Innovations in the supervision of social work undergraduate dissertations: group and individual supervision

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Abstract

This paper was presented at The Higher Education Academy Annual Conference on 5th July 2006. It reports on interim findings from a comparative study of the use of individual and group supervisory strategies for students undertaking their undergraduate dissertation on a social work programme.

Results indicate that supervision of undergraduate students using small, supervisor led peer groups is an effective paradigm for dissertation supervision. Advantages of the peer group approach include: a much higher rate for completion on time; greater interest in their studies maintained during the process and less ‘failure driven’ learning. The students’ gradings suggest is that there is no detrimental effect on performance.

We include a description of the management process for the group supervision paradigm as an appendix.
Introduction

“Beware of those who have read a great deal and have remained ignorant. They will be filled with murderous resentment against those who came by their ignorance more easily.”

(Kurt Vonnegut, *Cat’s Cradle*).

What teaching and learning approaches can be used to support undergraduate students in the difficult task of their undergraduate dissertation? The task can be daunting in scope, with students reporting difficulty in deciding on their topic, accessing materials and managing their time (I’Anson and Smith, 2004).

The quotation from Vonnegut (above) summarises the problem of integrating knowledge into a conceptual framework and the frustrations that can be experienced when despite their best efforts students do not achieve the grades they desire. Autonomous adult learning requires a move from passive absorption to an active reflective process. Hayes and Stratton (2003) propose a definition of learning in professional practice as “A relatively permanent change in knowledge, behaviour or understanding that results from experience.” This is highly relevant to social work students endeavouring to integrate theory and practice, and particularly pertinent to their dissertation study which requires independent study of a subject of their own choice and involves a shift in conceptualisation to critically analyse the materials they have accessed.

Managing larger numbers of students has encouraged innovative approaches to the processes of both teaching and assessment including: the use of posters for assessing students (Akister, 1998); problem-based learning to move the focus of learning from the teacher to the student (Gibbs, 1992; Akister, 2001); the development and application of the Patchwork Text for formative learning in groups rather than the one-to-one personal tutorial (Scoggins and Winter, 1999; Akister 2003, 2005) and the use of the Patchwork Text with groups of students undertaking a masters dissertation (Maisch, 2003).

With increasing numbers of students undertaking the dissertation on the BA Social Work Programme, we were seeking ways to manage the process within existing staff resources. “The difficulties in undertaking and supervising undergraduate research also have to be put in the context of wider trends in higher education including widening access and coping with large groups of students, the increasing occurrence of plagiarism…” (I’Anson and Smith, 2004, p. 29). One option was to supervise students in a group. As Jackson and Prosser state, many educationalists advocate small group teaching in higher education as a means of developing higher cognitive skills, but there are few reports of the implementation of such teaching (Jackson and Prosser, 2005). We decided to evaluate the effectiveness of individual and group supervision from the perspectives of the student experience and the learning outcomes.

The accepted paradigm for supervising dissertation is one-to-one supervision, but the use of group supervision with Masters Dissertation students (Maisch, 2003) indicated
the possibility that students might benefit from a group supervisory experience in terms of greater support from the peer group and of decreasing the isolation some students experience when working on dissertations. Todd, Bannister and Clegg have reported on social science students undertaking a dissertation in the final year of their degree and found that while students value the autonomy and ownership that they feel in relation to their dissertations that they also experienced considerable challenges particularly in relation to ‘time’ (Todd, Bannister and Clegg, 2004). The support offered by group supervision may help with such challenges.

The study reported here was designed to track the students’ views through the experience, including their expectations prior to beginning the dissertation. We experienced some difficulties in gaining ethical approval as there was concern that students may feel disadvantaged by not receiving one-to-one supervision as this is the normal paradigm. We were able to satisfy the ethics committee (see sample and ethics below) and undertook the study on two sites using a combination of workshops for all students combined with either individual or group supervision.

