



Resource Guide to Dissertation Supervision on Taught Undergraduate and Postgraduate Programmes

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INTRODUCTION

While there is a considerable body of work on research supervision, this often focuses on the postgraduate level and particularly MPhils and PhDs. There is very little written on the supervision of students undertaking taught programmes at undergraduate or postgraduate levels or in the area of Hospitality and Tourism. The literature used for this resource guide is therefore drawn from across the subject disciplines and has also drawn on articles on research supervision where it has seemed appropriate and relevant. It is intended that the range of sources provided will present various ways of considering the issues around supervision and enable practitioners to reflect on their own practice.

As more students are involved in the process of formal research and of writing a dissertation as part of their University qualifications, the role of supervision is coming under the spotlight. The aim of this resource guide is to signpost sources related to the supervision process and the expectations of both staff and students. The specific focus of the annotated sources within this guide is the debate around differing expectations, the role of the supervisor, styles of supervision, whether supervisors need to adapt to suit different groups of students and whether the supervisory process changes over time.

A brief review of some key issues in dissertation supervision is included at the start to demonstrate the range of materials covered. This is followed by annotated book, journal and website sources. Finally there is a list of sources relating to wider issues relating to dissertations and the practice of supervision

DISCUSSION OF SOME KEY ISSUES IN DISSERTATION SUPERVISION

The dissertation process is one where the student and supervisor relationship is inextricably linked (Armstrong, 2004). The student perspective of the

dissertation process is widely researched, but the complexities of the relationship with the supervisor are not (Calvert & Casey, 2004). Hence, the development of this relationship and the expectations between the parties is becoming an area of exploration in the literature. It has been suggested that the relationship changes over the time period of the dissertation process, but the manner in which it changes is debated (see Hammick and Acker, 1998; Sayed, Kruss and Badat, 1998; Anderson, Day, & McLaughlin, 2006)

Reports of student dissatisfaction with the supervision process, has been one of the catalysts for a growing number of research papers focusing on this area (Armstrong, 2004). However, it is still relatively exploratory in nature (Todd, Smith & Bannister, 2006) and this is seen in the construction of models to theorise variables in the dissertation supervision process (Armitage, 2006; Morrison, Oladunjoye & Onyefulu, 2007).

The individual style of the supervisor has been purported as a major influence to the relationship, but the way in which the style influences the relationship has been largely ignored. Hammick & Acker (1998) looked at the influence of gender, Armitage (2006) researched the task or process focus of the supervisor, and Todd, Smith & Bannister (2006) studied expectations and perceptions of both.

Being able to cope with the increasingly diverse student body is another dimension within the supervision relationship of particular interest. Research by Kam (1997) suggests that university staff regularly supervise students with language and communication difficulties, outside pressures such as family and work, and differing levels of dependency. Often expectations are unclear for both parties and competence of supervisors is recognised as an inhibiting factor to the successful dissertation completion (Harman, 2002).

There are a small number of best practice examples or 'how to' recommendations which are indicative of the exploratory nature of this area of research (see article summaries).

The academic community is attempting to bridge the gap between student and staff expectations of the dissertation process and building a wider base of knowledge for those active in this area. Increasingly, reflection, using participant experiences, and the narrative approach to research are seen as methods useful to better understand the process (see Ylijoki, 2001). Yet there is still clearly a dearth of literature on the subject of dissertation supervision.

TEXTBOOKS ON DISSERTATION SUPERVISION

Bartlett, A. and Mercer, G. (Eds) (2001) *Postgraduate Research Supervision: Transforming (R)Elations*. New York: Peter Lang

This text brings together personal experiences in research supervision as a method of learning and theorising about the supervision process. A broad range of perspectives are narrated and intended by the authors as a thought provoking spring board to further discussion and understanding of the

individuality and complex process of dissertation supervision, rather than a 'how to' guide.

Lewis, V. and Habeshaw, S. (1997) *53 Interesting Ways to Supervise Student Projects, Dissertations and Theses*. Trowbridge, Wiltshire: Technical and Educational Services

This is a practical and helpful 'how to' guide that would be useful for all supervisors to use in reviewing their practice but which may be of particular benefit to new supervisors. It offers a number of suggestions and techniques to help foster a good relationship and support students in tasks they often find difficult. It is clearly based on good practice, is simply and clearly explained and shows congruence with many of the issues raised in the literature.

