard (1996: 163) cannot be underestimated as they note, "students undertaking research projects have a right to expect to receive advice, supervision or direction". However, the students' experience of supervision is dependant upon their supervisor, whose attitudes to supervision are affected by the fact that demands made upon them differ from those that arise in traditional teaching situations (Sharp and Howard, 1996). This may manifest

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itself in several ways as Sharp and Howard (1996: 163) note that, "they [supervisors] may feel a lack of competence in research methodology and in coping with problems which arise in areas in which they are unfamiliar. More fundamental is the degree of obligation which the supervisor carries for the successful completion of a research study", and for many postgraduate programmes two conditions have to be met. Firstly, the research report or dissertation must be submitted on a particular date and, secondly, minimum standards have to be satisfied. However as Sharp and Howard (1996: 163) note:

Postgraduate degrees are often based wholly or in part on dissertations or theses for which the submission date is flexible within what might be quite an extended period', and that 'In these circumstances (even though the student may be paying substantial fees) supervision can become lax and solely reactive.

Hussey and Hussey (1997: 28) also note that, "you may need to find specialist supervisors who will be interested in your research, supportive, and most important, whom you will be able to get on with". Philips and Pugh (1994), who identify several key aspects of how the supervisor-student relationship should be managed, also note these points. Although referring to doctoral supervision, Hussey and Hussey (1997) note that such sentiments apply equally to taught Master's Students. They go on to note that the supervisor-supervisee relationship is central to the successful completion of a project or dissertation and "ideally, a student should relate to one supervisor throughout the project" (Sharp and Howard, 1996: 167).

Previous studies have also confirmed such claims and have explored the issue of power and its place within the formation and development of relationships between supervisor and supervisee within the supervisory process (Brown and Atkins, 1988). Harrow and Loewenthal (1992) acknowledge the issues of power in their small-scale study of the roles, interventions and power perspectives of the supervisory process, and the impact it makes upon the supervisor-student relationship. They note that expert and referent power are important issues within this relationship. Smith (1995) also views the supervisory process as a power base for supervisors in terms of their knowledge, expertise and authority. Thus, the importance of power that exists between individuals is central to relationship formation.

Early studies by Emerson (1962) develop the relational aspect of power regarding the importance of dependency relationships in the total power constellation. He suggests that power resides 'implicitly in the other's dependency'. In other words, the parties in a relationship are tied to each other by mutual dependency and this often results in conflict, which manifests itself in the form of power relationships with those involved. Hall (1972) notes that it is important to recognise that power relationships exist outside the organisational context and that social relations commonly entail ties of mutual dependence between the parties, as 'A' depends upon 'B' if they aspire to goals or gratifications whose achievement is facilitated by appropriate actions on 'B's' part. By virtue of mutual dependency, it is more or less imperative to each party that he be able to control or influence the other's conduct. At the same time, these ties of mutual dependence imply that each party is to some degree in a position to grant or deny, facilitate or hinder the other's gratification. Thus, it can be argued that the power to control or influence the other resides in control over the things they value.

French and Raven (1959) classified power into five types of power bases, based on the nature of the relationship between the power-holder and the power-recipient. The first of these is 'reward power', or 'power whose basis is the ability to reward' and is limited to those situations in which the reward is meaningful for the power-recipient. Reward power is also known as 'resource power' or 'remunerative power' and is the power source implicit in most calculative contracts. It arises from the perceived control over resources that the potential recipient desires (Handy, 1993).

Their second power base is 'coercive power', based on the recipient's perceptions of the ability of the power-holder to distribute punishments. French and Raven note that the same social relationship could be viewed as one of reward power in one instance and coercive power in a second.

Their third form of power is very close to the implication of the Weberian distinction between power and authority. This type is called 'legitimate power', 'position power', or sometimes 'legal power', or authority (Drummond, 2000). The recipient acknowledges that the power-holder has the right to influence them and they have an obligation to follow the directions of the influence which Drummond (2000) calls 'institutional power'. This type of power is based on the formal role of the individual within the organisation and, as Huczynski and Buchanan (1991) note, may rely on a job title that followers see as conferring on the leader the right to give orders.