Background

Undertaking an undergraduate dissertation is likely to be the most significant piece of work that student completes during their degree (Todd et al., 2004). The undergraduate dissertation requires students to work with minimum personal tutor supervision whilst bringing together all other aspects of teaching and learning that they have encountered throughout their university course and practice placements. ‘The dissertation is often the first opportunity for undergraduate students to build on knowledge they have already gained and then undertake a substantial piece of independent study.’ (Rowley, 2004, p. 14).

The dissertation student needs support throughout this process due to its complexity and the dissertation supervision requires a fine balance between providing supervisory support and promoting student autonomy. Historically, the support has been formally provided by an allocated dissertation supervisor who has to balance support for the student with promoting autonomous learning: ‘The challenge in the undergraduate dissertation is to provide sufficient support to cultivate autonomy while recognising that many students may not feel fully prepared for this form of study’ (Todd et al., 2004, p. 336).

Autonomous learning or ‘knowing when to withdraw the scaffold’ of support (Wisker and Brown, 1996, p.119) is a vital consideration when planning dissertation supervision in order to ensure that students are empowered to complete a dissertation and that they have the necessary knowledge, skills and motivation to complete such a complex task whilst at the same time balancing the need for students to demonstrate independence and creativity. Our research sought to evaluate whether the ‘scaffold’ of one to one supervision between student and supervisor could be replaced and/or enhanced by supervision within a small group. The formation of a group for any purpose will inevitably be influenced by a number of important variables that will impact upon its functioning, survival, and outcomes. The size of the group and individual composition will have a bearing on the dynamics in the group and the relationships that evolve. The learning group established for the dissertation module...
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Working in small groups also provides additional learning opportunities for personal growth in terms of confidence building, trust, mutual support, motivation and encouragement. It helps to cultivate a climate of cohesion where individuals feel that they can be vulnerable with people of like mind and with like task. The commonality of aim and purpose to achieve a predetermined goal can act as cement over a time limited period to bind disparate individuals and to provide, “the opportunity to be ‘helper’ as well as the helped, and to get positive feedback and support from ones peers.” (Brown, 1997, p. 224).

Context of Research:

A new honours degree level professional social work qualification was introduced by the Department of Health in 2002 (GSCC 2003/4) and began at Anglia Ruskin University in September 2003. This is the first cohort to undertake the dissertation module. Students are asked to complete their dissertation in the form of a research proposal within a social work subject area of their choice. The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education: Social Policy and Administration and Social Work benchmark statement 4.4 (2000, p.17) states,

‘….The requirements of honours degree programmes in social work frequently include an extended piece of written work which may be practice-based, and is typically undertaken in the final year. This may involve independent study for either a dissertation or a project, based on systematic enquiry and investigation.’

The social work department at Anglia Ruskin University is split into two sites, 50 miles apart from each other. Historically, Site 1 has attracted twice the number of social work students as Site 2. This is seen to be due to the location of Site 1 in an area which includes a large County Council, two Unitary Authorities, proximity to East London boroughs and lack of close University competitors.

Our research project arose from the need to manage a large student cohort on Site 1. Site 1 opted to manage dissertation supervision in small groups (see Diagram 1 and Appendix 1) while Site 2 opted to use one to one supervision. On Site 1 each dissertation supervisor was randomly allocated 6 students and was asked to manage supervision within a small group framework. On Site 2 dissertation supervisors were randomly allocated 2-3 students and asked to facilitate supervision on a one to one basis. All other support aspects of the dissertation process were the same on both sites, and included a comprehensive workbook and supporting workshops. Each site also identified a dissertation co-ordinator who was responsible for meeting any students who were experiencing difficulties (see Appendix 1). This also met ethical considerations whereby if any student in ‘group supervision’ was assessed as not functioning within their group they could be supervised individually by the co-ordinator.
Innovation has been described as: “... the creation and implementation of new processes, products, services and methods of delivery which result in significant improvements in outcomes efficiency, effectiveness or quality.” (Mulgan and Albury, 2003, p.2). This research project sought to evaluate the two different methods of dissertation supervision and to discover whether there were advantages and disadvantages of small group supervision and whether it provided the right balance between autonomy and support needed to succeed in the dissertation module.