Wisker, G. (2005) *The Good Supervisor: Supervising Postgraduate and Undergraduate Research for Doctoral Theses and Dissertations*. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan

This text is aimed at providing examples of good practice for supervisors using international perspectives at Undergraduate, Postgraduate and PhD level. Strong reflective contextualisation provides supervisors with examples, methods, frameworks and practice which provide useful opportunities for engagement. Chapters of the book work through the entire research process with reflection from both student and supervisor perspectives. It is a good companion for supervisors at all levels of the supervision process.

RESEARCH ARTICLES ON DISSERTATION SUPERVISION

Anderson, C., Day, K. & McLaughlin, P. (2006) *Mastering the Dissertation: Lecturers' Representation of the Purposes and Processes of Master's Level Dissertation Supervision*. *Studies in Higher Education*, Vol. 31 No. 2, pp.149-168

This article focuses on the emerging area of Master's dissertation research, but draws on a number of sources from Undergraduate level. The relationship of supervisor and student is explored and the gaps in expectations between the two identified. The article states the expectations of supervisors and students separately and briefly discusses the issues of needing to adapt to individual needs and also that the expectations and relationship between the two parties will inevitably change over time, especially after the initial agreement of the research topic and towards completion. The article suggests that one of the major challenges lies in the role of supervision assuming a strong directive approach rather than encouraging an enquiring and creative approach (shaping versus supporting) by the student whilst achieving academic standards.

Armitage, A. (July 2006) *Consultant or Academic?: Frameworks of Supervisory Practice to Support Student Learning and Postgraduate Research: The Higher Education Academy Annual Conference held at Royal Holloway College*. London: Royal Holloway College

This paper was presented at the Higher Education Academy Annual Conference with the aim of the research to develop an understanding of

supervisor's roles and expectations. Emphasis is on the development of the student / supervisor relationship over the dissertation experience with implications for the relational and transactional elements of the psychological contract. Social exchange theory is introduced as a key feature in the relationship and how expectations are shaped. This research identifies the main 'types' of students completing dissertations, the dissertation process and how it evolves and role expectations of supervisors. Two frameworks for Professional Practice were developed as a result of this research based around the task or process focus of the supervisor and the three-phase framework of the actual supervision process. A key piece of research for those interested in this area.

Armstrong, S. (2004) The Impact of Supervisor's Cognitive Styles on the Quality of Research Supervision in Management Education. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, Vol. 74, pp. 599-616

This article was instigated by a lack of research into the process of dissertation supervision, and suggests high student failure rates can be attributed to high levels of student dissatisfaction with supervision and poor relationships. The focus was on the cognitive style of the supervision and concluded that an analytic rather than intuitive style is more likely to foster a positive supervision relationship and success for the student.

Barratt, A. (2004) The Dissertation: What sort of Animal is it and how might it be Better Trained? *The British Journal of Theological Education*, Vol. 14 no. 2, pp. 208-228

This article (based on research from St John's Seminary) looks at the role of a dissertation in the assessment process, and the definition of the role of the supervisor. It has an introductory discussion about learning expectations and outcomes of the dissertation process (i.e. are students expected to show new skills or the development of existing skills?) and the role of the dissertation as an assessment tool. A gap in expectations and communication between supervisors and students is explored and a recognition of relational concerns for students, but task orientated concerns for supervisors. There are some useful generic comments at the end of closing the gaps in expectations between the two parties.

Calvert, B. and Casey, B. (2004) Supporting and Assessing Dissertations and Practical Projects in Media Studies Degrees: Towards Collaborative Learning. *Art Design and Communication in Higher Education*, Vol. 3 no. 1, pp. 47-60

This article was borne out of a lack of literature or best practice about how to supervise dissertations effectively and describes the process for students and supervisors as 'opaque'. The themes of shaping versus supporting are explored. Issues for students often include anxiety, isolation, lacking a clear structure and a feeling of being 'thrown in at the deep end'. The article is designed to give ideas, support and guidance to academics supervising students and although based in the realm of Media studies has useful information for all subject areas.

Dann, S. (2008) Applying Services Marketing Principles to Postgraduate Supervision. *Quality Assurance in Education* Vol. 16 No. 4, pp 333-346

Dann offers a very interesting perspective that can be related to the ownership of the learning process (a feature of student-centred learning) and how the dissertation can provide one of the best means of achieving this. He applies services marketing practice for the design, delivery and quality assurance of research supervision. A very interesting piece.

Felton, S. (2007) The Student Experience of Supervision: Towards the Student-Supervisor Agreement. *Research Supervision: an Online Journal* [online] Available from: <http://www.lancs.ac.uk/celt/celtweb/current_journal> [Accessed 19 May 2009]

Excellent on the supervisor v student perceptions. This article discusses the conceptual issues regarding supervision and consider the postgraduate student experience and how best to support and enhance this experience through the student-supervisor agreement.

