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How Doctoral Supervisors and Candidates Clarify Expectations During Doctoral Education

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Abstract: The diversification and formalisation of doctoral education in the last 30 years has meant that supervision is a complex activity. An effective supervisor and candidate relationship is important and achievable through the clarification of expectations. There are formal and informal strategies to clarifying expectations, but research into the usefulness and appropriateness of these is currently lacking.

This paper reports on a contemporary study at a Midlands university, which aimed to address this gap. It used semi-structured interviews with nine supervisors and nine candidates and included stimulus material to elicit insights into sensitive topics.

The findings suggest that informal strategies were favoured over formal strategies or the use of wider university provision such as taught modules. There was an inconsistent use of strategies and mixed views on the need to clarifying expectations. The candidate starting point is important and using a 'working alliance' as opposed to a blanket tick-box approach.

Paper: Introduction

The diversification and formalisation of doctoral education in the last 30 years has created challenges for the doctoral supervisor to candidate relationship. The diversification is apparent in the types of degrees, the number of candidates, the growth of part-time candidates and a shift in demographics relating to gender and age (Carter et al. 2021). The formalisation is evident in the reduced time to complete with funding being linked to completions as opposed to enrolments and regulation through codes of practice and the shift towards a provider-consumer relationship (Taylor et al. 2018). Supervision is an increasingly complex activity and an effective supervisor to candidate relationship is achievable through a discussion and agreement of expectations (Taylor, 2019).

This paper argues that there are informal and formal strategies through which to clarify expectations. Informal strategies include a discussion, exercise or agreeing simple points. Formal strategies include

a checklist, learning contract or discussing a university's code of practice (Brown & Atkins, 1988; Wisker, 2005; Finn, 2005; Masters & Kreegar, 2017). Departments, universities or countries have adopted checklists and agreements (Taylor et al. 2018) but there are concerns around the enforceability or legal status (Hill, 2013). Furthermore, formal strategies can relate to an understanding of a code of practice requirements (Helfer & Drew, 2019). This suggests a link to the formalisation of doctoral education and questions what is appropriate to respond to diversification.

Research method and aims

Research into the usefulness and appropriateness of the informal and formal strategies is currently lacking. Much of the existing research is from supervisors' perspectives (Bui, 2014). This paper presents data from a recently completed research project investigating the clarification of expectations between supervisors and candidates at a Midlands university. The project aimed to address these research questions:

- How are expectations determined between supervisors and candidates?
- What strategies or resources are used to develop relationships, agree milestones and expectations?
- What strategies would be useful to the supervisor and candidate relationship?

The methods included online semi-structured interviews with nine supervisors and nine candidates from two faculties from a Midlands university. During the interviews, the supervisors and candidates reflected on eight items of stimulus material (e.g. policy developments, supervisory styles, expectations and strategies) to elicit insights into sensitive topics (Kara, 2015). The research did not use supervisor and candidate dyads.

Content analysis was used to explore themes through the frequency of words or categories in the transcribed recordings (Cohen et al., 2018). The researcher moved back and forth between the data, research questions and literature, as the units of analysis emerged (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). Codes were subsumed to assist with creating open and flexible coding categories (Mason, 2002).

Findings

The findings suggest that informal strategies were favoured as six supervisors used a discussion, but four supervisors indicated this was inconsistent across candidates. Individual supervisors used formal strategies such as a learning contract or rating scale and two supervisors discussed university regulations. One supervisor highlighted how the research degree handbook outlines expectations, but candidates did not mention this. Three supervisors and six candidates identified the role of wider university provision such as taught modules or the doctoral college, in the clarification of expectations but this related to a specific expectation (e.g. days for feedback).

Mixed views were apparent on the need, time point and strategies to clarify expectations. Two supervisors emphasised they would not clarify expectations as this should happen as issues arise. Three candidates argued that it was an unspoken agreement amongst adults and they did not want expectations clarified. Four candidates would have liked their expectations clarified.

Several supervisors and candidates found the strategies presented interesting and wanted more information but highlighted the need to consider candidate starting points, being open to discovery and using an ongoing discussion to clarify expectations as opposed to a blanket tick-box approach. This paper uses the concept of the 'working alliance' through which expectations can be clarified. Whilst previous research conceptualised supervision as a working alliance, strategies to clarify expectations were lacking (Torkam, 2016). This paper aims to support the working alliance with appropriate strategies.

This paper has recommendations for institutions including the need to map and collate institutional policies and procedures where expectations are clarified to support supervisors and candidates. An output from the study is a visual resource of the informal and formal resources and strategies, to assist the working alliance between supervisors and candidates. The findings presented in the study will be of use to many institutions operating in the Higher Education Sector, in the UK and abroad.

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