Sample

On Site 1, the students who were taking the dissertation module were supervised in groups of 6 or less. On Site 2 the students were supervised individually.

Students from the two sites were given questionnaires at the initial dissertation workshop; mid-way through the dissertation and on hand-in (Site 1, n=49; Site 2, n=19). The response rate for Site 1 was 63% (n=31) and for Site 2, 58% (n=11).

The students who responded were equally divided between the age groups 20-29, 30-39 and 40-49, with 1 student over 50 years of age. 90% of the students were female and 10% reported having a disability with 5% having special needs. For 17% of the students English was not their first language and 10% of the group had undertaken a dissertation before.

On site 2, 86% of the students were White British. On Site 1 39% were White British, 36% reported being Black British, Afro Caribbean or Other (7% on Site 2) and 25% did not specify their ethnic background (7% on Site 2). There are significant differences in the ethnic backgrounds between the Site 1 and Site 2 cohorts (p<0.1, $\chi^2 =8.1$, n=42, df=2).

Ethical Approval

We sought ethical approval for the project from the university ethics committee. Concern was expressed, by the committee, that the students may be disadvantaged by the group paradigm given that the one-to-one supervision for dissertations has come to be viewed as the ideal supervision strategy. For this reason we created the role of dissertation co-ordinator who would be available to any student having difficulty in the group context or wishing to have one-to-one contact (see Appendix 1 for co-ordinator role description).

The process of gaining approval from the ethics committee was helpful both in terms of ensuring that students were not disadvantaged by the research project and also in highlighting the extent to which the one-to-one paradigm has become established as the ‘gold standard’ for dissertation supervision, making it critical for us to evaluate any alternative teaching strategy used for dissertation supervision.
Research Design:

A semi-structured questionnaire was designed to ascertain: students ‘preparedness’ for their dissertation at the outset; what they hoped to learn from the dissertation; any barriers they could identify to the process; skills that they would need; their aspirations for their learning and where they expected to find support for their studies.

The dissertation module ran over the period of two semesters within the students’ final degree year. The students were asked to complete three semi-structured questionnaires: an initial questionnaire identifying preparedness, aspirations and concerns; a mid-point questionnaire monitoring the reality of the task and identifying changes in aspirations or concerns, and a final questionnaire following completion of their dissertation and reflecting on the experience. A focus group was held, after the hand-in, which gave students an opportunity to discuss their responses to the final questionnaire.

Research Findings

(Please note, where there are statistically significant results between the two cohorts, Site 2 (n=11) and Site 1 (n=31) these are reported. Where there is no significant difference between the cohorts the results are presented for the whole sample).

The findings reported here are based on the analysis of the initial and interim questionnaires and are related to the number of candidates who completed the dissertation on time.

From the first questionnaire we ascertained the preparedness of students for the dissertation by asking whether they had decided on their topic area and who they had discussed this with. A significant difference between the sites at this early stage was identified with 97% on Site 1 and only 75% on Site 2 having decided on their dissertation topic ($p<0.05, \chi^2 = 4.7, n=42, df=1$). In addition 47% Site 2 and only 8% on Site 1 having discussed this with their personal tutors, who support their learning through the entire 3 year programme ($p<0.05, \chi^2 = 5.4, n=42, df=1$).

The differences in preparedness may be an important factor in the process of undertaking independent study required by the dissertation and links to other research indicating that the characteristics of the students at the outset of any programme of study. are critical to their capacity to utilise the learning opportunities (Prosser, 2006).
Group Supervision of Undergraduate Dissertations

Aspirations for learning

Table 1: What students hoped to learn from their dissertation module?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Initial(^1) Whole Cohort (n=42)</th>
<th>Midpoint Site 1 (n=14)</th>
<th>Midpoint Site 2 (n=28)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>More about my topic</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>100*</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How to do a literature review</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How to research a topic</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How to write a research proposal</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How to develop my writing skills</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>79*</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>About myself as a learner</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>86*</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^1\) At the initial stage there was no significant difference between the replies from the two cohorts and results are therefore reported for the whole cohort.