Their fourth type of power base is 'referent power' and is present when a power-recipient identifies with a power-holder and tries to behave like them. In this case, the power-holder may be unaware that they are, in fact, a power-holder.

The fifth form of power, 'expert power', is based on the special knowledge attributed to the power-holder by the recipient and is sometimes called 'information power' (Geenberg and Baron, 2003). The power-recipient behaves in a particular way because they believe that the information possessed by the holder is relevant and that he himself does not have that sort of information available.

Within the context of the research environment, Marguiles and Raia (1972) explored the shifting power dynamic of researcher and client within an Action Research based type project cycle and proposed a model describing role characteristics on a continuum ranging from task to process orientation. Between these two extremes, relationships include expert power, to more collaboration and support on the part of the researcher as the project progresses.

Lippitt and Lippitt (1978) have also suggested a model that ranges from 'directive' to 'non-directive' relationships within the context of a consultancy-led project environment. The power dynamic in their model shows its changing nature on a continuum that moves from 'process counsellor' to 'informational expert'. However, recent studies have addressed the importance of power and control of knowledge within the supervisory process in a more direct manner. Grant (2005), Manathunga (2005), and the work of Kandlbinder and Peseta (2000), has addressed the supervisors' perspective of postgraduate supervision. This theme has also been addressed by the work by Gatfield (2005), who reviewed supervisory styles, extracted two dimensions upon which supervisory styles have been analysed, namely 'structure' and 'support' (see also Grant, 1999 and 2000; Kam, 1997; Delamont *et al.*, 1997 and 2000, Pearson and Brew, 2002). In addition, Gurr (2001) has developed a tool that describes how supervisors and candidates can independently plot on a graph where they feel that the relationship is between them at any given time.

Thus, the focus of this study generated a central research question, which emerged from the review of related studies and conceptual literature regarding power and relationships in the supervisory process (Schein, 1980; Hetrick and Trafford, 1995):

What are the power types exhibited by supervisors during the life cycle of the dissertation process?

This was supplemented by the following guiding questions:

1. What power types are exhibited by supervisors when directing their students in the initial supervisory meeting?

2. How does the power dynamic change throughout the life cycle of the dissertation process?

Research design and methodology - The approach of the study

This study was based in the phenomenological paradigm, used an ethnographic methodology within its research design, and exemplified a practitioner-based research approach of investigating organisational praxis and dynamics (Fuller and Petch, 1995; Radnor, 2001). As such, this study is inductive and practice-based in nature as it moves from professional practice to the development of theory and model building as a means to inform professional practice and to add knowledge regarding supervision of postgraduate dissertations. The guiding questions for the study were developed from the underpinning literature and were intended to explore how the different aspects of the research process could be affected by the power relationships between supervisor and supervisee.

The fieldwork consisted of semi-structured interviews and was conducted with 14 practitioners who supervise Master's Degree dissertations in the Professional Development Department of a UK Business School. These included the MSc in Management, MSc in Human Resources, MSc in Health, and the MBA. The sample was a self-selecting sample and, because of the qualitative nature of the research, it was not seeking to gather large sample data, but rather to study the practices of a group of practitioners in depth.

The guiding questions were piloted by two supervisors who supervise dissertations on other Postgraduate Programmes (Fuller and Petch, 1995: 74), and this confirmed that these were appropriate questions to ask. Each respondent in the main study was asked the five guiding questions to ensure that there was a commonality in the data collection process. However, respondents were allowed to deviate from these questions if they wished to add insights and other issues to their responses. After the interviews, each was transcribed from audiotapes and respondent validation was used in order to confirm the accuracy of what had been recorded in the interviews (Radnor, 2001). Huberman and Miles' (1994) General Analytic Procedure was used to code the data by grouping it into patterns or themes that emerged from the interviews.