Kam, B. (1997) Style and Quality in Research Supervision: The Supervisor Dependency Factor. *Higher Education*, Vol. 34, pp.81-103

This research looked at the reliance or dependency students showed with their supervisors at Postgraduate level for guidance and motivation, with non-native English speaking students showing the highest dependency. The findings suggest that there is no set prescription to the supervision process and that characteristics such as quality and style of supervision, role expectations of both parties and field of study also have to be considered – authors suggesting there is ‘no fixed recipe’ for good supervisory practice. It explores in some detail the expectations a student may bring to the relationship and how these may vary. There are some suggestions at the end of the article which may help to address the issues raised in the research.

Hammick, M. and Acker, S. (1998) Undergraduate Research Supervision: A Gender Analysis. *Studies in Higher Education*, Vol. 23 No. 3, pp. 335-347

This research from a small population looks at the role of gender related to attitudes, values and practices of the supervisor in the research process focusing on knowledge and power as key influences. It is another area where there is a dearth of literature, and the aim is to try and understand the impact of gender. Discussion looks also at the impact time has on the relationship and how changes occur, and the engendered ‘position of power’ impacts outcomes. Results showed women tended to have a more personal relationship, whilst men were more task orientated (matching traditional gender stereotypes), both using different language and approaches but working towards the same end result.

Harman, G. (2002) Producing PhD Graduates in Australia for the Knowledge Economy. *Higher Education Research & Development*, Vol. 21 No. 2, pp.180-190

This paper evaluates the success of Universities producing PhD graduates for the knowledge economy in Australia through a large scale survey. It shows a

number of those completing PhD's will not continue in the role of research on completion. The focus is slightly different than Europe because of the strong Government involvement in education in Australia, but the issue of dissatisfaction of supervision and the gap in expectations is still highly relevant. Time spent with the supervisor was identified as a key factor in dissatisfaction, as was access to resources, quality of supervision, competence of supervisors and interpersonal skills.

Luck, M. (2008). *Student Research Projects: Guidance on Practice in the Biosciences*. Available from: <<http://www.bioscience.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/guides/studentres.a.spx> > [Accessed 19 February 2009]

This is set to be a valuable resource for anyone who is involved in undergraduate (and indeed postgraduate) dissertation provision. It is a most comprehensive publication with excellent case studies detailing and evaluating different approaches to and formats for undergraduate research projects. Although relating to biosciences it is worth a visit and the publication can be ordered at no charge.

Morrison, J., Oladunjoye, G. & Onyefulu, C. (2007) An Assessment of Research Supervision: A Leadership Model Enhancing Current Practices in Business and Management. *Journal of Education for Business*, Vol. March/ April, pp. 212-219

The catalyst for this research was reported dissatisfaction with the interaction and relationships that students experienced in the supervision process. A new model of the supervision process was discussed to incorporate the diversity of students and an increase in the numbers completing higher education, for example joint supervision. Issues identified in this research include those associated with time management and the amount of time available to spend with supervisors, and the competence of allocated supervisors. This research led to the development of a six-tier Leadership Capability Research model aimed to assist better satisfaction of students in the future. This model offers some useful guidelines for departmental guidelines and supervisory practice.

Sayed, Y., Kruss, G. & Badat, S. (1998) Students' Experience of Postgraduate Supervision at the University of the Western Cape. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, Vol. 22 No. 3, pp. 275-285

Research from South Africa (Masters context) which examines the huge drop out rate of dissertation students, and attempts to understand the constraints of the process. Lack of methodological skills was the main factor attributed to drop out, followed by isolation (especially for part time students) and then problems with personal relationships. Problems with 'inadequate, poor or negligent supervision' are also seen as a key consideration. It discusses the common factors noted previously in the literature about mismatched expectations (the supervisor as a director or guide) and confusion over the final piece of work, especially the academic research context. There is also research to support the assertion that the supervisor / student relationship changes positively over time. Some good best practice recommendations made at the end.

Todd, M., Smith, K. and Bannister, P. (2006) Supervising a Social Science Undergraduate Dissertation: Staff Experiences and Perceptions. *Teaching in Higher Education*, Vol. 11 No. 2, pp. 161-173

Research in the area of dissertation supervision is dominated by Masters and Doctoral experiences; however this piece of research focuses on Undergraduate experiences of staff and students. Their results show a lack of staff confidence in their ability to supervise, role confusion, task versus process and a high level of variability in experiences student to student. The article gives quite a lot of discussion about the change in the relationship over the period of the supervision process and the need for adaptability of both parties. Very useful bibliography.