While the cohorts start off with the same ‘hopes’ for the dissertation, by the mid stage these are significantly different in respect of their interest in their topic and their hopes for developing their writing skills and learning about themselves. It appears that studying and sharing in a group (Site 2) keeps the students motivated whereas the students who are having one-to-one supervision (Site 1) by the mid -stage report only wanting to meet the requirements for passing: that is, writing a literature review and a research proposal. Their enthusiasm for the topic in its own right and for developing other skills has diminished. Their learning has become ‘failure-driven’ rather than ‘aspirational’ (Harry, 1997).

Again this is in line with the expectations found in the extensive research into student evaluation that those who begin their studies less prepared become preoccupied with meeting the requirements and use surface rather than depth approaches to their learning. These students tend to be more critical of the teaching they receive and to feel overburdened (Prosser, 2006)

Barriers identified and skills needed for the dissertation process

The study skills students identified as important for this module were ‘time management’ and ‘ability to structure the dissertation’. They also thought ‘library skills’ and ‘writing skills’ were necessary. The need for these skills is apparent and closely relates to their perceived barriers to doing a dissertation.

In terms of barriers identified, the students on both sites were initially concerned about getting started, structuring their time, understanding what was required and
questioning their ability to do a dissertation. By the mid stage they remained concerned about structuring their time and understanding what was required.

Throughout their third year these students are on social work placements and there is enormous pressure on managing their time, so time management is a realistic difficulty. It is of interest that even at the mid-stage, with workshops and supervision that they remain uncertain about what is required. This may reflect the nature of undertaking such a large piece of work and the difficulty, even with guidance, of dealing with the volume of material generated.

Students’ views of the dissertation at the initial and midway stages

At the outset, there was a difference between sites in the students knowing what they wanted to do but amid the concern about how to get it all done, students were looking forward to studying independently and excited about the freedom to select their area of study. Interestingly before starting they did not think it would enhance their professional development (see Table 2).

Table 2: Student views of the dissertation project

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Initial Site 1 (n=11)</th>
<th>Initial Site 2 (n=31)</th>
<th>Midway Site 1 (n=14)</th>
<th>Midway Site 2 (n=28)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Excited to be studying a topic of my choice</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Looking forward to studying independently</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know what I want to do.</td>
<td>7*</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How will I get it all done</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It will enhance my professional development</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

( * p<0.05, $\chi^2=7.56$, n=42,df=1)

By the mid stage, the Site 2 students are dramatically less excited about studying a topic of their choice! They are all much less enchanted with learning independently and still concerned about getting it all done. The other interesting change between the two time points is the realisation that this may well enhance their professional development.

Possible support structures

Initially, the students on both sites thought that the workshops, the supervisions, peer group support, their personal tutor and family and friends would support them through the process (see Table 3). By the mid-stage the students on both sites, have found their supervisions to be clearly the most important source of support and on Site 1,
their personal tutors. On Site 1 the students are using a wider range of support structures than on Site 2, where the supervisions are clearly the dominant support structure.

Table 3: Possible sources of support for the dissertation project

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Initial</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>Midway</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Site 1 (n=11)</td>
<td>Site 2 (n=31)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Site 1 (n=14)</td>
<td>Site 2 (n=28)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer Group support</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>57</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family / friend support</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>28</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workshops</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>43</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supervisions</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>78</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practice Teacher</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>21</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal tutor</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>36</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

( * p<0.05, χ² = 3.93, n=42, df=1)

The only statistically significant difference between the cohorts here is the extent to which they find their personal tutor to have been helpful in the process. They all imagined this would be important at the outset but this has not been such a significant feature in the Site 2 cohort at the midway stage. Perhaps this is a reflection of the one-to-one nature of the supervision on the Site 2 campus leading to less use being made of their personal tutor.

The use of family and friends for support approaches significance and it can be seen that this is less of a feature for the Site 2 cohort and overall less important than students had imagined at the outset.