Discussion and interpretation of findings

The following four categories emerged from the interviews: the initial supervisory meeting; supporting the student during the dissertation process; supervisors' expectations of the dissertation process; supervisors' paradigms and methodological positions.

Finding 1: The initial supervisory meeting

The interview evidence revealed that the initial discussion in supervisor meetings covered several issues. The first issue was that of establishing a rapport with the student, the formation of a working relationship and setting boundaries for the supervisor - supervisee relationship. This suggests that the supervisor is adopting a *directive approach* at the early stage of the supervisory process and is using their technical expertise as the subject specialist as a means to establish their authority (French and Raven, 1959; Greenberg and Baron, 2003). However, it has to be recognised that this is also couched within what might be perceived as a supportive environment in terms of guidance and advice regarding university regulations, and the contents of the final dissertation document in the guise of what Drummond (2000) calls institutional power.

Without exception, all of the respondents said that the initial meeting was an important aspect of the dissertation process. Supervisors noted that the terms of reference and the setting of boundaries at this meeting were important issues to establish in order to form an adult one-to-one working relationship with their students. As one respondent noted:

The initial meeting with students allows me to find out whether a student is weak or well grounded in research methods.

The second issue is that of a directive approach adopted by supervisors whereby they explain the need for methodology within the dissertation process to their students. Thus, *informative and confronting interventions* are exhibited by the supervisor whereby they impart knowledge and information to their students and raise their consciousness about this aspect of the dissertation process, despite the fact that they might have already undertaken a research methods module prior to the dissertation itself. However, as French and Raven (1959) have noted, the influence of legitimate power and expert power might be other factors that are part of this initial relationship formation where power relationships in the supervision process is an area that lies firmly with the supervisor. As one supervisor noted the initial meeting was used as a means to establish which students might need extra attention and the direction of the research noting that:

Establishing a rapport at the outset gives me an idea as to who will be in need of 'heavy counselling', and it helps to clarify the direction of the student's research

The third issue is an expectation of the supervisors that students will be aware of research methodologies and methods prior to the initial meeting. This can be interpreted as an unspecified obligation on the part of supervisors whereby they expect students to have a grounding in these issues. Thus, the evidence indicates that supervisors, although giving support and direction at the initial meeting, expect the notion of reciprocity to be upheld by their students in terms of what they bring to the initial supervisory meeting.

The issue of methodology without, exception caused, much interest in the respondents, and varied responses were offered regarding this area of the dissertation. As one respondent noted:

I expect students to be aware of the various research methodologies and methods, especially as we now teach a three day research module before they start their dissertation. I think this has been a helpful development as the research methodology is almost written in a 4 000 word assignment, and it makes this chapter easier to write.

However, another respondent had a differing view of the research methods module:

Most students are very weak in this area. I still have to guide and advise them step by step through the methodology chapter although they have done the research methods module.

Another respondent also made remarks about the research methods module that is a precursor to the dissertation, commenting that:

Despite the fact we now have a research methods module, students are still weak in this area when they start the dissertation. Perhaps we need to evaluate the way we teach and deliver this module, because in my opinion students still have little understanding of methodology.

Finding 2: Supporting the student during the dissertation process

Four issues emerge as being central to this relationship. The first is that of *academic support* as the dissertation process progresses. Bennett and Knibbs (1986) have elsewhere posited the notion of the mentor as an interpersonal role of the supervisory process where the supervisor provides their student with guidance and tutoring on aspects of the dissertation process. This was evinced by one respondent who said that:

Students do tend to need help and support in terms of getting ideas and books to read, and to clarify the direction of their research, and to set clear objectives. Those that do not get this support at the beginning do have difficulties.

