*Identifying the components of excellent doctoral supervision: creating an inclusive experience for the doctoral candidate (0388)*

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This paper describes the first of two stages of a university wide project created to review local models of doctoral supervision, then to identify, create and embed good practice through learning communities ((Wenger, 1998; Wenger et al 2002; Oja et al, 2010). From the beginning one of our objectives was to support supervisors at all levels, to develop their skills in managing the myriad issues which affect doctoral candidates. A second objective was to find ways of overcoming any reluctance by experienced supervisors to participating in supervisor development activities (Kiley 2011).

Data were generated firstly through small groups of experienced supervisors joining one of six faculty specific (ie discipline centred) focus groups (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Within the criteria of 'experienced supervisors' we wanted a strategy of maximum variation sampling. Secondly data were generated through focus groups of research students and thirdly through our sharing and exploring further our findings with a discussion group made up of a senior representative from each of the original disciplines. At each stage we recognised, documented and interrogated our own subjectivity and the impressions we formed, which because of our combined experience, influenced our findings (Flick 2014 p 16).

The next phase of this work will be piloting the findings through a series of learning communities and this work will be described separately.

**The research team**

The team comprised three academics all with considerable international expertise in research supervision, between them they have supervised many doctoral candidates, led supervisor development programmes, researched and extensively published on various aspects of doctoral supervision and been involved in the management and administration of large doctoral programmes. The original disciplines of the three members of the team were also diverse: medical science, psychology and social sciences. Two of the team members are full-time academics in very different schools at the University of Bristol, the third team member works part-time at the University of Bristol and also independently elsewhere in the world. Thus in the binary dimension scale below we would describe ourselves as around point 3 (Quin Patton 2015). This means that whilst our credibility with the focus groups was high, we needed to pay a great deal of attention to achieving as much objectivity as possible.

| Participant Observer | | | | Partial Observer | | | | Outsider Observer |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 |

**The Participants**

There are over 30 disciplinary schools within the University grouped into six academic faculties.  Experienced supervisors, invited by Graduate Education Directors, attended lunchtime focus group session with other members of their faculties.  Most faculties have between 6-8 schools and this resulted in a good size for a focus group (Bryman 2016) and enabled any disciplinary distinctiveness to be apparent (Golde 2005, Wisker and Claesson 2013).

**The search for objectivity**

We collected data from a wide range of sources, both across disciplines and at all levels of doctoral education.  The team themselves held every emerging concept up to scrutiny, and only if it could be under-pinned by convincing data from several sources was a concept allowed to be part of the final model.  Once the model had achieved reasonable stability it was tested again through further discussion and the learning communities.

**The emergence of a model**

Each focus group was recorded in three ways.  An audio recording was made, a full transcription was carried out and a contemporaneous summary of the discussion was also created.  These methods had interesting outputs.  The full transcription was the primary source, but was inevitably not always coherent or comprehensible, the audio recording was available to be replayed in an effort to understand some times when there over-talking or laughter obliterated dialogue.  The contemporaneous record was also used to check understanding and showed some early filtering and analysis which we needed to be careful to question.  We intended at this early stage to separate description from interpretation, but inevitably this last type of contemporaneous record was one influence on our subsequent discussions.

As our discussions and constant comparisons of the data continued, created coding categories and identified some key sensitising concepts (eg: mental health and wellbeing, conflict, progression) (Flick 2014).   Then we  reorganised the codes (which became conceptual categories) into a process model of inputs and outputs.  Thus we took an inductive approach, the model began to emerge after reviewing and coding the first four focus groups.  The last two focus groups were used to further test and refine the model through constant comparison and interrogation.  It is common, as Quinn Patton (2015) notes, for there to be a blurring between when data gathering ends and analysis begins.

This overall approach of inductive, iterative thematic analysis will only be robust if it has credibility with users.  We are aiming, as Quinn Patton (2015) suggests,  for people to say any one of three things:

> 'That was obvious, but I had not thought of it in that way before'

> 'What I thought was obvious may not be true'

'That is revealing and explains xxx to me'

If users say 'that is confusing or wrong' we probably will have failed in both evaluating the current situation and in correctly identifying the sensitising concepts.