Clearly the most important source of help is the supervision experience, followed by the personal tutor, peer groups and workshops in Site 1 and by the peer group and workshops in Site 2. Overall, the Site 1 cohort appear to be accessing a wider range of help and this may reflect the less individualised experience in the group supervision.

Outcomes

What happens at the hand-in stage?

On Site 1, 94% of the students handed their dissertations in on time. On Site 2, 52% of the students handed their dissertations in on time.

This is a dramatically different outcome from a process which as far as the student experience is concerned had few significant differences. However the nature of these differences may be quite critical and the whole is underpinned by different supervisory experiences. Thus although the students appear equally happy with their experience of supervision, the different models generate very different outcomes.
Did the students who handed in on time achieve their expected grades?

Clearly students in their final year may not perform at the same level as in previous years due to the higher level of study. Indeed two of the students on Site 2 were disappointed with their grades compared to their achievements in the second year. When the marks for the dissertation are compared with the students’ other marks for the final semester there are no significant differences, with the spread of marks for any one student being less than 12 marks. Thus, the marks achieved by those handing in on time are in the expected range.

There is also something important, if we return to the responses to the initial questionnaire about how prepared students were for studying for their dissertation. Here we found that most of the Site 1 students had already identified a topic which they planned to study and had already discussed this with their personal tutor.

**Discussion**

It is common for students to become solely focussed on ‘passing’ a module and avoiding failure: *failure-driven motivation*, as distinct from *aspiration-driven motivation* (Harry, 1997). From student evaluations it appears that part of the processes involved in promoting aspiration-driven learning lie in the design of the assignment task and in the teaching process, since failure-driven students become negative about the learning environment and feel overburdened by the assignment requirements (Harry, 1997; Akister & Kim, 1998). Analysis of student satisfaction surveys also identifies that beneath the initial ‘satisfaction’ scores the students’ preparedness to study and their conceptualisation of their subject determine their capacity to make use of the learning experiences offered (Prosser, 2006; Triggwell and Prosser, 1996). Further evidence of the relevance of the students’ conceptualisation as critical to outcome is also found in analysis of students’ success in Doctoral vivas (Trafford & Leshem, 2002). Autonomous adult learning requires a move from passive absorption to an active reflective process, from being the recipient of ‘teaching’ to directing their own ‘learning’.

Our study found that many more students on Site 1 handed the dissertation in on time. It is easy to hypothesise that this is related solely to the nature of the supervision paradigm, however the preparedness of the students between the two cohorts was different at the outset and based on the research cited above this is clearly a factor in the capacity of the students to make use of the learning environment. There is no obvious explanation for this, but it may be related to the approaches to managing a large cohort used on Site 2. In our next study we will investigate the mechanisms used by staff in the second year of study to prepare students for the final year dissertation.

It appears that the management of dissertation students, using the Site 1, group supervision approach (see Diagram 1 and Appendix 1) enables students to retain their enthusiasm for their studies (see Table 1) and to complete their work on time. In contrast the students on Site 2 with the one-to-one supervision became concerned about ‘passing’ (failure driven) and much less enthused by their studies.
Group learning takes many forms and individual members of a group can make use of comments from individual group members, the group, and their supervisor in the form of feedback to improve their own learning (see Diagram 1). We think that the interactive nature of the small group experience decreases student isolation and encourages the students aspirations through the sharing and interaction of their peer group. We also note from talking to these students that they did not want to be ‘left behind’: “I don’t want to be the only one who doesn’t finish on time.” The peer group sharing and competitiveness helps students to keep on target, and is also promoted by the ‘trigger system’. In the individual supervision paradigm the student mainly relate to their supervisor and may not be aware of the experiences of other students. Under the intense pressure on time management they can fall behind without realising this.

As a note of caution, whilst groups are a resourceful mechanism for learning they can also be source of intense rivalry, competitiveness and conflict. This in itself can be a good force in that it can galvanise individuals to improve their practice to do well but it can also act as a demoralising agent for others.