The second issue is that of the *validation role*, or as French and Raven (1959) term it *position power*, which is evidenced by the interview as supervisors have to act as a stern critic and

evaluator within their supervisory role. This is evinced in the interviews whereby supervisors gave feedback regarding advice on the presentation of work and the use of English, and developing their students as critical thinkers. As Bennett and Knibbs (1986: 139) have stated elsewhere:

Research students must be capable of handling criticism of their work. They have to defend their arguments, views and approach. The supervisor can, and should, provide a challenge to the student's arguments and offer critical appraisal.

Thus, this form of evaluation will help the student determine appropriate standards against which to measure the worth of the output achieved. In the final analysis, the supervisor may be one of the examiners, thus extending the evaluator role in a critically important way i.e. referent and position power or as what Drummond (2000) has termed legal power.

The third issue was that of *pastoral support*, which emerged from the interview data - one supervisor became involved with the personal issues of their student at the first meeting thus acting as a friendly helper and this might be seen as an appeal to the referent power of the supervisor. This can be argued within the notion of social exchange whereby the supervisor does a favour by lending support to their student's predicament in the expectation that they will return to continue their dissertation. As Blau (1964: 90) noted:

Social exchange, whether it is in ceremonial form or not, involves favours that create diffuse obligations, not precisely specified ones, and the nature of their return cannot be bargained about but must be left to the discretion of the one who makes it.

Other support tended towards that of the included pastoral type, as some students had to balance their studies with work and family life. This was exemplified quite candidly by one respondent who offered the following insight:

Many students do not estimate the time that it will actually take to produce a dissertation, as work and family life get in the way of good intentions. One student had been going through a rough time at work, and his studies were also putting pressure on his home life - I think his wife had threatened divorce at one stage. As his supervisor, I could not help but get involved at a personal level. I ended up giving study skill advice, extra tutorials, and a supporting shoulder of encouragement. However, in the end I had to suggest that he took time out, and he intercalated so he could sort himself out.

The fourth issue identified the *personal development* of the supervisor, and the continuation of a personal and professional relationship after the dissertation process had ended. This manifested itself in the form of developing personal and professional relationships with the student in terms of co-authoring conference papers and a catalytic intervention ensued that sought to affirm self-discovery, self-directed learning in an equal one-to-one relationship. This indicates that the power base of this supervisor's expectations of the dissertation process has moved from that of expert and legitimate power to that of referent power (French and Raven, 1959), whereby the supervisor and student have a feeling of oneness with each other or a desire for such an identity. Here, the influence of referent power manifests itself in the form of the student sharing the same social goals as the power-holder (Hall, 1972). Another form of support was also seen in the form of personal development, and one respondent revealed that:

I think that the personal relationship is an important part of the dissertation process, and I have developed these in the course of the supervisory process. Some of my students have gone on to do doctorates, others have produced conference papers with me, and as such professional relationships have developed into personal ones - I still exchange Christmas cards with some of my former students.

The implications of the above perhaps highlight the professional interests of supporting students in their intellectual journey, and the development from teacher-student to an equal

peer-peer relationship.

Finding 3: Supervisors' expectations of the dissertation process

The first issue concerns the supervisors' expectations about what they expect the dissertation to provide for students within the role of management research. The evidence indicates that supervisors provide students with an opportunity to use knowledge gained in their taught modules to explore a topic in depth, and an expectation by supervisors that the dissertation would be an enriching process.

The interview findings produced various responses regarding supervisors' expectations of the dissertation process and what follows is endemic of supervisory attitudes regarding this issue. This category produced a varied set of responses; all respondents however were in general agreement of the dissertation's role in management research. One respondent saw the issues as follows:

The role of the dissertation is to provide students with the opportunity to synthesise skills they have learned in modules, and a chance to explore a specific topic of interest within their organisation - it has organisational utility. As such the dissertation is used as a means to be process-centred - the results do not matter, as long as they are researched in a rigorous manner.

Another respondent saw the dissertations having an academic utility stating that:

The dissertation is a link to professional doctorate and PhD research as it develops the student's way of looking at the world from different perspectives - it develops individual criticality and reflexivity of practice.

