

## Research Student Perspectives on Supervisor/Advisor Approaches to Supervision

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### Background:

This is a discussion of a project which has surveyed research students in universities across the world. The project re-issued an original pilot survey of research students enquiring into their perception of their needs with respect to the approach to the supervisory relationship adopted by their supervisor (or advisor). The value in following up the original survey is one of broadening the sample. Fraser & Mathews (1999) surveyed only research students in one Faculty of one University in Australia. Running the survey more broadly would provide cross-national as well as cross-institutional, and also cross-disciplinary, dimensions. Fraser & Mathews conceptualised the contribution of the supervisor as comprising three main aspects: expertise in the research area; support for the student; balancing creativity and criticism. They structured their survey in order to test for how desirable the student respondent found each of 22 characteristics of supervisors' approaches to their role (McMichael & Garry 1994), having linked each characteristic to one of the three main aspects. Their main headline finding from their survey was that non-expertise-related characteristics are more desirable than expertise-related ones. This is despite the presumption of many which would be that the attribute of a supervisor is expertise in the field of enquiry adopted by the student (c.f.: Ives & Rowley, 2005, who temper it with the idea of 'working relationship'; and Hockey, 1994, who focuses on the pedagogical tension in needing to have but to erect a boundary around that expertise).

### Methodology:

The project has followed up the original pilot survey using the same methodology but reached across a variety of disciplines, across a variety of higher education institutional types and across a number of different nations: several in Europe, and Malaysia, China, South Africa, Australia, New Zealand and the US. The questionnaire survey ran on the Web by means of the Bristol Online Survey facility, circulated via networks: institutional; SRHE; National Postgraduate Committee of the UK; the NYLON research student network; and the International Doctoral Education Research Network. There is no claim here to have achieved a representative viewpoint from a sufficiently representative random sample but we do claim to have reached students from a wide variety of situations.

The methodology primarily comprises surveying opinion by means of a choice of response out of a Likert scale (1-5), representing the spectrum of undesirable to desirable, for each characteristic as potentially attributable to the supervisor's approach.

### Findings:

We represent the final findings in tabular form. These are general in the sense that below they are not broken down by discipline, nation, type of institution, nor year of study. The higher the mean score for each of the 22 characteristics mean score is out of a maximum of 5 on a Likert scale. And each of these characteristics is grouped according to the three main aspects of how a supervisor can contribute. The figure not in bold and not in parentheses is the result in the original 1998 survey: 32 PhD students from the Faculty of Agriculture at the University of Western Australia. The figure in bold and in parentheses is the result in the recent international survey: n=1141 research students.

Mean Score	Expertise	Support	Creative/Critical
4 and above		Enthusiastic 4.8 <b>(4.4)</b>	
		Helpful 4.5 <b>(4.6)</b>	
	Knowledgable 4.5 <b>(4.7)</b>	Attentive 4.5 <b>(4.5)</b>	Stimulating 4.5 <b>(4.4)</b>
		Available 4.4 <b>(4.4)</b>	Objective 4.4 <b>(4.3)</b>
		Involved 4.2 <b>(4.2)</b>	Active 4.2 <b>(4.2)</b>
		Caring 4.0 <b>(4.1)</b>	Critical 4.0 <b>(4.2)</b>

3 and above	Influential 3.8 <b>(3.9)</b>		
	Trainer 3.7 <b>(3.7)</b>		
	Teacher 3.6 <b>(3.9)</b>		Colleague 3.6 <b>(3.6)</b>
	Specialist 3.2 <b>(4.1)</b>	Friend 3.3 <b>(3.2)</b>	
	Co-ordinator 3.0 <b>(3.4)</b>	Partner 3.1 <b>(3.1)</b>	

Below 3	Director 2.6 <b>(3.0)</b>		
		Detached 2.2 <b>(2.3)</b>	
			Passive 1.7 <b>(2.0)</b>

There is remarkable similarity in scores for each characteristic between each survey. A potentially significant exception is the 'Specialist' characteristic. Otherwise, again, the main headline finding is that non-expertise-related characteristics are more desirable than expertise-related ones. These general results have preliminary status in that analysis by more specific factors such as discipline and year of study may reveal further nuances in the perceptions of research students, to be presented at the conference.

#### Discussion:

An implication from these findings is further support for the trend for programmes of academic development which emphasise the importance of general research pedagogy rather than subject field expertise.

There is scope to comment on theoretical matters, following further exploration, for instance to produce an enhanced synthesis incorporating the elements of Anne Lee's (2007) and Gatfield's (2005) frameworks of supervisory approaches. Looking more fundamentally still, Christine Halse (2011, p568) is on the right lines with her concern in general with the 'ontological' question of academic life: "doctoral supervision can be theorised as a perpetual process of subjective and identity formation – of 'becoming a supervisor'." But she has the wrong ontological priority. It is not the being of this role that is the important thing: it is the individual realisation of the ontological mistake of identifying yourself (as academic scholar in a position to supervise others) with the body of expert knowledge one has made one's own. If you hold that too unseparable from yourself then you are psychologically unable sufficiently to allow another in to that world of yours who may then mess around with it according to their own intellectual wishes, as well as being too distant from enquiry into neighbouring fields. Ultimately, we exist first and the essences we choose come subsequently and are always projects of, rather than identifications with, the Self (Sartre 1958). The point is not to develop a further quasi-Aristotelian excellence of supervisory character as the next part of the very fibre of your being but to dis-identify yourself with the pretend essence which would comprise immersion in the body of specialist knowledge through which you have made your name. That letting go is the condition of adopting the effective pedagogical role of supervisor and investing effort in your students' intellectual development as themselves contributors to fields of knowledge.

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