Conclusions

Using student evaluation and learning outcomes this research project sought to evaluate the two different methods of dissertation supervision, individual and small group, to ascertain whether group supervision, as an innovative approach for the supervision of undergraduate dissertation provides a suitable learning opportunity for students.

In conclusion, we feel that supervision of undergraduate students using small, supervisor led peer groups is an effective paradigm for the supervision of dissertations. Surprisingly, considering the long established paradigm of individual supervision for this type of study we found certain advantages in the peer group approach including: a much higher rate for completion on time; greater interest in their studies maintained during the process and less ‘failure driven’ learning. Students used a wider range of support and the evidence from their marks is that there is no detrimental effect on performance.

These results are based on one cohort and we realise that it is necessary to repeat the study and also investigate the ‘preparedness’ of students for the dissertation and to research the staff experience. We feel that the indications of the potential for group supervision are important to disseminate and replicate and we hope to include masters dissertations and work with other institutions to increase our understanding of the processes.
References:


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Appendix 1

Group Supervision of Undergraduate Dissertations: Managing the Process

The dissertation is unique in that students select their own topic area and title. The student can, therefore, be creative and innovative within the parameters of their chosen area of enquiry. For the social work student, however, the requirement is that students must relate theory to practice within an academic piece of work which embraces other modules and practice placement experience.

From a macro perspective, it was necessary for the University to validate group supervision as a method for supervising undergraduate dissertations. Approval for the research came from the University Ethics Committee. It was necessary to show the Ethics Committee that the success of all students undertaking a dissertation would not be compromised from receiving either group or individual supervision.

Supervisors:

On Site 1, 8 staff members were initially identified as dissertation supervisors and agreed to manage their allocated students using small group supervision. All supervisors on both sites were experienced Senior Lecturers or Personal Tutors. Supervisors on Site 1 met as a group prior to the commencement of supervision to discuss their small group supervision role and the process of how failing students could be identified and assisted. Within the comprehensive workbook, which accompanied this module, a time line flow chart gave supervisors detailed information as to the stage their allocated students should be at within the process of writing a dissertation, at given dates throughout the year. This allowed an explicit measure of progress and identified students who were having difficulties.

On both sites the allocation of students to their supervisor was random, with the understanding that supervisors were managing the process of writing a dissertation in partnership with students, and not subject specialists. Historically, within the one to one paradigm supervisors had been allocated students who shared a chosen topic area with the supervisor’s area of expertise. This cultural shift meant that small group supervision allowed the student within the process to be at the centre of dissertation supervision rather than the supervisor being the expert on the topic.

Timing:

Feedback from students throughout the programme indicates that many students wish that they could spread their workloads across the calendar year. We agreed, therefore, to commence the dissertation module at the end of the students second year, thus giving students almost 12 months to complete the process. Students on both sites knew who their allocated supervisor would be and what other students would be in their small group prior to their summer holiday. Students were encouraged to think about the focus of their dissertation, undertake initial planning and mapping of their topic area and undertake part of their literature review prior to their first small group supervision session upon their return to the 3rd year of their degree.

The Dissertation Co-ordinator and the trigger system:
Managing a large number of students undertaking a process which is new to them, as well as managing a module which involves the input of a significant number of staff members can be fraught with potential problems. The dissertation co-ordinator is responsible for the overall management of the dissertation process. This included meeting students who had been identified, through a trigger system, by their supervisor as falling behind or not attending supervision sessions. The trigger system met ethical demands whereby if any student within the small group was assessed as not functioning within their group they could be seen individually by the co-ordinator. This arrangement would be seen as a one off session with the aim of facilitating the students return to their respective group. All supervisors were briefed on how to use the trigger system which necessitated the supervisor filling out a trigger form outlining the student’s details and a brief summary of the presenting problem or concerns. The co-ordinator, thereafter, invited the student to meet to discuss the problem and assisted the student in formulating a catch up action plan. Any student who presented with difficulties that were considered to put the completion of their dissertation or degree in jeopardy was referred to the degree programme leader. The success of the trigger system, as means of early identification of students who were having difficulty, was reliant on supervisors using the system as soon as the problem was identified.