The second issue focused upon the expectation that students should have knowledge of research methodologies and methods. The evidence provided indicates that supervisors found that students had difficulties in this aspect of management research, and making connections between the methodology literature and the dissertation process regarding its use in the research process. Here, the evidence pointed to use of expert power (French and Raven, 1959) by the supervisors whereby they exerted their knowledge of the methodological aspects of doing research and assumed the 'high ground' on this issue. One particular respondent identified other issues that the dissertation should challenge:

Methodology is the weakest chapter of a dissertation, and I stress the importance of getting this right. The dissertation is expected to deliver both process (methodology) and output (findings), but I would not be expected to be prescriptive in these processes, the supervisor facilitates the research journey only.

Finding 4: Supervisors' paradigms and methodological positions

The interview evidence indicates an eclectic approach when dealing with methodological issues as supervisors appear to be happy working within the positivistic or phenomenological paradigms, and are willing to deal with qualitative and quantitative data alike. Only one respondent stated that if they had to use quantitative data they would seek advice. These findings indicate that supervisors are loath to cede their expert and positional power (French and Raven, 1959) in this phase of the supervisory process where some reported that a successful supervisor should have knowledge of research methodology. As one stated:

I am happy to supervise in either paradigm (positivistic and phenomenological), but I do prefer to use more inductive approaches. As it is, many students doing dissertations do not use sophisticated statistics in any case.

In addition, another articulated that:

I am quite happy to use either positivistic or phenomenological paradigms, and I can deal with both soft and hard approaches to data analysis. However, this has to be thought

through before data collection takes place.

Further issues were explored by another respondent who felt that the dissertation should be a challenge to both supervisors and students, stating:

Supervisors have methodological comfort zones. We all probably work in comfort zones - consciously or unconsciously. For example, only a few dissertations use quantitative or statistical analysis - most are qualitative. If we do not challenge our own comfort zones how can we expect students to do so. In other words qualitative paradigms are dominant in the business school.

Some also stated that the requirements for supervisors to operate in their own areas of interest and competence were paramount. However, supervisors were less comfortable within the mentoring role perhaps indicating that their positional power status (see French and Raven, 1959) might be exposed, as one stated that:

Students require guidance and tutoring on many aspects of their work - reading, research design, methodology, analysis, conceptualisation, report writing. Supervisors have to counsel across a wide field and I'm not sure if I am competent to do all these things well.

Conclusions

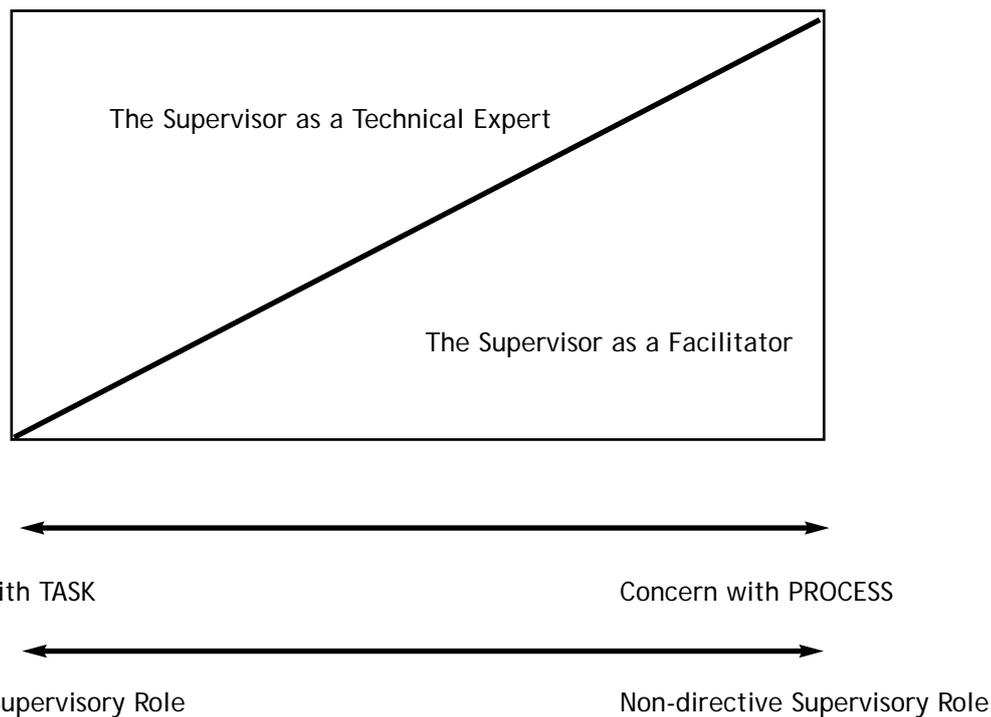
The conceptual underpinnings of this study were formulated within the notions of power and the findings from the interview data revealed issues that direct the supervisory process. The evidence that emerged appears to indicate that supervisors need to acknowledge that there is a power dynamic between themselves and their supervisees, which is not always overtly recognised. Furthermore, the study identifies that supervisors are not ceding their power bases, either as subject specialists or as 'methodologists', preferring to work within a well-trodden path that suits their own particular comfort zone. The wider implications of this research poses more questions than it initially set out to ask and, with the ever increasing need for higher education teachers to deal with a more diversified student population, it is paramount that they adopt a supervisory style that is appropriate for dealing with students in one-to-one supervisory environments.