Ylijoki, O. (2001) Master's Thesis Writing from a Narrative Approach. *Studies in Higher Education*, Vol. 26 No. 1, pp. 21-34

This research uses a narrative based approach to consider the writing of a Master's thesis, providing a fresh and innovative insight to the student perspective. It introduces the writing of a thesis as the final phase in a student's academic journey and the conflict between the perspective that the thesis is a 'crystallisation' of academic study and the opposing perspective that it is students have to make a dramatic change from 'consumers of knowledge to producers of knowledge'. The narratives include the heroic, tragic, businesslike and penal 'stories whereby students perceive the dissertation journey in different ways. The article acknowledges that interpretation of roles and responsibilities differs between students and supervisors and that communication of expectations is a key driver of student success. A thought provoking read focusing on the student perspective.

GUIDE TO INTERNET RESOURCES

Clearly there are many websites, particularly those of higher education establishments that offer guidance to students writing dissertations and, to a lesser extent, to supervisors about the supervisory process. It would not be possible to give them all here and so these are offered as a 'taster' of what is available.

Companion for Undergraduate Dissertations

This resource has been developed in partnership by the Higher Education Academy's Centre for Sociology, Anthropology and Politics, the Centre for Social Work and Policy and Sheffield Hallam University. It looks at the dissertation process from both a supervisory and student focus with useful information including key chapters and resources. Interactive videos and personal comment enhance this user-friendly site.

<http://www.socscidiss.bham.ac.uk/s10.html>

The Robert Gordon University, Scotland.

This University website gives best practice guidelines to staff about research supervision and identifies expectations of the relationship.

<http://www.rgu.ac.uk/academicaffairs/assessment/page.cfm?page=2291>

Higher Education Academy (HEA)

Searching under key terms such as dissertation supervision, dissertations, theses and supervision will produce a number of materials that may prove useful to anyone wishing to develop a particular aspect of dissertation supervision and support.

<http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/>

Research Supervision: An Online Journal

While this site relates to PhD supervision there are some interesting articles and materials that will be useful for supervisors from different fields and at different levels.

http://www.lancs.ac.uk/celt/celtweb/current_journal

ADDITIONAL READING

Akister, J., Williams, I. and Maynard, A. (2006) Innovations in the Supervision of Social Work Dissertations: Group and Individual Supervision. The Higher Education Annual Conference, July 2006 – Session Paper

Brew, A. and Pearson, M. (2002) Research Training and Supervision Development. *Studies in Higher Education*, Vol. 27 No. 2 pp.135-150

Brew, A. and Peseta, T. (2004) Changing Postgraduate Supervision Practice: A Programme to Encourage Learning through Reflection and Feedback. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, Vol. 41 No. 1 pp.5-22

Cryer, P. (1997) *Handling Common Dilemmas in Supervision*. London: SRHE

Fry, H., Ketteridge, S. and Marshall, S. (1999) *A Handbook for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*. (2nd ed.) Abingdon, OXON: Routledge Falmer

Graham, A. and Grant, B. (1997) *Managing More Postgraduate Research Students*. Oxford: The Oxford Centre for Staff Development

Green, P. and Usher, R. (2003) Fast Supervision: Changing Supervisory Practice in Changing Times. *Studies in Continuing Education* Vol. 25 No. 1 pp.37-50

Manathunga, C. (2005) The Development of Research Supervision: “Turning the Light on a Private Space”. *International Journal for Academic Development*, Vol.10 No. 1 pp. 17-30

Okorochoa, E. (1997) *Supervising International Research Students*. London: SRHE

Rowley, J. and Slack, F. (2004) What is the Future of Undergraduate Dissertations? *Education and Training*, Vol. 46 No.4, pp 176-181

Ryan, Y. and Zuber-Skerritt, O. (1999) *Supervising Postgraduates from Non-English Speaking Background*. Buckingham: SRHE and Open University Press

Snowball, J., Ross, K and Murphy, K. (1994) Illuminating Dissertation Supervision through Reflection. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, Vol. 19 pp. 1234-1240

Todd, M., Bannister, P. and Clegg, S. (2004) Independent Inquiry and the Undergraduate Dissertation: Perceptions and Experiences of Final-year Social Science Students. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, Vol. 29.No. 3, pp 332-355

Wisker, G. and Sutcliffe, N. (1999) *Good Practice in Postgraduate Supervision*. Birmingham: SEDA

Zhao, F. (2003) Transforming Quality in Research Supervision: a Knowledge Management Approach. *Quality in Higher Education*, Vol. 9 No. 2 pp.187-197