The emergent nature of the study has highlighted that other research in the area of supervisory practice has not yet grasped the full implications of the 'power dynamic' between supervisor and supervisee. For example, the work by Gatfield (2005), who reviewed supervisory styles and extracted only two dimensions upon which these have been analysed, namely 'structure' and 'support' (see also Grant, 1999 and 2000; Karn, 1997; Delamont *et al.*, 1997 and 2000; Pearson and Brew, 2002). It must also be noted that whilst Gurr (2001) developed a tool that describes how supervisors and supervisees can plot graphically where they feel their relationship is at any given time this does not address the power relationship between them. Although it is recognised that generalisability cannot be claimed by this study, the findings produced do bear similarities with these other extant sources and studies, and thus but might have transferability into other contexts (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Thus, based on these findings, it is proposed that the following model for supervisory practice is offered to educational practitioners as a means to guide their relationships with their students.

A way forward: a model for supervisory practice

The findings suggest that supervisory practice has to contend with a multi-faceted array of variables and as such, together with the extant literature, the model of supervisory styles (based upon the consultative model of Margulies and Raia (1972) and the description of the consultant's role as devised by Lippitt and Lippitt (1978)) shown in Figure 1 is proposed. This model shows the diametrically opposed dimensions of task vis-à-vis a process-centred supervisory role, moving away from the supervisor as the expert and legitimate power and authority

(see French and Raven, 1959; Drummond, 2000) or information power (Greenberg and Baron, 2003). As the relationship progresses between supervisor and supervisee the former takes on the role of facilitator, for example when pastoral support is given.



Power centred supervision	Functions of the supervisor-supervisee relationship	Facilitation centred supervision
The supervisor as expert evaluates the situation and chooses the problem	Problem identification	The supervisor discusses with student leading to agreement of problem
The supervisor provides ideas, opinions, tactics for developing the methodology	Problem solving	The supervisor uses problem-solving approaches with student to encourage student participation
The supervisor offers expert opinion and interprets problem from own perspective	Feedback on the problem	The supervisor provides and welcomes exchange of views with student and encourages multiple perspectives
The supervisor is concerned with task. Implication is that student is given support to resolve problem with minimum collaboration with supervisor	Support given to student	The supervisor is concerned with collaborative relationship. Implication is that student is given support regarding non-academic issues such as pastoral guidance
The supervisor assumes expert role and makes specific and precise recommendations based upon problem definition	Subject expert	The supervisor develops a process role which is not dependent upon subject knowledge and expertise and assumes student is the subject expert
Supervisory assumes formal authority based upon power of the expert and position of perceived authority	Legitimate basis of power and authority	Supervisory recognises power and authority position but is rational with credibility based upon participation with student
Supervisor adheres to the problem and recommendations for improving the process. Possible use of sanctions by expert if action has not been taken	Method for review and action	Supervisor enters discussion with student to identify any barriers that impede progress where action is necessary. Participative basis for review and further action

Figure 1: A framework for supervision styles

The model also displays how supervisory roles change depending on the supervisory style adopted-

ed by the supervisor, and can be represented on the continuum of task/process centred concerns and directive/non-directive supervisory roles and is modelled on the referent, information, legal power and position power perspectives (see French and Raven, 1959; Drummond, 2000; Greenberg and Baron, 2003). At one end of the continuum, the supervisor acts as a technical expert having an input into the planning of the dissertation in a prescriptive manner. Here the supervisor is focused upon the task of completing the dissertation and takes little account of the needs, requirements and ideas of the student, relying upon their perceived expert knowledge of the subject to direct the supervisory process and relationship with the student (French and Raven, 1959). The supervisor also gives little support to the student outside the bounds of the supervisory process. As such, they have no interest in developing medium or long-term personal and professional relationships with their students. Developing 'problem-based' solutions is not seen as part of the function of the supervisory role, and the supervisor sees the research problem from their own perspective where they provide ideas, opinions, tactics and the methodology, with little recourse to the student, and thus exhibits the characteristics of information power (Greenberg and Baron, 2003). At the other extreme of these continuums, the supervisor is concerned with process-centred activities in a non-directive supervisory role. Here, the supervisor takes account of the needs and requirements of the student, and adopts a collaborative and participative style of supervision. Here the supervisor recognises that power based upon expert subject knowledge, and their position of authority as a supervisor, could have consequences upon their relationship with the student. These positions are ameliorated as the supervisor establishes trust with their student by way of a participative supervisory style whereby they discuss and identify barriers to progress, and offer advice and guidance to the student in a collaborative and supportive manner.

Implications for supervisory practice

The findings of this study have highlighted the need for the dissemination of best practice amongst staff supervising students undertaking Master's Degree dissertations. They suggest that supervisors do not share their experiences of their roles and expectations of their supervisory practice in a 'public forum'. Supervisors have now started to develop closer professional relationships between themselves by exchanging personal experiences more openly with each other. Moreover, whilst not the focus of this study, its outcomes have emphasised the different approaches to supervisory practice and the identification of learning style alternatives that are required as a consequence of the types of students who present themselves to supervision process. This has now led to initiatives that now encourage academics to attend the post-graduate research training programme that is offered across the university expected for a dissertation.

It must also be added that these findings have been incorporated as part of the periodic post-graduate reviews and are now central to a 'problem and practitioner-based' curriculum that is intended to develop critical thinking and practical research skills at an earlier stage of a students' postgraduate programme. This has provided practical guidance to tutors and supervisors in their effectiveness and help they give to students regarding their learning needs in supporting them within a project lead environment. As such, this is now beginning to help academics outside the dissertation process to develop their reflective practice as a means to evaluate their relationship with their students.

Therefore, the implications outlined here are central to a 'problem-based' curriculum that is required to develop critical thinking and practical research. However, this requires academic staff to assist students more effectively with their learning needs and progress within the dissertation 'life-cycle'. It will also require academic staff to adopt different approaches to their supervisory practice as the findings identify that supervisors tend to work in their own particular paradigms, methodologies and subject specialisms. As such, in order to support students, universities need to acknowledge the diversity of experiences and backgrounds students bring

to this part of the curriculum. Thus, supervisors need to exchange information more readily, not only about different ways of supervising research based dissertations, but also how those in their charge can learn more effectively to get to 'grips' with, and progress through, the various stages of the supervisory 'life-cycle'.

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